

HYDE: DRY SIDE

24

Revised
29-4-83

Losing a seat in parliament involves the ex-member in a fairly dramatic change of life-style - yesterday a strutting rooster; today a feather duster. Lots of kind and, we like to think, wise people send us notes assuring us that our efforts have not been entirely in vain.

Among all those kind notes, many of which assured me that the nagging by the "drys" did manage to change some important attitudes, if only just a smidgin, I got two telegrams intended to rub a little salt in my supposed wounds. One was from some pro-abortionists and the other from Mr Ray Aitchison of the Australian Confederation of Apparel Manufacturers. Mr Aitchison's telegram raises an important point, in fact a point so important that it might be the most important consideration for Australia's long-term economic health.

His missive read: "Manufacturing industries and their multitude of employees around Australia to whose future your drys applied themselves in Canberra magnanimously wish you well now that your careers are moving into more cost efficient and

productive fields following Saturdays national restructuring decision."

I am an enthusiastic adherent of the rules of the democratic process. The political rules are that he who takes half the votes plus one wins all. These rules are not perfect but they are the best we have been able to devise. I not only accept them but I support them. It is under those rules that, as Mr Aitchison so neatly put it, I have been restructured. I have no complaints whatever. Political restructuring is an entirely necessary and in fact inevitable process, and may Australia be spared the circumstances where it is not possible under an agreed set of rules, but instead takes place in violent, bloody and disruptive manner.

While I have no complaints I do have a few regrets; maybe if I'd tried a bit harder things would have been better; who knows. The point is that judgement about my technical efficiency was irrelevant, and rightly irrelevant to the eighty-five thousand odd purchasers of my product - my constituents. They only had to ask themselves whether they would get a product more or less to their liking from my oppos-

ition. They chose as others chose in a number of other electorates and the result is a major political restructuring.

The rules of the commercial market, as opposed to the political market, while similar in many respects are more subtle. Commercial rules aren't "winner take all"; different buyers can choose different products; minorities are not forced to take the product chosen by the majority. Thus there is room for a range of suppliers rather than just one with another sitting on the side lines hoping to occupy the entire field. Thus, if it is not interfered with, restructuring takes place continually and gradually instead of rarely and completely - 1972, 1975 and 1983.

This is an old analogy but a good one. In a market people's votes are their dollars which they cast for the product they prefer, retaining as many votes as possible for future use. Those dollar votes are their property which they may cast for red, blue or green garments or none at all. It is wrong to disenfranchise people by confiscation of all their votes, to gerrymander by taxing in a discriminatory way or to do what is done in one party states: limit the voter's choice

to certain anointed candidates.

Just as when the voter's choice is limited in one-party states the voter is politically poorer, so when the consumer's choice is limited he is financially poorer.

Mr Aitchison might at this juncture wish to argue that we don't allow foreigners into our political process, and that all he asks is that we prevent our consumers from voting for foreign candidates. Leaving aside the fact that I can see no good reason why Australians shouldn't elect a foreigner to their parliament if they chose, there is a more fundamental problem with the "no foreigners" proposition. It is that we want foreign consumers to vote with their dollars, pounds, yen or whatever for our exports. They cannot get Australian dollars to buy from us unless we simultaneously buy foreign goods. What Mr Aitchison would be really arguing for is a gerrymander favouring apparel manufacture at the expense of other industries.

Even Mr Aitchison can't seriously oppose all structural adjustment. If there had been no structural adjustment since,

say, the year 1900, I would probably have followed in my father's footsteps. Instead of writing newspaper articles I, like my father, might be a skilled wheelwright in the business of making hansom cabs. By preventing the importation of motor cars, or better still by preventing the importing of petroleum, the future of the horse-drawn vehicle might have been extended immeasurably. Think of all the jobs that might have been saved, not just among wheelwrights but horse-breeders, harness-makers, farriers, chaff cutters and even street-cleaners. But then again think of all the jobs lost in tourism, wheat, meat and wool production, mineral production; in fact all those industries dependant on a transport system that is better than the horse. Think also that we would not have had the strength to withstand the Japanese advance, so somewhere about 1943 we would have been in for some pretty mighty restructuring like it or not.

Mr Aitchison is not really opposed to restructuring; he enjoys his motor car, his television, his packaged food and so on just as much as I do. He is

in favour of restructuring in every industry bar the garment industry.

If Australia doesn't change to meet changing times, that is, restructure, then the world will pass us by; as it is passing us by already. In the early fifties we were very nearly the wealthiest nation on earth. We are far from that now. Japan has already passed us by; on present trends Singapore and Hong Kong will be before the year 2000.

There are many reasons for our abysmal economic performance but the most obvious is our failure to restructure to take advantage of changing comparative advantage in a few identifiable areas. These are, in approximate order of importance, trade unions, textiles clothing and footwear, motor car manufacture, the public sector and shipping.

Either we accept steady restructuring of our industry in accord with the rules of the market place now, or else eventually violent and even bloody restructuring becomes likely in an impoverished Australia. If we are silly enough there is no inherent reason why we should not repeat the history of Argentina.

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24-7

I accept the authority of my political
market. How about your commercial market
Mr Aitchison?