

Of Honour and Politics

John Hyde

"---for Brutus is an honourable man; so are they all, all honourable men---" William Shakespeare.

Leadership coups are a necessary part of politics. Whether the replacement of Howard by Peacock is in either the Liberal Party's or the national interest is, however, a separate question from whether that coup was honourably conducted. So is Mr Hawke's utter hypocrisy in the matter a separate question. The Opposition's attitude to policy issues, such as wheat deregulation, will, in time, indicate what interests, if any other than the MPs directly involved, were served by the coup.

When political power was manifested in proficiency with lance and sword, a code of 'honour' maintained some passing semblance of civility among the knights. To this day, honour is important in politics and politics is not without honour--- that is, a code which prevents it becoming vile.

Honour is not a precise notion, but a thesaurus lists these synonyms: probity, integrity, loyalty, open heartedness, veracity and a fine sense of one's obligations. The Liberal Party today is plagued not merely by cross Federal MPs and despairing branch members. The open flouting of 'honour' has given it an underlying problem. Honour having been flouted by some, and those some having been rewarded, then others feel that they are no longer bound by the code.

Unless the authority of the code is restored, the Liberal Party will divide and the claimed justification for the coup, namely, electoral victory, will be lost. Angry Liberal MPs will justify behaviour which is divisive by reference to the Four Corners programme and Macphee's promotion. In regard to his pre-selection Macphee showed an unparalleled disregard of the behaviour expected of party members. The problem is thus of Mr Peacock's own making. He has, in the minds of people on whom he must depend, 'legitimised' forms of disruptive behaviour which were formerly not 'legitimate'.

The Liberal leader must now 'delegitimise' the breaking of the time-honoured, if unwritten, rules. He is between a rock and a hard place. The things he must do to re-establish

respect for the code have a high political cost. Nevertheless, the political cost of not re-establishing the code will, in the long run, be even higher.

He should have dropped Mr Tuckey and Mr Moore, the Four Corners gloaters, from the Shadow Ministry for being offensive, divisive and exceptionally stupid. He should still do this although the world is not black and white---Mr Tuckey, by championing wheat market deregulation, which was in the national interest but was unpopular in his own electorate, has demonstrated that he can behave honourably. Nevertheless, a stretch on the back bench will do neither him nor the Liberal Party anything but good. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, Mr Peacock can assume that the other members of the Gang of Five, Shack, Puplick and Jull, were unaware of what was said on camera by Tuckey and Moore.

Howard should still be promoted: I suggest to Industry, Technology and Commerce where his talents will be useful. Senator Austin Lewis, whose protectionist sympathies make him unsuitable for his present shadow portfolio, should have Tuckey's Housing and Small Business portfolio.

Those steps, although difficult, would be sufficient to overcome one reason to believe that anything goes in the Liberal Party. Because Macphee's sins predated his appointment, the problems caused by it are even more difficult to undo.

Mr Macphee is an unsuitable choice not just for the Shadow Ministry but, as Les Hollings pointed out in the last *Weekend Australian*, for the Foreign Affairs portfolio---and unsuitable appointments is part of Andrew Peacock's credibility problem. His immediate problem, however, is to prevent a repetition of Mr Macphee's disregard for the code of restraint which should surround pre-selection contests. For instance, may James Porter, who is challenged in his safe seat of Barker by Mr Ian McLachlan, publicly claim that he is leadership material and the true voice of liberalism and compassion who is facing a Fascist plot?

In private, even though his admonishment will inevitably elicit derisory laughter from some quarters, the Liberal leader should tell those of his colleagues who are caught up in pre-selection battles that they should not resort to public invective and special pleading.

In public, Peacock should state plainly, and keep restating, the undoubted fact that Liberal party leaders have no role in the endorsement process and that any action on his part that might influence the outcome of a pre-selection would be improper.

The disciplining of Mr Macphee should be left to the good sense of the pre-selection committees. The Victorian Liberal Party's responsibility is, as it always was, to ensure that the committees have the widest possible choice among able applicants.

Leadership coups, although sometimes necessary, are usually unpleasant. After the event, this coup was made more so by conflicting stories about Mr Peacock's role, by gloating, and by the rewards Mr Peacock gave to people who, in terms of the code, behaved badly. Before the event, it was marked by the failure of Mr Howard's senior shadow ministers to observe the tradition that obliged them to tell their leader of the coup in time for him to mount a defence which just may have changed the numbers. Like the pirate chiefs in "Treasure Island", Howard was entitled to receive the Black Spot before they did him in. The claim, made several times by the participants, that their disregard for the established means---the code of honour---was justified by the end, namely power, is no more than the claim of every tyrant throughout history.

Being seen to be the cypher of those who gave him leadership will have increasing political costs for Mr Peacock. Because the satisfactions of blood-letting quickly pall, the parliamentary party has settled into an uneasy truce. But friction is in the nature of politics. Unless Mr Peacock re-establishes "a fine sense of obligation" in the conduct of his party's affairs, then one day he too will exclaim "et tu Brute".

---John Hyde is Executive Director of the Australian Institute for Public Policy---

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