

A Christmas Carol

Christmas is the season when we think of those less fortunate. But a generous regard for the needy, once seen as an individual and personal responsibility, has come to be seen as a collective responsibility met through the agency of Government.

Dickens, concerned to encourage individual generosity, wrote "A Christmas Carol" - a tale of the Christmas time conversion to generosity of Scrooge, an old skin-flint. One hundred and thirty-nine years later the immediate problem has ceased to be Scrooge's desire to hoard his wealth. That is no longer possible; governments given the task of exercising generosity on Scrooge's behalf now must expropriate his wealth. Whether Scrooge likes it or not the government is now Scrooge's trustee, and the problem now is what happens to the trust funds. It is amusing to wonder how Dickens might have written "A Christmas Carol" to take account of this new problem.

Would the ghosts of past, present and future visit the Cabinet instead of poor old Scrooge? Would they show 15 frightened ministers past, present and future elections rather than Christmases? Would Cabinet, since it has nothing of its own to give away, be reminded not of generosity but of the responsibilities of trustees? Might not Cabinet be reminded of how often in the past the trust funds have been used, not to help the poor but to buy votes from the relatively well-to-do?

Those ministers who were in the McMahon Government in particular might be taken back to the 1972 election. Whitlam has committed the Labor Party to abolish the means test. The policy is popular and the Liberals'

fate extremely uncertain. Prime Minister McMahon, at some cost to what he knows to be right decides to be popular. Never the less the Libs lost the election (and since then the number of aged pensioners has increased to 833,000 to 1,300,000).

The ghost of election present could show Cabinet the election that never was. Cabinet would be shown an extravagant election budget, a burgeoning deficit, a tax revolt, mounting unemployment and a welfare bill made large, not by generosity to the poor, but by easier access to benefits which were once reserved for the poor alone. It might be shown people who claim both the taxation advantages of occupational superannuation and the old age pension, public sector superannuation schemes too generous to maintain, and its own inaction in the face of these growing problems.

The last ghost, the ghost of elections yet to come, by far the most dreadful, shows Cabinet Australia 20 years hence. There are now 60% more people over the age of 65; twice as many over 75, but only 34% more in the workforce. The economy cannot grow for the dead weight of heavy taxation. The people have grown accustomed to turning to government to satisfy their every want; vast numbers of welfare recipients - the old, the young, the unemployed, the sick, those with children, single parents, the handicapped however defined, the ill-educated, the over-educated, the ethnics, those in uncompetitive industries, farmers, miners, manufacturers, everybody; and worse, an army of welfare providers who, with politicians and the most successful tax avoiders, are now the rich.

The Cabinet now sees mounting social tensions, even riots, as greedy people, all encouraged to think of themselves as "deserving", squabble over too small a cake. It sees poverty and a frightened irresolute government.

At a point similar on a personal level to that which we have now reached on a national scale Dickens had Scrooge beg "Good Spirit, assure me that I may change these shadows you have shown me by an altered life". There can be a happy ending.

Let us imagine that Cabinet declares that it is more important that governments be correct than popular; that it is wrong morally and politically, is in fact a breach of trust, to use taxes to buy votes, that true generosity is giving to those who need help; whereas universal welfare is a middle class cop out, in fact a very effective tax avoidance scheme in which the middle-class taxpayer is beneficiary of his own trust. Most important of all the Government henceforth does as it says.

The economy grows, there are no riots, the needy receive more in transfers from those with more. And as Tiny Tim observed "God bless us, every one".

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