

Ad hominem attack and politics

John Hyde

The public, which cannot directly control politics, has a vital interest in the propriety of those who do. Therefore, distasteful as it often is, the tendency for Oppositions to 'muck-rake', is inevitable and necessary. In truth, we all resort to ad hominem arguments for the good reason that knowledge of people's characters is often our best or only guide to their veracity and good faith. In short, "ad hominem" attack has been given an unduly bad name.

When the nineteenth century British statesman Edmund Burke said that politics was but morality writ large he, among other things, drew attention to the point that politicians have not much else but morality to guide them. More specifically, he said: "It is not, what a lawyer tells me I may do; but what humanity, reason and justice tell me I ought to do". If only some of our Premiers had been less concerned with the legal limits to authority and more concerned with humanity, reason and justice they might have spared their citizens much chagrin.

Today, the public, media and Opposition parties have an almost obsessive interest with the moral fitness of the men and women who exercise power. Before I was a politician, I thought the constant probing of politicians' moral shortcomings misguided---nothing more than malicious enjoyment of the discomfort of people who had aroused jealousy---but my years in parliament changed my mind.

I did not discover that politicians are a particularly immoral lot. Indeed, I formed the opposite view that politics attracts an unusual proportion of people with noble ideals, and that the best of these, in fact, do tend to get promoted to the Cabinet. Rather, I became convinced that it takes unusually moral people to withstand the extraordinary temptations of office. Upon reflection, with a more intimate knowledge, it seemed to me that Acton had, after all, been right when he observed that power tends to corrupt. Since, as a matter of course, even the gentlest rulers expropriate property, and order death and injury, on a scale that criminals could not dream of, rulers who are easily corrupted are dangerous. And one way of reducing the danger is to conduct a continuing devil's advocacy against those who hold

or aspire to power. Politics does that, and, up to a point, the process works.

Ordinary people have remarkably good instincts about governments. They give their rulers the respect that is due their office but they don't trust them. Why should they, when they know that should their rulers ignore what humanity, reason and justice say ought to be done, then it is ordinary people who bear the cost. Since laymen cannot possibly understand all of the temptations of office, they try to observe and monitor Ministers' ability to withstand such temptations as they do understand and, try to insist on a higher standard in these than they would of people in private life.

Parliament and the press probe aspects of the lives of public figures that have little direct bearing on official duties but, nonetheless, may indicate an inability to resist temptation. In short: they muck-rake! It follows, for instance, that papers such as "The Eye" have their place in a free society.

Muck-raking is often easier than serious policy analysis, and moral issues are, in general, more easily understood by laymen than technical ones. To gain political advantage Oppositions, therefore, play the man. It is true, their attacks are sometimes unjust, pointless or malicious, but the attacks are inevitable and often useful. Naturally, Ministers try to stifle them. 'Muck-raking' is, however, a poor metaphor for their purpose, because it is only the muck which is not raked that stinks.

Ad hominem politics has its place. Rather than condemn it outright we should try to establish what, that place is and the rules that will keep it within the bounds of decency.

To consider an analogy: we don't much worry about the moral fitness of our grocer, while we are concerned with the morality of our employer. One difference is that we contract with our employer, but not our grocer, to perform for us long after the bargain is struck. In employment, not all contingencies can be foreseen, nor does it pay to set the future in concrete. We must, therefore, rely on good faith.

Since there is more that cannot be specified in the social contract than in any employment contract, and because, short of migrating, "I quit" is meaningless, our relationship with our rulers requires even more trust. Put another way, rulers are much less constrained than employers by law, custom and the market; and democracy, important though it is, is only a partial answer to corrupt rule makers.

Political corruption takes many forms. We need canvass only a few of them to understand its insidious nature. Embezzlement is not the problem---so far as I know, Ministers don't put their hands in the till. A few may cheat on such things as travel allowances and use of VIP aircraft and most

are more than willing to take their remuneration in hidden perks rather than visible salary. But that is all.

Bribes taken in votes are much more serious. A Minister who cynically seeks political advantage at national cost is no better morally than one who takes his payment in cash, and far more damaging. For instance, when a Minister deliberately presents the budget in a misleading light, inflates the economy prior to an election, or grants trade protection to vocal vested interests he knows it is not what he "ought to do". If, as was alleged by his opponents, Menzies sent troops to Vietnam for political as opposed to national reasons, then the decision was a corrupt one. Political corruption is most blatant when, as in the case of WA Inc., private beneficiaries of government largesse are individuals or single firms. Except in such blatant cases, however, it is not easy to put your finger on it.

Muck-raking, which never reduced a paper's circulation nor cost an Opposition votes, is not just the malicious humbling of the mighty. People need to know that the mighty are honourable men and women, practiced in the art of resisting temptation. It is not unreasonable to fear that those who cheat in business, games, and love might also cheat in politics, where the stakes are higher and the opportunities almost endless.

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

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