Massacre of the Innocents

On June 4 the Communist Party of China committed one of the worst atrocities in that country’s recent history. Against unarmed civilians, who demanded only that socialism be practised rather than preached, the party launched an all-out armed attack. June 4 1989 will go down as one of the darkest days in Chinese history. It may also signal the beginning of the end for the Chinese Communist Party. No one imagined that the party would respond in this way. Nevertheless, in hindsight, the tell-tale signs were everywhere.

Two hundred thousand battle-ready troops had been shipped in from outlying provinces. According to the official media, they had been called upon to implement martial law: to ‘restore order’ and ‘guarantee property’. They did so at the point of a gun. Five hours before the army went in the official media began broadcasting warnings to students that martial law would be implemented and that Tiananmen Square would be cleared. Only weeks before, the now cowed Chinese media had offered unprecedented support to the demonstrators and exercised a degree of press freedom never before seen in China. The army put an end to all that. On 26 May armed troops were sent in to secure all media outlets and the press and electronic media from that time on faithfully followed the government line. Media bulletins began to broadcast the dire warnings of the aged and reactionary leadership of the Communist Party: they showed pictures of hotel buildings around Beijing festooned with banners calling on the people to ‘combat bourgeois democracy’, and they reported on Beijing residents who were said to be disgusted with the students’ actions. The demonstrations too were covered, but after 26 May a much more critical approach was adopted. Great coverage was was given to the counter-demonstrations which took place in the week that followed. The heavily censored television news showed shots of counter-demonstrators bussed in by the government and said to have burnt effigies of leading political dissidents such as Fang Lizhi. Within a few days it was more than effigies that were being set alight.

What had begun as a peaceful mass demonstration was to end in a bloodbath. Students, workers and ordinary citizens were fired upon or crushed under tanks as the entire force of the military was deployed to wipe out the unarmed protests. By day’s end on 4 June, Beijing hospitals were flooded with the dead and injured estimated to be in the tens of thousands. The Chinese media, however, presented a very different picture of events. The national evening news announced only that troops in Beijing, after much provocation, had "seriously punished a very small band of thugs carrying out counter-revolutionary wrecking". This so-called 'punishment' continued on 5 June as the government went out to 'secure' the campuses in north-east Beijing. The senseless killing continued.

After the killings came the secret police. China’s head of the People’s armed police force, Qiao Shi, was rumoured to have replaced the liberal Party general secretary Zhao Ziyang. Qiao Shi first came to prominence in 1984 when he was promoted from his position as head of the Party’s liaison department. The public role of that organisation was to maintain links with friendly overseas parties, but it is widely believed that its primary role is actually espionage. The State president Yang Shangkun, who has also risen in importance as a result of the massacre, is rumoured to likewise have very close links with the secret police. Although Yang built his career through the army, it is said he has great influence in the Public Security ministry, the State Security ministry, the United Front department and the Central Military Commission. All of these units are said to be involved in one way or another in covert police activity. All of this goes to explain the nature of the present campaign against ‘counter-revolutionary hoodlums’ - a campaign which has all the hallmarks of a Stalinist policing action. Special phone lines have been set up so that people can secretly inform on friends, relatives and lovers, the media wantonly distorts events to suggest that unarmed demonstrators are capable of inflicting heavy losses upon heavily armed troops: all this adds an Orwellian dimension to the slaughter which has already taken place.

The senselessness of the killings only underlines the essential political bankruptcy of the present leadership. They have simply run out of ideas. Swept to power after the fall of the ‘gang of four’, the present leadership embarked upon an ambitious program of economic reform. This reform program turned on the decentralisation of the economy. This, in turn, resulted in the formation of regional and sectional interest groups. It also resulted in opportunities for corruption on a scale unprecedented since the revolution. On a more positive note, the economic reform program resulted in a much more liberal intellectual climate. Chinese intellectuals were much freer than they had been in the past to study foreign ideas and to examine some of the more critical schools of Marxist thought. What they
quickly discovered was that the actual practices of the Chinese Communist Party fell well short of its theoretical ideals. The necessity for some form of political reform was obvious to all but the government. Only through political reform could corruption be checked and competing regional and sectional interests be identified. Only by political reform could the ideals of a socialist democracy be realised. It was with these values and hopes that the students took to the streets.

All this has now changed. After the massacres of June, it is quite likely that the Communist Party in China is a spent force. Its rule comes from the barrel of a gun. In order to hold power the leadership clique of Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng was forced to rely upon the military might of troops loyal to Deng and to the ageing president Yang Shangkun. In order to maintain that power they are now forced to rely on Qiao Shi and the secret police.

The tragedy of the present situation is that it did not have to be this way. The phenomenal growth of the democracy movement in the last few years has been fuelled by the failure of the government to implement the necessary amount of political reform to help resolve some of the many inequities and inconsistencies brought about by the government's own economic reform program. The demands of the democracy movement were ones that the government would have had to address sooner or later anyway had it wanted to keep the economic reform program on the rails. As the contradictions brought on by the economic reform mounted, the movement calling for political reform grew.

This was a very different political climate from that of the late Seventies, when the democratic movement first began. While that democracy movement too was clearly suppressed by police actions, albeit on a much smaller scale, its decline had more to do with China's unprecedented economic growth and reform than with Stalinist police tactics. By the end of the Seventies, those who advocated a program of political democratisation found themselves almost without a constituency. People then preferred to enjoy the fruits of economic reform than protest at the lack of democracy.

In the mid-eights, however, the situation was quite different. In 1984 the hugely unpopular and largely unsuccessful urban reforms were introduced and, with them, the removal of subsidies on most non-essential items. The result was that the prices of non-essential goods rose dramatically. At around the same time, emergency austerity measures were introduced in an attempt to halt the massive depletion of foreign reserves. In the first quarter of 1984 alone, something like a third of China's foreign reserve holdings were lost. The political backlash was inevitable and many highlighted the massive imbalance of trade between China and Japan in particular as the source of China's woes. This
cent in 1988. In the first four months of 1989 alone prices rose by a staggering 27 percent. Shortages of basic commodities and the reintroduction of ration coupons for pork after years of abundance had knocked much of the gloss off the reform process and the attempts to introduce overall price reform had resulted in disaster. Meanwhile, the issue of official corruption continued to grow. All this made political reform and government accountability more essential than ever. Yet the government continued to stonewall. It felt its power threatened by the numbers and class composition of the demonstrators. It was in this climate that Li Peng introduced the martial law decree on 19 May.

The martial law order was to do little to reassure the government of its power. The local Beijing military garrison, sent in to implement martial law rule, proved unwilling to exercise its power over the people it was in theory defending. Beijing troops would not turn on the people of Beijing. The same could not, however, be said of troops from other regions. By the end of May, Beijing was completely surrounded by troops from rural garrisons loyal to Deng Xiaoping and Yang Shangkun. The stage was set for the bloodbath that followed.

The reign of terror continues. Now, however, the secret police have replaced the troops. As a result, the murders will be more carefully calculated, they will be more specific, and they will be far less visible. The news spectacle has died away, but the terror will continue until the government is satisfied that the opposition has been entirely silenced. While this is being accomplished the government will continue to promote the image of business as usual. Hopefully the world will continue to say that while the terror continues there can be no business as usual.

Michael Dutton.

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Alas Poor Johnny

When Andrew Peacock usurped the position of the Liberal leadership back in May, the media had a field day. There were endless accounts of the minutiae of the coup; myriad explanations of how it was that Howard remained, Queeg-like, oblivious to the last; and much competition for the retrospective title of "I guessed it first" among self-satisfied pundits.

On the subject of what the change of leadership actually means for the Liberals' future, however, there was near-to-total silence. The Sydney Morning Herald's Mike Steketee did note, a little bemusedly, that some of the party's leading Dries were in the "Gang of Five" who ended the reign of the Driest of them all - thus suggesting that it was hardly a triumph for the Liberalism of Menzies and Fraser. But if we were clear on what the Liberal's palace coup wasn't, there was little or nothing to offer on exactly what it was.

Steketee was undoubtedly right to note that the new Peacock shadow cabinet, leavened though it is by many of the Wetter faces evicted during the Howard leadership, hardly suggests a change towards the "human face of Liberalism". Ian Macphee, his crusading days suddenly in the past, was briefly in the foreign policy job, and Chris Puplick had the environment: neither of Federation. (Not to mention the likelihood of Mr Charles Copeman, Mr Ian McLachlan and Mr
Peter Costello on the backbench.) Undoubtedly the young turks of the Victorian Liberals were embarrassed by the attempted reversal of their purge on Wets in that state; but then, there were quite likely as many Dries irritated by Mr Kroger's (and Mr Howard's) inept handling of that episode as were delighted by it. In the balance of forces in the Liberal Party on strict ideological grounds, it seems clear, little has changed.

Or, if you believe some analyses on the left, things may actually have got worse. A popular diagnosis on the left after the Peacock accession was that it "masked" (that familiar conspiratorial term) an even more dramatic "New Right push" - that the friendly face of Peacock was to be the front for another yet Drier season. In this analysis the key was to "see behind the style to the substance". It seemed that in their dastardly way the Right was always plotting to get further Right again, if only by stealth.

Yet both of these analyses in their different ways miss the point. On the one hand, "style" is important, and the difference between the symbology of the Peacock and Howard leaderships is not all window-dressing. Again, John Howard's project as Liberal leader was never simply the reduction of the party to a cabal of free-market economists and union-bashers - however much it may have seemed like that at times. Howard's world view, his political instincts, even his intuition of the temper of the times, were essentially those of Margaret Thatcher; his project was an antipodean Thatcherism, shorn of its trappings of fake-fur imperial blustering and "British Bulldog" bellicosity. And the Thatcherite project was never simply reducible to the canon of free-market economics and class-war jingoism. It was (and still is) an ideological marriage of the "moral" anxieties and panics of "small people" in an age of disintegrating moral certainties and splintered values, with the political authoritarianism necessary to "stop the rot". Or, in another famous couplet, the marriage of the free market and the strong state: the one underpinned by the moral agenda and its criticism of the "permissive" Seventies, the other anchored by the ideology of the household budget writ large.

It is not the Dry agenda which has suffered a defeat as a result of the Peacock revival: on the contrary, if anything the focus is likely to be more narrowly on economic conservatism than before, if only because the economy is Labor's biggest Achilles heel. Rather, the loser has been the moral agenda, the terrain of Howard's "Future Directions", with its invocation to the economic fears of "little people" about their diminishing stake in society, as well as their moral fears about its standards and direction. There is after all no natural affinity between the astringent amoralism of the free marketeers and the moral crusaders. Mr Peter Shack and the Reverend Nile probably have less in common than do Mr Keating and Tom Uren. Now, undoubtedly, Andrew Peacock will run with the general themes of "Future Directions" - if only because the policy was hammered out at the cost of so much toil, tears and sweat. But it is difficult to believe that the lexicon of "traditional moral values" will seriously survive the accession of the twice-divorced society stiff-upper-lip conservatism and "keeping politics off the front page": far from it. In the Liberal Party the New Right still holds the initiative, even if its public credibility is by now a little shopworn.

But what it may mean, following the lore of cookbooks, is that the Liberals will "first catch their election victory". It's much easier to take the political agenda by the scruff of the neck when you're already in government; much more difficult to get into government that way. Margaret Thatcher didn't win in 1979 because she was popular, but because British Labour was very unpopular. Since then it's been another story. If the Liberals win the next election, it will still be time to batten down the hatches. But in trying to get there the Thatcherite model has certainly taken a bit of a beating.

David Burchell
Green Fever

The rise of the Independents in Tasmania has sent shock waves of concern through the major parties and firmly entrenched Green issues on the political agenda on a national level. The poll of 18 percent is the largest recorded on a statewide basis anywhere in the world and makes Tasmania the only place outside West Germany where the Greens hold the balance of power.

The explosion of the Independents onto centre stage in 1989 has been a long time coming. From one seat in 1980 to two in 1986, and five in 1989, the Independents have gradually tapped into the green groundswell while the major parties ignored it.

In the last three years, the Gray government has forced the agenda a range of projects around which Green extra-parliamentary opposition has crystallised. Debates have raged over proposals to log the National Estate, the construction of a silicon smelter in a residential area, the giant Wesley Vale pulp mill. On each occasion, the parliamentary Labor Party has sat impotently on the sidelines while the Green movement has slugged it out with the Gray government and big business. In so doing, Labor vacated the reformist ground to leave the Independents a clear run.

The signing of the Labor-Green accord - which set out a program of parliamentary and policy initiatives - has guaranteed the Labor Party minority government, with the Independents retaining a distance from the machinery of government. The accord includes agreements for: fixed four year terms; freedom of information; land rights; repeal of anti-gay legislation; a Wilderness Act; public disclosure of bulk power contracts; nuclear warship safety plan and mineral royalties; affirmative action policies; nomination of sections of the Western Tasmanian wilderness for World Heritage.

Many of these are issues long advocated by the Greens to the opposition of sections of the ALP and conservative forces.

Within days of the Independents gaining the balance of power, the pillars of Tasmanian society dramatically changed tack from ridicule of the Independents to enticement. The editor of the Launceston Examiner, who, for years, had been antagonistic to conservation, had a hand-written note delivered to Bob Brown's remote rural home. The editor of the Hobart Mercury, which had also editorialised against the Greens, rang to offer his congratulations. The Hobart Chamber of Commerce made contact seeking discussions, as did the Chamber of Mines. The grassroots rebellion against unwanted developments which they had tried to crush had survived. The time had come to try to limit the damage.

But the Independents have eschewed co-opting processes, as they have the spoils of power. Ministerial positions, there for the taking, were not sought. Symbolic of the Independents' aversion to parliamentary privileges is the move to abolish the traditional perk of subsidised liquor for Ministers. With substantial philosophical differences between the Independents and the conservative parliamentary Labor Party, there will be substantial differences on many policy issues.

The Independents will retain their right to ask questions of the government on the floor of parliament, while extra-parliamentary groups will maintain external pressure. For the next term, moreover, the Independents have three more members to cover more issues and, under the accord, will gain support staff where presently they have only what they pay for out of their own pockets.

The ALP, with 13 seats, needs all five Independents present to avoid suffering defeat on the floor of the House. Any backdown on the contents of the implementation of accord renders the ALP vulnerable to the further erosion of its support base at the next election. In public perception the Independents have become the real opposition for many and have effectively ensured that, for the foreseeable future, the ALP cannot govern in its own right.

Much of the Independents' program will undermine the standing of entrenched business interests which dominate Tasmania's economy. At present, seventeen major companies dominate the economy - consuming 66 percent of the state's electricity, mining 90 percent of the minerals and 85 percent of the timber production. The very same companies have provoked intense environmental controversies over the past fifteen years.

The fate of the program of reform hinges on two vital factors - the extent to which the Greens allow the program of reform to be watered down, and the degree of obstructionism from the conservative Legislative Council. The latter is likely to frustrate many of the proposed legislative reforms such as freedom of information and gay law reform. The Greens will undoubtedly be subjected to substantial pressure to be 'reasonable', 'responsible' and willing to 'compromise' from the media, big business and conservative unions. The countervailing pressure to maintain and extend the agenda will depend on their ability to retain their roots with their respective groups.

Despite these possible setbacks the Green momentum appears unstoppable. The federal ALP, increasingly nervous about the prospect of the next election, is keen to ensure that the Green/ALP connection is projected successfully onto the federal level. Out of the fires of anti-conservation, which burned so brightly seven years ago when Gray came to power, has come a bold new experiment. The ripples of hope from success in Tasmania will spread far beyond these shores.

Bob Burton.