# *Governing*
# PASSIONS

*The WA Inc fiasco has highlighted the dearth of clear
principles for government in Australia. In their absence,
the style of government in WA degenerated into a
semi-secret society of mates. But **Gary Wickham** argues
that the great ideologies of the twentieth century offer little
by way of such principles. Perhaps moderation and
toleration, rather than the One Great Cause, are the key.*

**T**he controversy surrounding the Royal Commission into 'WA Inc' raises many questions about processes of government, including questions about corruption. The Commission, or at least the way it is being reported, is generating a strong impression that the Burke WA government was devoid of principles, regardless of whether any charges of corruption actually emerge.

Unfortunately, the Commission and the media coverage are avoiding direct discussion of the role of principles for government. The sorry tale of 'WA Inc', as we've heard it so far, highlights the ease with which principles for government can be ignored.

Government can go on with or without principles, so there is no need for us to panic. However, it is much more difficult for government to be consistently "good" government (by whatever criteria for judging good) without clear, consistent principles to guide it, so there is some cause for us to despair: Australia definitely lacks clear consistent principles for government at the moment.

In this article I want to reject a variety of oft-touted candidates for the title "clear, consistent principle for government in Australia"--socialism, social democracy, liberalism, the free market principle, agrarian socialism, and environmentalism. I propose instead four principles which have in fact been around for quite a while but never as "clear, consistent principles for government": government itself, civilisation, moderation and toleration.

To consider this issue carefully we need a solid working definition of government. By government I mean the processes whereby a certain target population is defined and then subjected to various forms of regulation in line with some or other aims.

In this way government can go on at many levels. Target populations for government can be defined at the level of the nation, the region, the city, the district, the institution and even the family. All these targets are governed. They are subjected to various forms of regulation in line with some or other aims—better health, more efficient workforce, greater military capability, less inflation, more respect for grandparents, cleaner bathrooms, less polluted beaches and so on.

If this technical definition of government is our solid working definition, you might well ask, surely clear, consistent principles for government are impossible; surely the target populations and the aims for regulation are too diverse to make it possible?

The answer is, "No, but a little bit of yes". There is enough operational overlap between the levels of government—governing the nation overlaps with governing the region, they both overlap with governing the institution and the family, and so on (not a hierarchy of government, but a tapestry)—to suggest that clear, consistent principles can have at least some effect on them all. But the fact that the reach of principles is not automatically total must be seen as a limit on the effect of even clear, consistent principles.

In this article I'm talking mainly about principles for governing Australia's national population, though I'm not thereby rendering all other levels of government subservient to this one. The effects of the different principles I'm discussing on the other levels can only be assumed up to a point. Ideally, they are the subject matter of separate careful consideration. Let's now see why each of the various rejected candidates for "clear, consistent principle for governing Australia's national population" does not measure up.

Socialism, in a variety of forms, has been touted as a principle for Australian government by a wide range of organisations, including the ALP (or at least some factions of it), different Australian communist parties, some unions, and some student groups (to name just a few). I'm rejecting socialism here not just because of the recent spectacular collapse of many of the world's more notable experiments in socialist government (though that's surely reason enough), but also because socialism has never worked in the sort of clear, widespread manner I think necessary for a principle to be called a clear, consistent principle.

Socialism has always relied on ill-defined shibboleths like "promoting the working class" and "eliminating obstacles to equality". Even on the occasions when these sorts of rallying cries have informed policies for national government, through the ALP, their almost mythical qualities have led to policies as diverse as the White Australia policy and government funding for non-government schools, and to a

style of government which appears little more than a semi-secret society of mates.

Social democracy appears to be more workable as a principle for government, especially by the ALP. By social democracy I mean the principle whereby socialism is explicitly tailored to suit modern, pluralistic Western democracies. This principle is ostensibly the main principle for government in several prosperous Western European nations, including Sweden and France. Up to the present time in Australia, though, it is no clearer or more consistent than socialism. It too, seemingly, can involve just about any policy and it too, seemingly, involves a most unclear style of government by mateship.

Liberalism looks for all the world like a clear, consistent principle for government. In certain 18th and 19th century hands—particularly, following Locke, those of the utilitarians and J S Mill—I think it was. The trouble is, under late 20th century Australian conditions, it's not really alive.

Ironically, the Liberal Party seems determined (and, indeed, has done since its formation in 1949) to rid itself of all traces of liberalism, expelling personnel and policies which come close to reflecting it, in favour of those more closely aligned with the free market principle. Political liberalism is sometimes mentioned by the Liberal Party in the same breath as the free market principle, as if there were a natural link between the two; this is more a matter of convenience (part of a hasty search for principled clothing for blatant self interest), than it is a matter of historical fact.

I must conclude that although Australia has a major political party with the name Liberal, and although there are organisations other than parties (like civil liberties associations, for example) promoting it, and although it is quite closely related to one of the principles (toleration) I am advocating in this article, liberalism does not provide a clear, consistent direction for governing Australia's national population—something a clear, consistent principle should do.

It might be said to be too early to tell whether the free market principle is a clear, consistent principle for government or a smokescreen for the usually unclear, very inconsistent pushing of self-interested barrows which is an inevitable part of government (it has to be inconsistent as there are so many barrows.) I don't think it is too early, though neither do I think the free market principle is the devil some people on the Left suggest it is.

The idea of the free market is not a principle for government, even though it is currently being judged as such by both major parties in Australia. It is no more than a tool for describing some activities of the national population awaiting government—the barrow-pushing I referred to above. To call this a principle for government is to sell the idea of government short, it is to rob Adam Smith of his crucial moral dimension, to sloganise a fraction of his work while ignoring the more difficult (but more serious for government) remainder.

It should be noted that I am not arguing that its existence as an aspect of social life is no reason to treat it as a principle for government and, moreover, that as its existence as an aspect of social life takes so many and varied forms, it could never be a consistent principle for government in any case.

In dismissing socialism as a possible clear, consistent principle, I am also dismissing agrarian socialism, a version of it which relies on ill-defined shibboleths about the virtues of rural life and production over urban life and production. The mythical qualities of these rallying cries ("Australia riding on the sheep's back" and the rest) have, like those associated with other socialist rallying cries discussed earlier, informed policies for Australian national government on occasions. Indeed, because of their central place in Country Party/National Party thinking (rarely acknowledged by the name "agrarian socialism", but what else could it be?), they have been much more influential than other socialist rallying cries, Like the policies associated with other socialist rallying cries, however, these policies have been very far from consistent and the style of government involved has been far from clear: policies as diverse as providing subsidies for rural producers and taking away subsidies for urban producers, and a style of government along the lines of a rural mafia.

Environmentalism is not so much a principle for government as an aim of government: a particular device to justify and guide the regulation of a population. In the case of Australian federal government, environmentalism is being touted most loudly as a clear, consistent principle by organised Greens and by the Democrats. They often appear frustrated and angry that the ALP government will not treat environmentalism as a clear, consistent principle. Their frustration and anger is understandable but misplaced.

The Hawke Labor government did much before the last election to convince the Greens, the Democrats, and their supporters that it saw enviromentalism as a principle for government. Perhaps some members of the government even believed it. After all, as I've suggested, Labor in government has no clear, consistent principles, so it's not surprising if some members of the government were genuinely tempted by the apparition of a principle for government that is not only clear and consistent, but also popular. However, after the election and faced again with the realities of governing, the Hawke government was soon treating enviromentalism as one aim among many and not as a principle at all. It had no choice.

So much for the oft-touted candidates for "clear, consistent principle for government" I am rejecting. I want to make one final point about them as a group before turning to the four principles I am proposing.

In rejecting these various candidates, I stress I am rejecting them as principles for government. I am not interested in them as principles for opposition. Political parties and other groups potentially involved in the process of national government in Australia find it very easy to pretend they have clear, consistent principles for government when they are not faced with the tasks of government.

In proposing my four clear, consistent principles for Australian government in the late 20th century, I want to offer some remarks about certain widespread conditions of late 20th century government, conditions which must serve as conditions of late 20th century principles for government.

First, the conditions of government are limited by time. Principles for government cannot seriously be proposed as eternal, despite attempts to do so throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. I am proposing four principles for Australian government in the 1990s. I am suggesting they work in this limited temporal domain. Beyond that I am making no claims.

Again, the conditions of government include geographical limits. Principles for government cannot seriously be proposed as universal either. I am proposing four principles for government in and of Australia. I recognise Australia as a nation state with a national population and with certain international commitments—diplomatic relations, trading agreements, military agreements, and so on. I am suggesting the four principles work in this limited spatial domain. Beyond that I am making no claims.

The conditions of government are often technically very complex. Principles for government are a guide to government, not a substitute for it. One cannot simply wave principles at problems of engineering, problems of administration, problems of law reform, or problems of economic reform in order to solve them. Far too many political activists, of all colours, refuse to recognise this condition of government and of principle (a point well made by Colin Mercer in *ALR* 126).

These remarks involve the point that principles for government and pragmatism are complementary, not contradictory. For too long, government at all levels has been forced to operate under the burden of the mistaken but widespread belief that to be pragmatic is to be unprincipled. Those who sing songs of purity have been allowed to sing too loudly.

The four principles I am proposing—government itself, civilisation, moderation, and toleration—work as clear, consistent principles for government only as a package. I will describe them separately then discuss their operation as a package.

It may seem strange to be proposing government itself as a principle for government, but I think it is crucial for two reasons. First, it is the foundation for any other principles for government. Second, as I pointed out in discussing the so-called free market principle, the idea of government is being sold very short in Australia at the present time. The first of these reasons needs no expansion.

On the second reason, in proposing government as a principle I am saying that the very idea of utilising processes whereby certain target populations are defined and then subjected to various forms of regulation in line with some or other aims, is indeed a clear, consistent principle for these very processes. This idea of government, as a principle, is necessary for good government.

For those involved in governing our nation and our firms to argue otherwise seems to me to be hypocritical, dangerous and downright stupid, but those who push magic "invisible hand" deregulation ideas do precisely this. Social life as we know it is only possible because target populations are constantly defined and constantly subjected to regulation in line with some or other aims. No one could run a business, use money, read books, watch television, receive an education, move around other than on foot, for instance, if this were not the case. This alternative to government is not a utopia of advanced unconstrained human activity, despite the anarchistic fantasies of both right and left, it is a return to the chaos and violence of primitive unconstrained human activity where kill or be killed could be the only principle for living. This is not-very fortunately, I think—a serious alternative.

Of course, in proposing government itself as a principle for government I must be proposing the government of economic life as part of this principle. This is not to say much, as the process of governing economic life includes systems as diverse as laissez-faire capitalism and central, state-control communism. I am not going to argue for it here (see my arguments in *ALR* 122 and those of Grahame Thompson in *ALR* 124) but I am assuming that the most suitable system for governing economic life in line with the four principles I'm proposing is the sort of "mixed", sensibly regulated system which emerged as dominant in Western Europe and Japan after World War Two.

*"The idea of government is being sold very short in Australia"*

By civilisation I mean modern, Judeo-Christian, Western civilisation. In this way, I mean a civilisation alongside or even in opposition to other civilisations, like Islamic civilisation. In proposing modern Western civilisation as a principle for government I need at least a working definition of it (though I can hardly discuss it in detail in an article of this size). Thus modern Western civilisation is that mode of organising social life in which modern statecraft has emerged on the back of the rule of law (in some form of parliamentary arrangement), assumed a dominant but not repressive role in church-state relations and fostered a day-to-day situation in which individuals and organisations (and of course organisation are increasingly important in modern statecraft) learn or are forced to regulate their own behaviour in line with more or less tightly defined social goals.

I am thus allowing the adoption of a technical definition of Western civilisation—one I have borrowed largely from Norbert Elias' Civilizing Process—to the decidedly non-technical task of proposing principles for good government. I am not, though—it should be noted—allowing this technical definition a teleological dimension. As Elias acknowledges, Western civilisation is not an inexorable march forward; it is a development which can just as easily be reversed (the "decivilising process" is thereby a sort of anti-principle for government, something government should guard against).

Moderation is the crucial ingredient in giving a technical definition of modern Western civilisation a normative dimension. Moderation means the various actors of modern social life—the individuals and organisations of our civilisation—learning or being forced to regulate their own behaviour away from excess.

Giving the regulation of behaviours this direction involves a vast array of checks on behaviour—for example, the development of definite codes of good manners for keeping decorum in interpersonal relations, the development of the tendency to obey laws without direct policing, the development of the tendency to limit the number of organisations legally permitted to use violence as part of their normal operation (military organisations, the police, the prison service), and the development of the tendency to control the use of violence by even these organisations.

This is a principle which, like all principles for government, not excluding the other three I'm proposing, rarely works in practice as well as its abstract definition suggests it should. Remember, principles are guides for good government, not guarantees of good government (and as I suggested at the outset, "good government" can only be defined relatively, not absolutely).

Finally, toleration is the principle whereby tolerance—that is, the recognition of, respect for, and commitment to preserve, the diversity of historically emerged forms of social life—meets government. Toleration is tolerance converted into workable arrangements for government, traditionally arrangements to promote (relatively) free speech, other expression and assembly.

Toleration should not be confused with democracy, as it so often is. Democracy is not a principle for government; it is a means of organising government. Democracy may or may not be the best means of organising government in line with the principle of toleration, but in any case it should not be thought that democracy guarantees toleration or that toleration is not possible within other means of organising government.

This understanding of toleration owes a good deal to Locke, Bentham, James Mill and J S Mill, well known political theorists in the liberal tradition, as I acknowledged earlier. It also owes a great deal to the lesser known theorist Pierre Bayle. Bayle was a French Protestant who fled France in the face of the repression of Protestants which followed the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. In Rotterdam, among a thriving emigré intellectual culture, he developed, among other achievements, propositions whereby different faiths (he maintained his faith in the face of intellectual scepticism) could co-exist peacefully within systems of effective government.

These four principles, as I said earlier, work as clear, consistent principles for government only as a package. Separately they may be neither clear nor consistent. For example, toleration is possible as a clear, consistent principle only if it continues to exist. Sometimes this may make war with other civilisations necessary: hardly an act of toleration. Again, forcing individuals and organisations to regulate their behaviour in line with more or less highly defined social goals may be considered less than consistent with toleration.

> "These principles... may very well involve government by 'muddling through'"

Yet, taken as a package the four principles can be a clear, consistent guide for good government even in these difficult situations. It is good government not to tolerate intolerance, though only if the intolerance involves excessive behaviour. It is good government to go to war to defend modern Western civilisation, though only if the war is conducted in line with codes of moderate military behaviour (the Geneva Convention and so on) and only if the clearly stated aim of the war is a situation of greater or equal toleration than that which existed before the threat to civilisation arose. And it is good government to force individuals and organisations to comply with more or less highly defined social goals, though only if it is done in a moderate manner and only if it is done with a clearly stated aim of increasing or maintaining toleration among the wider population.

These four principles, as a package, will never work easily or automatically. They require care and vigilance to work. All principles do.

These four principles are not as passionate as communism or fascism, but given the excesses to which the passions associated with these so-called principles have clearly led, principles without too much passion are surely desirable. They may well involve government by "muddling through" more than they involve government by force of conviction. Again, though, isn't this the best type of government we can hope for?

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