

THE ETERNAL NANNY*Republished
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Although parents often try to wrap their children in cotton wool, sheltering them from every possible risk, they always fail. Either the child rebels, seeking out risks and growing up in spite of his parents, or else he remains a milksop who never learns to weigh risk. While milksops seldom fail, they seldom succeed either, and they always will be at risk if only because they never learn to cope with those unpredictable hazards which have such a bad habit of showing up at the most inconvenient times.

When the government becomes society's eternal nanny the effect is pretty much the same. (Society's members gravitate to those activities which are least regulated, but beyond that they rebel in the black economy,) go hang gliding and sniff cocaine; or else become milksops who debilitate the whole society.

Increasingly our governments are not only trying to ameliorate the more serious consequences of bad choice and bad luck, but are trying to remove risk itself from society. By assuming the roles of final protectors the governments are assuming the right to be the ultimate decision makers. For instance, we are all forced to pay for Medicare even though some of us might prefer to make other arrangements or no arrangements at all. Medicare will not pay other than a registered practitioner to fix our bodies. We may not purchase drugs without prescription, may not drive 'dangerous' vehicles, may not buy meat killed in an unregistered abattoir, and even if we are dying, our doctor may not prescribe drugs not approved by the Drug Evaluation Committee. The list could go on. (Our bodies have become the property of the state.) Nanny says "Don't darling. Nanny knows best." But does she ?

Nanny not only busies herself with her charges' physical well-being but with their education too. Increasingly Nanny is using the taxes to 'educate' us. The \$ 1.5 million appropriated by the Fraser government to advertise its 1983 (election) budget goodies, the \$420,000 appropriated by the Hawke government to sell its home deposit assistance scheme, and the big sums spent justifying rather than explaining Medicare were blatant misuse of the taxes for partisan propoganda. These clearly stand condemned on political grounds, but what of the politically uncontentious 'Life Be In]

programme and the anti-smoking campaigns? Do we pay taxes to be instructed in our private lives? These campaigns are quite different from the anti-drink/driving campaign which is more akin to Nanny's admonition to stop beating up little brother.

However, it is with our pocket money that Nanny's tyranny reaches greatest heights. It is as though the government, reconciled to the mortality of the human body and denied jurisdiction of the human soul by the best liberal tradition, has turned all its remaining attention to human means.

It might or might not be just for Nanny to ensure that each of her charges has the price of one ice cream even if she achieves this by enforced redistribution of some of each child's windfalls, earnings and savings. It is certainly not just or instructive for Nanny to use her authority to ^{take over} ~~absorb~~ the risk of spending the money unwisely by restricting choice or subsidising mistakes.

If Johnny should buy a toy that breaks or an ice cream he doesn't like, or drops some money in the crowd, he ought not to be encouraged to run crying to Nanny. Only a foolish and unjust Nanny imposes her taste in ice creams and toys, or takes money from a younger brother who earns less pocket money than his elders to subsidise an older brother's mistakes. Yet in essence governments do both these things.

Australians have developed the habit of crying on the government's lap whenever they strike commercial adversity because the government so often picks up their commercial risks. It is not at all uncommon for people who still enjoy expensive cars, fine homes and all the trappings of wealth to be subsidised because they happen to have been the victims of some temporary or partial disaster against which they have not explicitly insured.

Subsidies protect businesses and householders from losses occasioned by fires, floods and droughts. Businesses are protected against the risk even of competition from new or cheaper products and services by tariffs and import quotas, taxi plates, air route licences and other government favours.

Lawyers, doctors, stock brokers and most other professionals are encouraged to adopt anti-competitive practices which effectively protect them from innovators.

Price guaranties insure farmers against the risk of over production of wool, wheat, sugar, dairy produce and several more minor products.

Minimum wage laws insure wages against economic reversals, either within specific industries or the whole economy but cause wholesale unemployment. While the resultant unemployed are protected by unemployment benefits against some of the risk of pricing themselves out of work.

The government tries to protect consumers from themselves by licensing the providers of services from plumbing to medicine to travel, by banning countless products, and by complex labelling and packaging codes.

Parents and Nannies dealing with pre-schoolers may reasonably claim that the greater wisdom and knowledge that comes with age grants them a mandate to regulate their children. Governments can claim no such mandate; in fact they are very often patently less well informed on the relevant matters than those they regulate. What is more, governments are singularly ill suited to risk evaluation; they never have the spark of daring from which new ways spring and they are never chastened by costly mistakes. Instead they offer us (a security blanket which, not only is useless, but stops us from developing survival skills.)