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What is this thing called reform?

Abstract

Reform is one of the buzzwords of contemporary politics. It is assumed that all governments, of whatever political type, should engage in this thing called reform. Reform is assumed to be a constant, always needing to be done, and the worst thing a government can do is to slow down – or even halt – reform. Hence, in August there was a National Reform Summit held in Sydney to discuss how to provide more impetus for increasing the tempo of reform. With the elevation of Malcolm Turnbull to the prime ministership since, there is fresh hope that he can break the reform “deadlock”. But what exactly is reform?

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Reform is one of the buzzwords of contemporary politics. It is assumed that all governments, of whatever political type, should engage in this thing called reform. Reform is assumed to be a constant, always needing to be done, and the worst thing a government can do is to slow down – or even halt – reform.

Hence, in August there was a [National Reform Summit](#) held in Sydney to discuss how to provide more impetus for increasing the tempo of reform. With the elevation of Malcolm Turnbull to the prime ministership since, there is [fresh hope](#) that he can break the reform “deadlock”.

But what exactly is reform?

The evolution of a ‘reform’

The first master of the modern study of politics, Niccolò Machiavelli, never discussed reform as part of the art of politics, but he did recognise the absolute importance of dealing with necessity.

Any political order has to deal with the problems raised by Fortuna, or what we would probably refer to as circumstances which threaten that order. Good politics, for Machiavelli, is doing what is necessary so that when ill fortune blows one’s way, one is able to deal with it in order to survive and prosper.

Is not reform then little more than an acceptance of the need to do what is necessary, to master and overcome fortune, and to ensure that a country remains prosperous and strong?

This is a very old imperative. In the Bible, Joseph [learns](#) that there will be seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of dearth. Hence he lays up enough food to ensure that Egypt will not starve when the good times run out. He did what was necessary – we could say that he implemented a major reform.

Surely, then, in our modern age, reform means essentially mastering necessity – taking what steps are necessary to ensure that one’s country survives and prospers. This, more than anything else, should define what is required of those who we have placed in charge of the ship of state.

Any careful reading of Machiavelli will reveal that this is his true message – even when those in charge engage in morally questionable actions, this can only be justified if those actions benefit the common good.

Reform in an Australian context

Unfortunately, Australian politicians in recent times have sought to play what might be termed pseudo-Machiavellian games, thinking that politics is really about engaging in some of the more questionable activities described by Machiavelli, in order to achieve their own personal political goals.

In other words, they have become entranced by the game. But the necessity that they follow is dictated by their own personal career objectives, not the good of the country.

In such circumstances, reform – or necessary political action – is being held hostage to the desire of individual politicians to win and hold office. It is as if Joseph had decided to make the most of the seven years of prosperity and to hell with the future.

Unfortunately, it appears to be the case that to follow the path of necessity may not win much support in the court of public opinion. Sir Robert Menzies, perhaps Australia’s greatest prime minister, understood that good leadership meant that sometimes a government needed to take unpopular decisions.

To be a good democratic leader, in terms of the public good, one needed occasionally to take what Sir Humphrey in *Yes Minister* called [“courageous” decisions](#). Hence, in 1963, with a wafer-thin majority in the House of Representatives, Menzies went to an election with a policy of some government support for non-government schools even though he knew that this could be very unpopular in certain quarters.

If one looks to the Australian past one can see that good political leaders took necessary decisions because they knew that they had to be taken. To give a couple of examples:

- In the mid-1980s the Hawke government took reform measures including [deregulating](#) the financial system and [floating the dollar](#). Again, these were controversial measures and were widely criticised at the time. They did little to improve the electoral standing of the government; in Sir Humphrey-speak they were courageous measures. It was the necessity of the situation that drove them – as Bob Hawke said at the time of the floating of the dollar, “little Australia” could not afford to ignore what the rest of the world was doing.

- In 1998 John Howard went to an election promising to [bring in a GST](#) if his government was returned. It almost resulted in Howard leading a one-term government. Again, it was a courageous decision, driven by the necessity of solving the problems raised by the High Court having determined that the Constitution did not allow the states to raise sales taxes.

These were controversial decisions; one may disagree with them. But it is clear that they were not motivated by a desire to pander to public opinion or to score political points against one's political opponents. They were motivated by a desire to do what is in the public interest.

Australia faces real problems in the future. Australians, and their government, need to take stock of what necessary steps must be taken if Australia is to survive as a strong and prosperous country. This can happen only if the leaders of our political parties accept that there is more to leadership than the next poll and waging a political war against one's opponents.

Democratic leadership, as all good leaders in the past understood, means working for the public good and sometimes taking decisions which are unpopular.