

THE RULES OF THE GAME      John Hyde

While conceding defeat, John Howard pointed out that the things that unite us are more important than those which divide us. He might have gone on to say that the things which unite us are taken too much for granted. Years ago, William L Shirer's 'Rise and Fall of the Third Reich' convinced me of the fragile nature of liberal democracy. For better or worse it encouraged me to take an interest in politics.

Among the important things we mostly agree about are the rules which govern politics and law-making. Political power rests on trust. If the trust were lost we would probably resort to violence to settle political differences. Our politicians are not always as careful about the rules of the political game, some of which are not written, as they should be.

Australian Governments treat parliament with contempt, ignoring committees, limiting debate and bulldozing too much unintelligible legislation through too fast.

The influence of interest group lobbies, particularly trade unions and the so-called 'white shoe brigade', are an even bigger problem for democracy. Politicians invite disrespect by assuming roles they cannot manage fairly or efficiently. Inevitably motor car plans, steel plans, Accords and other attempts to substitute centralised compulsion for voluntary (market) processes lead to governments which sell favours to the big players with whom they deal.

Divergence from the one-man-one-vote principal weakens a government's legitimacy. So does misuse of public funds for campaigning. Advertisements in praise of Mr Hawke's tax changes and Sir Joh's use of the Queensland Government aircraft are examples of misfeasance.

The laws themselves invite disrespect. Perhaps because we are such an over-regulated people, legal rights and obligations are being changed frequently, often in ways that are felt to be unfair. Men in a hurry to achieve social and economic goals sometimes ignore liberal-democratic traditions. One of these is the principle that, in the absence of a compelling reason to the contrary, the law should treat everybody equally. Unequal privileges, such as trade union monopolies and immunities, untaxed gold-mining income and benefits paid to people not felt to be deserving cost 'the political system' respect. This loss leads to selective evasion of the law which causes further lost respect for it and so on.

Australians should beware because uncompetitive industry and foreign debt have a dreadful logic leading to falling living standards and disappointed expectations which more than anything else, have an unhappy history of causing people to behave badly to each other. When living standards fall people are more likely than in times of prosperity to seek scapegoats and to abandon habits of tolerance and fair dealing.

To resurrect the economy a bonfire of regulations (like the one blazing merrily in New Zealand) is needed. We must remove long-standing privileges. If disappointed monopolists are not to be encouraged to whip themselves into frenzies of self-righteous indignation, those making the changes must employ procedures which are respected.

Since Federation liberal democracy has never seriously broken down in Australia, but can we assume that it is the natural order that will continue irrespective of how we treat it? Liberal democracy is not a common form of government and other apparently civilised people have have lost it.

Argentina today and Germany in the 1930s inevitably come to mind as extreme examples of societies which, even though their people remained wealthier than the world average, faced with falling living standards, resorted to solutions that started a political process ending in governments murdering large numbers of their own citizens.

Australians would never behave so badly to each other: we are not cold blooded Germans nor hot blooded Latins. So we say! But I suspect the genetic and cultural differences between us and the Germans or Latins are, in fact, trivial. If they are trivial, the assumption of our inherent safety is nonsense---some might say racist.

Others say dedication to the perpetual long weekend, the absence of fire in our bellies, may destroy our living standards, but will save us from the extremes of enmity which in other countries end in murder. I don't see reliable evidence of that either. The economy is a poor guide to an Australian's capacity for passion. The rules by which we conduct it---anti-competitive statutory monopolies, doles, subsidies, tariffs and taxes---penalise enthusiasm during the week so we pour our enthusiasm into the weekend. In endeavours, such as sport, where competing players accept common rules and therefore the outcomes are not determined by the government, Australians display passion; witness the crowd at a close football match.

Economic necessity is forcing individuals to accept more change than is comfortable and more still is inevitable. Practices which should have been abandoned long ago must now be changed more quickly than would once have been necessary or desirable. Trade unions must cede their power. Protected industries---such as cars, textiles and dairying---must learn to stand on their own feet and other and economically efficient but beleaguered industries, such as wheat and coal, cannot expect to be subsidised by consumers or taxpayers even though those employed by them will see that other industries still are. These circumstances invite conflict.

It is very easy to cry foul when one's own livelihood is about to go down the tube, perhaps for good, when one's accustomed living standard must be abandoned or when one's expectations are dashed. What is more, even the most privileged parasite among us can find some circumstance by which he really is treated unfairly. Since Australians are neither perfectly reasonable nor utterly lethargic, big economic upheaval, which no government can prevent, will be

accompanied by big trouble unless the rules of the game are accepted. Therefor we can not afford to needlessly bring the rules by which politics is conducted into disrespect.

Neither should we needlessly inflame passions. Gough Whitlam's injunction to maintain our anger (fortunately ignored) was irresponsible. So are rallies at which speakers encourage farmers, trade unionists and others to believe that they have a nett grievance against other Australians. Instead of educating us about the need to forego our own privileges politicians usually concentrate on our grievances, widening small rifts into bigger ones. It is useful to attack trade unionism when in Woolongong, the super bounty when in Bourke, and industry protection when in Melbourne but those are precisely the places where most politicians will not raise those topics.

In the long run good procedures in support of good general principles should generate good outcomes. Among these procedures should be acceptance of the old liberal principle that the law make no favourites. Everyone already believes it, except in his own case.

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