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ON THE DRY SIDE

A CRISIS OF THE SPIRIT

John Hyde

Australians, who do not feel they were going anywhere in particular, are suffering a crisis of spirit. It has many manifestations and consequences - the parlous state of the economy is one of them.

Clear notions of good and evil have given place to a moral relativism. Personal responsibility has been denied and therefore nobility of purpose is an impossible idea. We do not respect self-sacrifice and have more anti-heroes than heroes. In literature and art we portray the common-place or establish the ugly with ideas of morality and purpose being largely relegated to the like of Rhambo and dungeons and dragons. Sacrifice has become the other fellow's responsibility and we have banded together in unions and trade associations to see that it is.

There is a meanness of spirit abroad that allows everyone, it seems, to really believe that he is getting less than his due.

We have stopped worshipping the common man because at his best he is glorious, and taken to worshipping him because he is common. Marx told us religion was the people's opiate so instead of gazing up to God we gaze at our navels.

It was not our industries but our spirits that first became impoverished. Paraphrasing Kennedy, we do not ask, "What can we do for Australia, our town, or neighbourhood." An increasing number of us don't even ask what we can do for our immediate relatives - they have become a state responsibility.

Of course I exaggerate; there is much in Australian life to be proud of; but our values have changed since my childhood in the wartime forties. And I think they have changed for the worse. Then we knew about the nobility of the common man; his self-sacrifice was on everybody's lips. We did not all practice self-sacrifice; I suspect we talked some rot about it, but we believed in it and the belief sustained us.

In the sixties and seventies a sickness of the spirit overtook the Western World. It came with, and was surely caused by, the opportunity to shed personal responsibility for the consequences of one's own actions. It came with the psychologist and the welfare state. The psychologist told us that our behaviour was neither noble nor ignoble but the inevitable outcome of childhood patterning and the welfare state picked up the pieces. It came from the indirect influence of neo-keynesian economics that devalued the idea of the future. It came from many places.

The world is recovering from this bout of self-indulgence. However, I fear Australians are not recovering from it as fast as some others, such as the Americans, British and West Germans.

If the psychologists are half right about the way we acquire our behaviour patterns we need some proper heroes. I don't mean those

cardboard figures who cradle microphones and chase balls but fairy tale heroes who pit their own lives and fortunes against evil. The evil of a serious depression is my candidate for the dragon.

Those at the top of the political heap are going to have to ask us to make some personal sacrifices we will not like. If they look a bit of a St George we might be better impressed.

My parents would never have voted for John Curtin but as the war wore on the bespectacled journalist with the wild economic views won their respect. That is not to say they agreed with his policies - often they did not - but his right and responsibility to call the shots was not questioned.

Curtin acquired the mantle of a minor hero - God knows at the time he had enough competition for it - by facing his responsibilities of office. Although a good orator his success was not due to flamboyance and it certainly was not to infallibility. He was a ordinary man, with a big spirit. He had well-developed views about good and evil and honourable and dishonourable behaviour, and he tried to live by those in dealing with the issues of his day and the people about him, including his own family. Even families like mine, which strongly disagreed with him, respected him.

The same values - the common man's nobility - go a long way toward explaining the popularity of Reagan and, considering all the vested interests she has upset, Mrs Thatcher, who could yet win a third term.

If Australians are to accept the uneven sacrifices that will be necessary to avoid the worst of what the economy could have in store, they must again feel that they are going somewhere. They must feel that important principles and goals are worth fighting for. They must feel personally responsible for the triumph of good over evil. They must realise that, even if sacrifice could be measured, 'equality of sacrifice' is impossible and that they may therefore be asked for more than a fair share. The essence of nobility is willingness to make an unequal sacrifice.

Tax-free income from gold mining, unaffordable superannuation deals, pensions paid to the wealthy, trade union privileges, tariffs and fertiliser bounties are but examples of the sort of things we should sacrifice. They are not of equal value and it will not be possible to put each on the altar at the same time. Are we each too mean of spirit to be first?

Although I am sure we would muddle through without him, Australia could use a Curtin or a Reagan - a common man's hero - to encourage us. Or show us up! That sort of leadership feeds the spirit.