

By the Year 2000

*John Hyde*

What sort of shape will Australia be in at the close of the 20th century? As the topic of a dinner address the question had the potential to produce more gloom than was appropriate; but asked at a gathering close by the marina in Fremantle (that is, deep in the heart of Americas Cup country) it was a nicely bizarre. The circumstances reminded us of one of history's best known lessons: the relationship of circuses to the decline of the Roman Empire.

When Standard and Poors and Moodies, yet again, mark down our credit rating and the IMF steps in, as it did in 1974 in Britain, we might still be crying: Throw another Christian on the barbie. Then again, we might take our responsibilities more seriously!

The year 2000 is, as yet, an unknown but we can be sure that what we do now will bear upon our fortunes then. In the interim, we may or may not enjoy the economic equivalent of the discovery of the Bass Strait oil-fields, or suffer a foreign war or the much predicted global warming. And beside these semi-exogenous ups and downs there will be a general trend, manifest in the habits and fortunes of our personal lives, our politics and our economy. This trend will be more completely within our influence.

The extremes of what will happen to our social mores, politics and the economy can be represented by two scenarios, one emphasising 'social responsibility', the other 'personal responsibility'. In the society which emphasises social responsibility, governments and other social organisations such as, unions, companies and committees will provide our bread and circuses. Individuals will be more or less bound by what passes for the collective will.

In this sort of world, good beggars command a premium and the most successful mendicants prosper. Instead of producing competitively, professional beggars seek monopolies, licences, tariffs and industrial awards.

If handouts to industries are debilitating, so too are handouts to people. When unemployment and sickness benefits are easily obtained, when social workers tell us that we are disadvantaged, and when churchmen, school teachers and parents take to rabbiting on about social rather than individual responsibility, then, not unnaturally, we at least consider handing our problems over to society. The rub is that societies become overloaded as the problems multiply and the available resources, to do even those things they can do, decline.

Western Australian authorities have deemed that the famous dolphins at Monkey Mia may be fed no more than one third of their dietary needs, lest they lose the ability to fend for themselves. It seems not to have occurred to the government that the argument might be applied to the human species. When governments needlessly subsidise unemployment, sickness and single parenthood, naturally there are more of these ills. The number of people drawing sickness benefit doubled during the seventies. The number drawing single parents' benefit trebled during the eighties.

When decisions are taken socially, individuals cannot be held responsible for failure and an important motivating force for human action is absent.

It is possible that in Australia in 2000 we will have learned too little from our own and others' mistakes. In which case we would still take rather more decisions collectively (and hence fewer individually) than in other countries with which we like to compare ourselves. Australia would then still be a place where some of the biggest profits are made by people who lobby governments successfully; in which it is easy to live off public charity; in which society is responsible in our own minds for our moral shortcomings; and so on. In short, Australians will still expect bread and circuses to be provided for them.

Under these circumstances we should expect that in 2000, like the ancient Romans, we will go on getting weaker relative to other societies. Average living standards will either not have risen appreciably or will have fallen slightly. We will be going through a period of union and other interest group militancy. Because our politics will still be heavily influenced by interest-group pressure then, as now, people will not accept that their shares are justly arrived at. What is more, in such a highly politicised society, militancy gets a bigger slice of the declining cake. The frightening cost of this scenario is an ugly, angry society.

We might, however, have regained the Americas Cup. Societies, such as Communist East Germany, in which people are denied control over the important personal goals tend to excel at games.

Alternatively, by 2000, Australians may have done many of the things that New Zealanders have already done under the tutelage of Roger Douglas, the Brits have done under Margaret Thatcher, and indeed most of the world, including the Eastern Europeans, are doing to some extent.

The most significant changes will have been in our own attitudes. Leaders will again be extolling those individual habits which we once called virtues. Personal characteristics, such as hard work, saving, acceptance of responsibility for the welfare of family members, and personal responsibility for one's own health will be back in fashion. So will certain social mechanisms which go with personal responsibility---the free market, voluntary charity and a much stricter view of the ethics of government, business and family.

These hopes are not beyond the bounds of reasonable expectation: for example, the Federal Government has already reduced industry protection and tightened up the administration of the dole.

We are potentially the poor white trash of South East Asia. We are, however, also potentially once again what we were at the turn of the 20th century---the wealthiest people in the world.

Within a wide range, ultimately limited by factors beyond our control, the sort of society we will have in 2000 is ours for the making. We know roughly what to do; but have we the courage, in the face of vested interest militancy, to do it? There are slowly developing signs that perhaps we have.

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