

CIVILITY

John Hyde

I am sure I am not alone in expecting the recommendations contained in the Interim Report of the Muirhead Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody to achieve little. Justice Muirhead is investigating a problem that is as intractable as it is tragic.

Until the Commission finally reports, it is improper to assume that none of the dead were the victims of criminal acts on the part of policemen or others, but we know that manslaughter is not the central problem. The Interim Report was primarily addressed to cases where aborigines in custody died by their own hand, or from medical conditions caused or exacerbated by alcohol. The underlying problem is the low self-esteem which apparently encourages people to drink themselves silly. Alcohol, in excess, is itself a depressant.

Wiser men than Mr Gerry Hand might admit that there may not be a great deal that governments can do about such facts---not directly anyway. On the other hand, if the government is itself contributing to low self-esteem, it might do something useful---it could, for instance, try repealing the labour laws which cause unemployment among the unskilled.

The phenomenon of Aboriginal deaths in custody is a tragedy, but because we don't know what to do about it, and have never known what to do about people who do not cope with life, it is not, as some allege, an Australian disgrace. The donning of sack-cloth and ashes will not help Aborigines, neither will scapegoats help them. Over the years we really have tried---from native reserves to land rights; prohibition of alcohol to drinking rights; social welfare to self-help schemes---but we still has its fringe dwellers, many of whom are black. With hindsight, we can see that bad situations were often made worse by people acting with the best of intentions. Nevertheless, we must go on trying.

Sometimes, blameworthy individuals---both black and white---should be punished, but anger won't often help this problem. There is a lot of talk about racialism, but whatever Australians may think privately, few actually denigrate aborigines either in public or when they meet them. To do so would be more uncivil than most people are. Drunks are a

different kettle of fish: drunkenness is self-induced and merits disapprobation. Moreover, when dealing with the inebriated most people pepper censure with unwarranted incivility.

Policemen are sometimes uncivil and I suspect they are especially uncivil to drunks, who are very trying even for those who don't have to deal with them every day. Moreover, we might, in justice to the police, remember that they reflect the society that is all about them. Policemen too are influenced by the language used in Parliament and by the incivility of some so-called leaders of various protest movements. They hear and note the contumely that political leaders heap upon whatever social pariahs are in currency--- smokers and tax avoiders for instance. They must endure the 'we-want-it-now' generation shouting abuse and throwing stones. In short, our police belong to a society which does not value civility.

Civility is subtle, but basically it is that part of good manners that raises the self-esteem of other people. It is not always easy to practice but, to make it less difficult, it has been ritualised with 'pleases' and 'thankyous', with honorific titles such as Mr, Mrs, Miss and Ms (civility demanding the title which the other person wishes), and with the assumption in conversation that all women are ladies. Of course, ritual is sometimes substituted for the real thing; nevertheless, civilisation would not be possible without civility. The Ancient Greeks, even if they were civil only to each other, had a point: they believed that civility distinguished them from the barbarians.

Civility often pre-empts conflict. Let me cite trivial examples of circumstances with which most people are familiar.

Recently I was stopped by a traffic cop. This perfectly civil policeman, who really suspected I was drunk, started the conversation with, "Sir, are you aware that you are driving below the speed limit on a freeway?" Had he accused me of drinking, been aggressive or ordered me out of my car, I might have reacted angrily. As it was, his formal deference and willingness to assume the best defused any likely agro and we parted on the best of terms.

Compare that simple episode with a much-reported example of police incivility. On suspicion of drink-driving, two Perth patrolmen stopped a car which had a sober, slow-driving driver. They insulted and then manhandled the driver, and arrested his wife for assault. The charges were thrown out of court with some sharp criticism of the police from the bench. The contrast illustrates the point that civility avoids a lot of trouble. The second episode, moreover, begs another question: would an equally sober aborigine, without the resources to defend himself, have successfully challenged the ridiculous charges?

Civility must be habitual; otherwise it cannot be called upon when needed most. Appreciate the exasperation which must

sometimes be felt by most policemen. It must, after all, be difficult to be civil to a drunk while the drunk is in the act of vomiting or describing you in four-letter incivilities. Yet, tell the drunk of the contempt you have for his behaviour and he is the more likely to be suicidal as soon as he calms down sufficiently to settle into alcoholic moroseness.

What is more, there might be less anti-social behaviour and less drunkenness if people experienced more civility--- that is, self-esteem enhancing treatment---between bouts of waywardness.

Civility is in sad decline in Australia---and not just among our policemen. The civilities are not middle-class indulgences; they are necessary social cement. They do achieve more than just making life more pleasant; they discourage us from treating each other badly. Let us have a 'year of civility'. It could be no more ineffectual than the 'year of the child' and would justify its hype if it did no more than encourage those 'sleazebags'---pardon---in parliament to stop calling each other names.

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