Government corruption is a cancer on the body politic, eating away at governments across the continent. Or is it? Gary Wickham and Gavin Kendall suggest our instincts about corruption, like those about 'good health', are often misplaced.

Corruption is with us. The WA Inc Royal Commission and its media coverage parallel Queensland's Fitzgerald Inquiry which itself had echoes of the inquiry into the Askin government of New South Wales. And so on. In other words, the WA Commission and the stories surrounding it are part of a tradition of government in Australia, hardly a noble tradition, but a tradition nonetheless: our governments, it seems, are constantly under threat from corruption.

The inquiries and the stories would have us believe corruption is a cancer. Unless we, the voters, act as a surgeon, urging healthy living on our governments and cutting out the cancer quickly whenever it appears, the consequences will be dire. We know enough to know we're not alone in the fight against this disease. Italy, Japan and the US from among the democratic countries, and just about all the falling communist countries, are acknowledged to be fighting it as well. We wish them well (sort of) though no one is too surprised when a government, a system, or even an entire nation has to be buried because of the disease and the surrounding area fumigated in its wake.

We also know enough to know that corruption is hardly a new problem. The Roman emperor Augustus, for example, identified the corruption of the empire as the major target of his new governmental program, although he can hardly be said to have succeeded. Ultimately, so our mythology has it, the Roman Empire was destroyed by decadence and corruption. Our fear is that we are going the same way.
What we don't seem to know is that there are other ways of looking at corruption. One of these other ways, we're arguing here, is actually more useful if one is concerned, as we are, with good government. In fact, we suggest corruption is better thought of as a necessary, though necessarily limited, aspect of modern government, including modern Australian government. To begin, we need to think about health. It's in the context of trying to assess the health of the nation and of its system of government that we understand corruption is inimical to health; the idea of corruption as a 'cancer' is entirely appropriate to this currently dominant way of thinking.

Let's take a few steps back. The health metaphor which we apply to our nation is, of course, derived from what is ultimately a medical source focusing on the body of an individual. The body is seen to be in its normal state when in perfect health, while illness and disease are the things that remove 'health', disrupt this 'normal' condition, and threaten the body.

By analogy, our nation has a normal condition when things are going perfectly well, and this normal condition is disrupted by such problems as corruption (although, of course, there are others, such as riots, civil disobedience,
crime, and so on). Too many of these problems, and the nation, like the body, can be destroyed. The job of the voter, as surgeon, is to ward off the incursions of these malign influences, and ensure the normality and equilibrium of the patient-nation.

However, this notion of health, although deeply embedded in our common sense understandings, is only one of a range of possible ways of understanding health. It's an understanding which arises at a specific historical moment; it is not an understanding which is good for all time.

Good government is a messy and complex business.

Another understanding of the health of our nation may help us better understand the function and the dangerousness of corruption and similar ‘evils’ This very old way of understanding health, which is being revived in some versions of homeopathy, organises itself around a conception of the body as necessarily overtaken by ills. The movement of the body through various stages of being ill and being well, and eventually dying, are all part of what constitutes ‘health’—thus even death can be thought of as ‘healthy’. This is very different from regarding a state of total wellbeing as the ‘default’ position.

It should be fairly clear how taking up this metaphor could transform our understanding of the ills of the nation. We are by no means advocating that such ills should not be the object of the voter-surgeon’s interventions, but we are suggesting that anyone who expects to see a nation reach a peak of ‘normality’ is being naive. In addition, perhaps it is appropriate that some nations and empires be allowed to die, as part of their cycle of health.

Some readers might well be saying: but isn’t this exactly Marx’s point? Didn’t Marx formulate a notion of capitalism as necessarily beset by evils and ills, by the tension between the relations and forces of production, and by the alienation of the workers from the means of production? Indeed so, but only in the context of setting up capitalism as deeply pathological. Alienation was merely a symptom of a deeper malaise. When capitalism gets replaced by communism, so he said, all the cancers will disappear or wither away.

Our outlook is different. If one understands the health of the nation and its system of government in the way we have outlined above, then it is no longer necessary to regard capitalism as pathological. Its ills are an inevitable part of its life course. Capitalism requires an understanding doctor, not an executioner. Following on from this, one would expect communist systems of government to suffer disease just like any other system—and Marx’s idealism in believing communism would prove different from the systems that preceded it has been blown apart by recent events in Eastern Europe, as we hinted earlier.

By contrast, Max Weber’s vision of a bureaucratic form of government was much more like the kind of metaphorical understanding of health we are arguing for here. Weber realised that a bureaucracy would be beset by problems such as corruption, and would cause a certain amount of stifling of the body, but he writes as though this were somehow a necessary oil in the machinery of government—necessary but still in need of careful regulation.

We are calling for a new realism in coming to grips with the ills of the nation. We believe that it is important to stop seeing the signs of decadence and decay all around, and to get on with the job of regulating the inevitable hiccoughs in government. No doubt our form of government will die, in time: but our over-reactions to its problems only make it more difficult to see how to act to improve the situation.

We realise that we have not said anything about what makes one form of government better than the other; perhaps we could be accused of suggesting that since all forms of government are equally prone to disease like corruption, then we have no way of deciding which is better. However, we would resist such a paralysis of thought. We reiterate that the purpose of this exploration is to engender a certain sense of perspective about our current problems, and a certain sense of modesty about the times we live in—they are almost certainly no more debauched or depraved than any other.

We need to understand that the piece of the life-cycle of government we are experiencing is just one of many such pieces. In addition, we would maintain that it is possible to make further ethical decisions about what forms of government are best (an analysis begun by one of us in ALR 129). Moral panics about diseases (like corruption) can only cloud our judgment and obstruct our ability to make such decisions.

So the WA Inc Royal Commission is more an indication of the way government works. Sure, it’s an indication that it never works evenly or smoothly, but this is hardly grounds for panic.

In this sense, our conclusion is that corruption inquiries should be seen as useful aids to a sort of popular political sociology. Given sensible reporting, they should help to make voters aware that good government is a messy and complex business. If voters want government that’s clear and simple, they’ll simply get bad government.

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