

Principle of Limits

John Hyde

Political tides eddy, and when one is close to them, in terms of time or involvement, it is difficult to determine their drift. Yet it is the drift of politics, rather than who has got his knife into whom this week, that matters.

In line with a discernible world-wide trend and following in the wake of Australian scandals, some National, NSW and Queensland politicians had been more inclined than their predecessors had been to accept certain very broad 'principles' which reduce their freedom of action. The relevant principles protect the private domain from government; ensure that government's laws apply generally without favour or disfavour to all citizens; and ensure that the process of government is as open and democratic as possible. These principles protect the citizen and ultimately they also protect the integrity and authority of government itself. Now the major parties are again less inclined to accept the principles. Whether this latest drift is tidal or just an election-year eddy, I cannot tell.

The two recent leadership changes, for instance, reflected the drift in the direction of political pragmatism. There are several parallels between the replacement of Mr Ahern with Mr Cooper and Mr Howard with Mr Peacock. These include: the search for a charisma; the involvement of certain, formerly excluded, members of the party; and the replacement of someone who was seen not to be on top of events with someone whom it was hoped (however forlornly) would get on top of them. There is, however, another parallel which has been less remarked, but which I think is more significant. Mr Peacock once supported the Joh-for-Canberra campaign. Both leaders have been willing to be associated with Mr Bjelke-Petersen and with his anything-goes style of government.

Mr Ahern's demise is, of course, the clearest indication on the liberal/conservative side of politics of retreat from restraining principles. Ahern was trying, against odds imposed by his own party, to clean up Queensland politics. He seemed to be about to establish more accountability and end the all-too-common cronyism. Whether he understood that collectivist causes of his party's slide from grace is another matter, but

he understood the necessity of practices which would reduce his own and cabinet's discretion.

Collectivism and corruption are inextricably entwined. In every country where government control of the means of production, distribution and exchange has been tried, whether the process has gone by the title of Fascism or Socialism, it has always resulted in cronyism. The Queensland Nats are more socialist than the Labor Party in Canberra or in any State government. Only in WA, where a Fitzgerald Inquiry is needed, is Queensland's corruption rivalled. Anti-socialists in Queensland really would do better to vote Labor than to risk a situation where the Queensland National Party became the dominant Coalition partner.

It is in the nature of party politics that politicians are judged by the associates they choose. Federal National Party MPs who do not publicly dissociate themselves from attempts to avoid the Fitzgerald recommendations deserve the odium they will inevitably attract. Similarly, Federal Labor MPs from WA who do not insist that Mr Dowding hold a Fitzgerald-type inquiry deserve to be associated with WA Inc.

The unprincipled, self-indulgent nature of the Bjelke-Petersen government was placed on the public record by the Fitzgerald Inquiry, but as long as ten years ago Canberra-based politicians and bureaucrats had developed a profound contempt for the way Queensland was being governed. Mr Peacock was not ignorant of the Queensland Premier's way of governing; we must therefore assume that he found it acceptable.

Federal Liberal MPs are divided on several of Mr Howard's strengths, but they cannot honestly deny that under him the Liberal Party ceased the practice of saying 'yes' to vested interests that promised it votes. I think most of them would also agree that his refusal to truck with vested interests was costly in terms of electoral and financial support. Some Liberals, the Macphree wets in particular, thought his dry principles were wrong. Others, however, did not object to the particular principles: they objected to any restrictions on their ability to win the next election and put the world to rights pragmatically. That these people could prevail is possibly a sea change.

The election of Mr Peacock could herald a return to the principle-free pragmatic politics of the Fraser era. However, there are those, who I admit are in better position than I to know, who assure me that Mr Peacock has learned by his experiences since 1983. I'll be more likely to believe it when the new Andrew Peacock gives the Queensland Liberals his fulsome support in their struggle with the Nats.

Given the state of the economy, the Coalition should win the next Federal election, therefore its attitudes are currently more important than Labor's. Nevertheless, the same drift to pragmatism is to be seen on the other side of politics. I do not believe that, even as little as a year ago, the Hawke cabinet would have employed taxpayers' money to

subsidise Kodak (which coincidentally has a factory in the Prime Minister's electorate). Nor do I believe it would have subsidised Ansett and Australian Airlines, as it has during the pilots strike. These are so obviously improper uses of taxpayer funds. They smack of the Fraser Government's subsidisation of the Mount Lyall Copper mine (in a marginal seat) and the Woodsreef asbestos mine (in a National Party electorate). They smack of WA Inc.

Queensland-style anything-goes power tripping has done immense damage to our economy and appreciable damage to the standing of our political institutions. Politicians who do not accept tight rules defining the limits of their own authority are likely to turn public authority to private ends---that is, be corrupted.

Australian politicians and the Coalition Parties in Canberra, in particular, did seem to be learning this fundamental lesson. Let us hope that they are not now forgetting it.

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

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