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ON THE DRY SIDE 170 PARLIAMENTARY REFORM John Hyde

Parliament is the electoral college which elects our 'presidents'; it is our way of making government legitimate. This is parliament's most important role and to date it has filled it as well as any political system in the world. It is supported by law and legal sanctions but its authority relies much more on the respect which people choose to grant to established institutions and practices.

It is remarkably robust - able to withstand the ill feeling associated with the Whitlam dismissal for instance - but, as the history of many countries testifies, its survival is not guaranteed by nature.

Parliament's power of peaceful legitimation is too valuable an asset to squander, but the competition between the parties for it is so intense that politicians resort to thinly disguised half-truths, slander and abuse.

Our leaders have broken their explicit and implicit cargo-cult promises so often that we wisely treat promises with skepticism; the skepticism spills over to the MPs who make the promises and the institution which upholds the MPs.

MPs bid for relative acclaim by attempting to discredit opponents. This too has affected their standing and has spilt over to discredit the institution.

MPs are too careless of the repute of Parliament. So far, it and they are held in reasonably good-natured contempt by Joe Blow. If, as seems increasingly likely, living standards must fall to let us service foreign debt, the good nature might evaporate.

Parliament's legitimising function has displaced its legislative and deliberative functions. Governments want their legislation passed, not discussed; and private members' bills are hardly ever called on for debate.

Over a century ago Walter Bagehot wrote of parliament's educative function; that too has been driven out. Parliamentary debate is a poor source of information about the affairs of state. Debate has degenerated at best into childish selective arguments to support predetermined positions, at worst into character assassination and theatre akin to bear-baiting.

Notwithstanding its noble traditions, parliamentary competition now includes slander protected by privilege, and the calculated destruction of political opponents by goading them until they lose their judgment and destroy themselves. The chambers of parliament are arenas on which the public and press gaze down to savour the drama; trying to discover meaning; weighing the performance of the players. Or it is a bear pit in which one politician is set upon by others in front who try to drive him mad; often while those behind, who want his office, quietly

cheer.

This is not new, but it has become worse.

With Mr Barry Simon, then Member for McMillan, I once induced the party room and ministry to establish legislation committees, based on those of the House of Commons. The Hon. Lionel Bowen achieved support for them from the Labor Party. The idea was to return just a little of its traditional legislative and educative functions to the House of Representatives, and most of all to take 'debate' away from the theatre of the chamber. This put the 'legislators' in eyeball to eyeball contact; reduced the rewards for grandstanding; and encouraged a little generosity.

Although the committees achieved their immediate aims, they failed to retain the support of cabinet, which saw them as a way for the Opposition to pry into Government affairs and stopped referring legislation to them. The committees also lost the support of the many MPs, who saw them as no help in holding their seats. By that time, too, the Labor Opposition could smell blood and had other interests.

There are always many MPs on both sides who stand above the worst excesses of the place. When I was there Lionel Bowen was one of them. When he was at the dispatch box, language became generous and the House became courtly, if somnolent. There was even a bit - a little bit - of good natured give and take in the argument itself. Most of us preferred it that way, but it made poor newspaper copy.

John Howard too preferred to avoid abuse. As party leader, he seems to have tried to stand above the most objectionable political tactics. Initially this approach was well received, but press gallery and public gradually gave their support to the baiters - like people who bought tickets to bear pits, with scant respect for ursine justice.

It seems that Labor has adopted a conscious policy of denigration, particularly of Liberal leaders. Cain's personal attacks on Kennet, Wran's on Greiner and possibly Burke's on MacKinnon when he looked like getting the WA Liberal leadership are all of a pattern. The practice of playing the man rather than the policy is not new, nor has it been confined to the Labor Party, but it has been raised to new levels of intensity and the tactics have plumbed new depths.

After months of accepting debating terms like 'His Oiliness', 'sleazebags' and 'Those two pansies over there', months of being criticised for not fighting, and watching his public standing slide, Mr Howard allowed the Liberals' most talented bruiser, Mr Tuckey, to bait his chief scourge, Mr Keating. Parliament was back to normal; another try at parliamentary reform had failed.

On the bus last week I overheard a man, who clearly respected Mr. Keating's ability as treasurer, express

disappointment that he had cried foul when Mr Tuckey attacked him. He said: "Keating mixed it. Now he should cop it sweet." Sadly I think he spoke for many. No criticism for turning parliament into a bear pit, just a demand that people take what they give. This attitude is not the Liberals' problem but Parliament's. In the final analysis, when Parliament's one real claim to authority, its respect, is badly damaged, it could become everyone's.

This respect is not aided by MPs describing each other as 'brain damaged', 'harlots' and 'criminal intellects'.

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\*\*\*\*\* NOTE TO SUB-EDITOR  
\*\*\*\*\* All "debating terms" quoted above have been verified in  
\*\*\*\*\* Hansard.