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For The People? Australian Democracy in Crisis: a Layperson's Viewpoint

Abstract

Throughout the '70s and '80s Australians who did not live in Queensland got a lot of laughs out of lampooning the Bjelke -Petersen government of that State, and especially the man himself, for his apparent ignorance of issues such as the meaning of the Westminster system of Government, separation of powers, and executive government. Whilst there was much mirth, and some incredulity that Government practices such as those of Bjelke-Petersen could be tolerated by the people of Queensland, there was no critique of Government process in this country, except at the most arcane, academic level. Unless one were part of an "inner circle" or cognoscenti, as it were, the issue simply was not discussed.

For The People? Australian Democracy in Crisis – a Layperson’s Viewpoint

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Throughout the '70s and '80s Australians who did not live in Queensland got a lot of laughs out of lampooning the Bjelke-Petersen government of that State, and especially the man himself, for his apparent ignorance of issues such as the meaning of the Westminster system of Government, separation

of powers, and executive government. Whilst there was much mirth, and some incredulity that Government practices such as those of Bjelke-Petersen could be tolerated by the people of Queensland, there was no critique of Government process in this country, except at the most arcane, academic level. Unless one were part of an “inner circle” or cognoscenti, as it were, the issue simply was not discussed.

There is a prevailing attitude in Australian society that issues of governance are either not to be discussed at all, or if discussed at all, then only amongst those who know something about such matters. This attitude is premised on the understanding that (i) the vast majority of Australians are ignorant about such matters; and (ii) that these are matters which rightly are the concern of others than ourselves.

It is an attitude that is promoted, albeit with equivocation, by parliamentarians and the media.

Indeed, one of the enduring issues in this country is the lack

of civics and citizenship education of our populace. For years Governments have actively disallowed the inclusion of such courses in our schools' curricula, especially in public schools, on the basis that such education programs are "political". Far too many of our fellow Australians have until recently accepted that inane proposition, and voted to encourage Governments to continue to promote the idea.

The lack of civics and citizenship education has been to our distinct disadvantage: abysmal ignorance is the most obvious aspect of our discussions about issues of governance. But of course, civics and citizenship education goes far beyond simply ensuring that our people understand issues of governance. More importantly it is about inculcating ideas of the rights and responsibilities of the individual to and for society, for the good of all.

This all sounds like idealistic nonsense, but I've not heard any alternative propositions which have the potential to resonate with all strata of society.

What this prescription means is that, at the level of Government there is a fundamental responsibility to mediate the various interests in society so that no one dominates to the detriment of others. That is a far cry from what we have been accustomed to experiencing in this country.

I am not sure that we have ever really experienced true democracy in Australia. There's no doubt that it is one of our enduring myths that we are a democratic society. Not only that, but also that ours are communities in which egalitarianism is the prevailing ethos. Modern Australia's inauspicious beginnings were as a number of scattered penal colonies established by the British, who set upon the task of exterminating the original inhabitants, changing the landscape to something approximating that which they had left, and instituting a class system as they had known. Whilst there was no hugely successful social experiment here, nevertheless Privilege (with all its incidents) has been as enduring as the myths mentioned a moment ago. Many communities within Australian society, for example, have been consciously and actively excluded from participation in society. That is most true for Aborigines, but it is also true for many recent immigrants and women (to a degree). Aborigines, for example, were treated differently than all other Australians, in every political, social and economic sphere. In particular, Aborigines were denied voting rights until relatively recent years.

Yet despite the inequities in the system. there were some aspects of the Australian model of the Westminster system of government, with its theories and practices of the separation of

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powers, that Australians came to expect. Foremost amongst those matters were indeed the separation of powers between the Government and the Executive, and public accountability through processes of reviewing and reporting. One of the ways in which that sort of accountability was practised was that competing political parties would publish their policy papers in respect of different social issues such as employment, housing, health, education, and overall fiscal policies, but in particular the extent of taxes which were planned to be raised, what items of consumption were to be taxed, and how those taxes were to be utilised in providing for those various infrastructure items which would ensure overall good societal health and strength.

The processes were public, relatively transparent, and open to public scrutiny long before the the polling booths opened, so that the public was able to make a reasonably informed choice of Government.

With the dawn of the '80s those practices were abandoned by the major political parties in our system, the Liberal-National Party Coalition, and the Labor Party. The abandonment of what many Australians saw as fundamental democratic practices in this country was most obviously practised by the Labor Government under the Prime Ministership of Bob Hawke.

It is true that so-called economic rationalism - the wholesale endorsement of economic determinism as propounded by the Harvard School of contemporary laissez-faire, free enterprise, capitalist economists - had taken hold of our chief spokespersons in the Treasury offices at all levels of Government in this country, following the lead of Thatcher England and Reagan US. This was an ideology which gave primacy to the notion that Governments should be fiscally accountable in the same way as capitalist enterprise allegedly was, seeking always to ensure an excess of income over expenditure, implementing systems of so-called efficiency and effectiveness. And those ideologues had tremendous influence in shaping government policies and practices across the spectrum of issues.

In those early days when these ideologies were being imposed on us, and we were being forced to accept the privatisation and corporatisation of essential social services and infrastructure, we, the people had no say whatsoever in shaping Government policies and practices. Potential Governments did not spell out their social and political agendas. We were not given access to policy statements on issues. To the extent that there was ever a published policy statement on any issue, there was no chance for discussion of the policies, and the practices. Important decisions on the future of our essential services were made in

secret, we, the people being presented with only the fait accompli, after many of our services went to international capitalist interests which were inimical to those of Jane and John Oz-Citizen.

Governments at both State and Federal levels, both Labor and Liberal-National, closed down entire towns and villages across the length and breadth of Australia, thus destroying numerous families and communities -all in the pursuit of dollar "bottom lines" (as we became so sick of hearing it described).

No longer did Governments consider it their responsibility to mediate the interests of all social cohorts, but rather Governments made it their business to promote the interests of a very select minority of extremely wealthy and privileged. Nowhere was that more clearly exemplified than it was in the deregulation of money markets. The first major step in that direction was taken by the Hawke Government through its then Treasurer Paul Keating, the World's Greatest! If ever there were an abrogation of Government responsibility, if ever there were a threat to democracy, that was it.

No longer do Governments control economics to ensure that all members of the community can enjoy the benefits of living in a civil society, a proper mediation of the many interests in society; that control now rests solely with corporate cowboy types who play spin-the-wheel, or monopoly on the stock exchanges of the world, every minute of every day.

With the advent of the ultra-conservative Howard Government those anti-democratic processes have gone on apace. We have been forced to become share holders in enterprises which were once supported entirely with our taxes. We have been forced to swallow the ideology that to pay taxes is to be subjected to some barbaric and inhuman treatment - a less than subtle appeal to the greed creed, unfortunately accepted by all too many people. We have been misled into believing that what is good for AMP, the National Bank, Westpac, and other financial institutions is good for us. If we are shareholders in these enterprises then it is in our best interests to endorse the greed creed, which places profit making above all else; which allows uncritical acceptance of unethical corporate behaviour (such as the exploitation of child labour in Third World countries); which displaces other communities of peoples around the world; which allows the despoilation of the environment and the extinction of other species. The very experience itself necessarily means that those who would otherwise decry and denounce such practices no longer do so, because it is against their financial interests.

We have been fooled into believing that through these means we are achieving greater freedom of choice, and hence greater

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access to or participation in democracy. Nothing could be further from the truth. At an escalating pace we are losing any control of the situation. Governments can pretty much do as they please: legislate out of existence any opposition to their policies and practices (as for example with industrial reforms, and especially the disempowerment of workers' unions); by executive decision, alienate public assets and enterprises into private holdings; abolish public watch-dog bodies, such as Auditors-General offices, administrative review panels and/or tribunals, human rights commissions, and the like.

All of these trends, and more, are indicative of Australian democracy being in a state of crisis. No discussion of the state of democracy in Australia can allow to go un-noted the role of media in shaping our thinking about political, social and economic issues. When Marx wrote, religion is the opiate of the people, he could never have known the sorts of technological and social developments that we have seen in this century, and particularly the sorts of adaptations that the capitalist system has been able to effect. Mass media has taken over where religion could never hope to have gone. It is the opiate of those who live in the latter part of the 20th century. For those who will live in the 21st century, there can be little doubt that computer games and the internet will become their opiate.

The role of mass media, and in particular the role of radio jocks on talk-back radio is a significant and potentially dangerous one for a healthy democracy. The recent, and on-going controversy about John Laws and Radio 2UE being paid large amounts of money by the banking industry points to an issue that should raise alarm in all of us if we are concerned to ensure that we continue to live in a democratic society. Former Prime Minister Hawke, closely followed by Keating, turned talk-back radio jaunts into an art form. Both, under the influence of media advisers, frequently used talk-back radio to announce policy, to announce the implementation of changed programs, and to assess the community mood as expressed by their audiences – politics on the fly. Howard continues to do it, with much less passion and panache, but he still does it. They know that they are always talking to an audience which has been softened up by years of listening to the very deliberate, often ill-informed, biased (if not prejudiced), and certainly jaundiced, cynical, and often antidemocratic views of John Laws, Alan Jones, Mike Carlton, Stan Zemanek, Howard Sattler, Michael Hodgman and the like. When was the last time any of us here, heard a balanced discussion on any talk-back radio programs that our leading politicians have the propensity to court?

Talk-back radio gives people the impression that on occasions they may have a direct line to the Prime Minister, or the Treasurer, or some other important member of Government, and that therefore they are experiencing participatory democracy in the most direct sense. Of course, it is all a “con”. Politicians care not for the voice of the people in those so-called forums. Indeed it is sickening to listen to the way that those same politicians, when on rare occasions they are actually challenged on their policies and statements, lie and otherwise obfuscate, confuse, mislead and deceive the listening audience. On the other side of the airwaves, that same listening audience has had its views crafted in the most subtle ways, and often not subtle ways, mediated by the attitudes and philosophies of their “hosts” consistently over very long periods. (As I wrote that, it struck me just how apt is that expression. It is a parasitic process.) At the end of the talk-back radio sessions, the listening audience knows no more about the fundamental processes of Government, the shape of the Constitution, and their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a civil society, than they ever did. In my view, at the end of the process that same listening audience has less engagement in society, and in the democratic processes.

In just a few weeks’ time we will be required to vote in a referendum on the question of whether we want an Australian Head of State, chosen by two-thirds of Parliament. In the vernacular it is referred to as being a question of our becoming a Republic. Although this has been an issue before the Australian people for well over a century, the contemporary debate was ignited by then Prime Minister Keating in 1993. Probably the most striking thing about the debates that have taken place over the years since, and leading up to the imminent referendum, is the very high level of ignorance amongst Australians about such fundamental issues as that of our Constitution and what it states, or not.

One of the first shocks that some of us had to get over was that a large proportion of our fellow Australians believed that the Constitution of the USA was ours, or at least that the Constitution of the USA has/had universal application. Who amongst us today has not heard the ignorant blatherings of so many Australians about our constitutional right to free speech, and our constitutional right to bear arms - and similar such rubbish; rubbish which our politicians tacitly encourage.

The next of the shocks that many of us have to deal with is that our Constitution says little, if anything of our rights and responsibilities as citizens and voters; it says nothing of the responsibilities of Governments to Parliament; it says nothing of

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the values and principles by which we will govern ourselves. These are simple straightforward issues which most of us who belong to even the smallest community organisations would expect our organisations to incorporate in a constitution to guide us through our activities. Yet when it comes to the issue of how we are to govern ourselves, there are those in the community who would have us believe that it is none of our business. Amongst those are politicians.

In the debates on the issue of whether Australia is to become a Republic we hear a great deal of emotive chattering about whether we should have an Australian Head of State, or whether we should mind our manners vis-à-vis the British Royal Family, the head of which is also Sovereign of Australia. We hear nothing of the fact that in a truly democratic system of government, it is the people who are sovereign. We hear nothing of the fact that our Constitution is one which was specifically designed for a Constitutional Monarchy. We hear nothing of the fact that our present Constitution is silent about such important democratic issues as who is a citizen; who is entitled to vote in elections; the value of our vote; the powers of the Head of State vis-à-vis those of the Head of Government. Under the Westminster system of Government it would be considered a heresy (well, treasonable to be precise) to question that last issue. The Sovereign is Sovereign.

In all, we hear nothing of the fact that our present Constitution is one entirely unsuited to serving us as a blueprint for a democratic republican system of government. It appears to me there is a conspiracy of silence on this most basic issue in the entire debate. More than that: the opportunities to debate these kinds of issues have been denied to us, not only by reason of the historical absence of civics education in this country, but also by reason of the fact that politicians, and certain cohorts of lawyers have hijacked the debates for their own purposes – another expression of a crisis in our democracy. We all should be demanding that our Constitution be reshaped to serve our needs as a democratic Republic, and that it is we, the people, who will shape it. If we deny ourselves such an opportunity, then we have certainly allowed the door to close on democracy in this country.

One of the big points that we do hear so much about is that regarding whether the Head of State be elected directly by the people, or whether that person be appointed on the voice of a majority in Parliament. From all sides the argument against direct election is that the office of Head of State is necessarily politicised. Of course it would be. Politics is of the people. In a democracy, it

is supposed to be of the people, by the people, for the people; and if we affirm for ourselves that we shall be democratically involved in the process of determining who is to be our Head of State then we can institute any Constitutional mechanisms to suit our purpose.

What we have observed since the advent of modern Australia (since 1788), and which has come into sharp focus in recent decades, is that Governments of either persuasion in this country (and there are only two) have represented very select, very narrow, powerful interests. Does any one of us really believe that any future Government, operating under the Constitution as it is presently constructed, will represent majority interests.

Of course, you will hear lawyers along with politicians argue how difficult it is to change the Constitution, and how difficult it would be to incorporate in our Constitution the sorts of changes that I suggest we need to make. The fact is, if the Australian electorate, being knowledgably informed of the issues, determined that our present Constitution is discarded and a new Constitution be developed to serve our needs in a modern, democratic Republic, we could do so. If we, as a independent, sovereign nation bit the bullet, and declared ourselves a Republic, we would not have to go in beggar mode to Westminster and ask that foreign government (as the High Court has now declared it to be) to repeal the Act of Westminster so that we can ditch our Constitution. We really do not have to have a change to the Westminster Act. That is an Act of the British Parliament. We can simply say as we do when we are adults, your rules no longer govern my life, I make my own rules.

For some years, I have seen a lack of passion and diminishing involvement of my fellow Australians in the issues that affect our democracy, and on occasions I have fallen into despondency over it. But, fortunately, the Victorian State elections happened just a couple of weeks ago, and I have come along here, once again enthusiastic and optimistic about the will of the people changing to ensure that we regain some control of the political agenda. If ever there was an expression of people having had enough of economic rationalism and its destructive effects on our society, that election result was it. The recent strikes in New South Wales were further expressions of that. The sea change that I have been waiting for, and I'm sure all of you too, has just happened. It might be a long time before the tide comes in again, but it surely will. We should all commit ourselves to being on the beach head when it does.