Political Corruption

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That some Queensland corruption should be at last exposed to
view surprises no-one who has worked near politics: for ten
years or more Queensland politics has smelt of the misuse of
political power for the granting of preferments to allies and
friends. However, the Fitzgerald Royal Commission, which will
take the scalps of officials who have broken the law, and
could even identify a law-breaking minister, will not reach
the type of corruption about which we have heard most: that
committed by "honourable men" who forsake their duty without
breaking the law.

We know what to do about criminality, even if we do not
always do it well. We have laws, courts, policemen and gaols
to keep our law-breakers in check. However, there is no
similarly adequate rein on people who make improper use of
properly conferred authority. To take an example from NSW,
Minister Rex Jackson could go to gaol----he broke the law----
but there could be no <u>legal</u> sanction against the whole NSW
Cabinet for not setting in train a Fitgerald enquiry in that
state. It seems to me that, ultimately, corruption of the
latter sort presents civil society with an even greater
problem than that posed by organised crime.

In the liberal democratic tradition, power is derived
from the people and is held in trust. Political power may not
be used by its temporary trustees for personal or political
gain, or to assist their little, and not so little, mates.
Governments which use power for these illegitimate ends are,
in a word, "corrupt", even when they break no laws.

Law-makers are above the law in one sense: if a law does
not suit them they can change it. However, they can never be
above the principles of justice and equity. Ministers have an
awesome power to grant licences, permits and immunities; to
tax or subsidise; to prosecute or not procede; to grant or
withold land and minerals. When they exercise this power they
make unequals of otherwise equal citizens. Political
ideologies differ on the extent to which politicians ought to
be trusted with these responsibilities, however none allows
that the power to discriminate should be used without good
reason or sold for cash or votes. Yet that is how power is too
often used.

When the owner of a TV licence, itself an exceptional privilege, settles out of court with a Premier---raise an eyebrow! When the settlement is for a sum, $400,000, which is considerably more than what the court was expected to award, and the station management subsequently says it has nevertheless acted in its shareholders' interests, there is something rotten, but not necessarily illegal, in the state of Queensland. If the station expected the government henceforth to award government advertising fairly and otherwise act without favour, how could the settlement be in shareholders' interests? (Media outlets do not normally make generous out-of-court settlements; it is a reputation they cannot afford.)

Compare the position of the Queensland Premier with that of a policeman who accepted bribes amounting to no more than $400,000, or with former Federal Minister Mick Young who, viewed in the worst possible light, was caught smuggling a Paddington Bear and other trifles to evade duty of only $100. And compare both with Cabinets which, in return for political favours, selectively dole largesse worth many millions of dollars---TV licences, airline route licences, prime real estate, mineral titles, logging rights, tariffs to protect inefficient industries, a loan guarantee to Rothwells, taxpayers' cash for the WA Teachers Credit Society, and so on and on and on.

I do not suggest that the monetary value of a corrupt act is a particularly good measure of its immorality, or that legal proceedings can provide remedies for corrupt acts that are nevertheless lawful. However, the cash value of a privilege is a rough measure of the damage it does to the economy and of the amount of further corruption it will buy. This is the big league, and there must be sanctions against corrupt rule-makers for misusing the powers they hold in trust. The problem is as old as politics, and parliament is supposed to control the executive with political sanctions.

Parliament is functioning poorly for two reasons. First, it has become a creature of the executive. It meets only when called by the executive, and when it does sit the majority votes with the executive. I think block voting is inescapable, but it is not necessary for the minority party to be as restricted as it is in the business it can raise. While the proposed constitutional amendments would weaken pariament, what we really need are devices to strengthen parliament against the executive. Two significant ones are: give the Opposition control of a large part of the notice paper---say two days a week----and give them a decently-funded secretariat.

Second, there is little understanding in the parliament, or elsewhere, of liberal political principles. Politicians, not the most humble breed, really think that they, but perhaps not members of the other party, can "mete and dole unequal laws" without corrupting themselves. When viewed disinterestedly does anyone doubt that power tends to corrupt?

The public's objection to Labor's rich mates is being badly misinterpreted by some commentators. The loony left aside, it is not that Australians dislike successful capitalists, but that they object to grace and favour. They

know that the surest way for an Australian businessman to become rich is for him to own a government privilege---a TV licence, a textile quota, a piece of zoned land, several taxi plates, or just friends in the Cabinet who will guarantee his loans. From the point of view of clever entrepreneurs, privileges are just capital, and what is a $400,000 dollar out-of-court settlement to a TV station, and what is a $10,000 campaign donation to a woodchip company, when both have so much at stake?

A state that confers privileges for reasons it cannot defend, is quickly corrupted. We have few defences against such corruption except parliament, whose powers to expose must be strengthened.

ENDS