

Dick Klugman

*John Hyde*

Australians are fed up with politics---with the triviality, the back biting and, above all, the failure to face up to real issues. Indeed, if times were to get tough, lack of respect for the political system might prove to be a serious problem.

The reasons why politicians conduct themselves the way that they do are complex and I do not pretend to understand them all. However, an underlying reason is that the system fills the Parliament with ordinary people who are given a task that is, in fact, intellectually and morally extremely difficult---far more so than most lay critics and some MPs appreciate.

Every election sees the retirement or defeat of several who have wandered among the pitfalls of politics. In a few years they will barely be remembered, even by their contemporaries, unless they are remembered for their idiosyncrasies and the parts they played in the various power plays. This is fair enough, not many retiring MPs can honestly swear that Parliament would have dealt with some important matter differently had someone else from the same party and faction filled their place. The reason that many individuals have so little influence on the broad course of government is that, for want of inclination, ability or fortitude, they do not take up significant causes.

Only among the loony left have there been many exceptions from the tendency to follow the whips and leave the hard advocacy to others. In consequence, the left, although always a minority with little public support, in the 60s and early 70s changed the way in which both Liberal and Labor governed. Whether the changes were for the better is a separate question. MPs, nearer to the mainstream, who have consistently pursued a significant issue are less common but not unheard of.

Dick Klugman, Labor MP for Prospect, who is retiring with this election, is one. Within the Parliament, he was to democracy what Bert Kelly was to the market---that is, its untiring and consistent defender. His consistency was legend and he was the scourge of hypocrites.

That his voice was, in fact, also the voice of sanity is particularly evident with hindsight. By nagging away, often with resort to ridicule, in the Parliament, on committees and in the caucus, he stopped Australia from making some mistakes and slowed down the rate at which we made others. Far from being swept along with the authoritarian tide, he altered the flow of the tide, however marginally in some cases. Only a few Ministers could claim as much. Even legislation for which a minister is nominally responsible would not have been much different if handled by another.

Foreign policy was one of Klugman's interests and it should be stated that history is now proving him right on almost every foreign policy issue. He opposed Australia's unnecessarily close association with dictatorships in the United Nations and elsewhere. He opposed unilateral Western disarmament. When it was fashionable to treat the totalitarian states as moral equals of the democracies, he objected to the equating of the Warsaw Pact societies with Western democracies. Klugman pointed out, many times over, that open democratic societies, such as the United States, have not been involved in wars with each other, while authoritarian regimes pose the constant threat of war. He defended the United States and similar societies from the hatred of the so-called left and ridiculed the Left's defence of Stalin and his successors.

It is typical of Klugman that in a farewell speech he should have raised the problem posed by the terms "left" and "right". If, as he prefers to believe, right means pro authority and left means anti, then his opponents on the so-called left are really right. Relatively speaking, Gorbachev is left and the Chinese, Vietnamese and Cubans right, and the B.W.I.U. and A.M.S.W.U. are, by Australian standards, extreme right. Confused?

It is a measure of his consistency that he opposed the legislation that banned the BLF, an organisation for which I am sure he has scant respect. He did it on the democratic grounds that: "Governments can declare certain behaviour illegal, but this must apply to all, not only to one group which is currently unpopular". On the same democratic grounds he had earlier questioned multiculturalism, positive discrimination and land rights. He says his attitude on those occasions made him unpopular with some/many of his colleagues. I am not surprised: consistency is a heavy cross for any Member of Parliament to carry.

In the same farewell speech he described himself as obviously not a political success story, if measured by achieving a ministerial position, but satisfied that he had been able to influence some of his colleagues on all sides of the caucus and the Parliament to look more critically at some commonly accepted propositions. I think the claim more than fair; and in doing it he changed, albeit usually only marginally, the way the whole polity reacted to matters of importance. That surely is the essence of being a good parliamentarian. Yet not many Australians know of him.

The Parliament is the electoral college that, without bloodshed, determines who shall rule us. Government is too big a prize for Parliament to be other than combative---besides combative Oppositions keep Governments honest.

Nevertheless, it is sorry state of affairs when even the most terrified Minister pretends that he has no doubts about what he is doing, when he treats Parliament as a nuisance, when MPs toe a party line, and when the fact that the Prime Minister was angry makes headlines because noting his anger is easier than deciding whether he was right or wrong. Politics could give more time and more honour to those who take a view that is longer than the next election---to the Klugmans and the Kellys; and, of course, their opponents. In short, there could be more substance to the debate. If thoughtful men were to find it easier to change things, Parliament might attract the better class of politician that it seems everybody is demanding.

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