Sunday Independant I Democratic Imperatives

In spite of policy speeches and party platforms, Australian politics has no clearly identifiable goals, save that of winning office. It waffles, often descending to nothing more substantial than denigration, allowing national policy to drift. Australian political parties see politics almost entirely in terms of power-- the ascendancy of men. Australia would be better served if our politics, instead, became more concerned about the ascendancy of ideals.

Political figures, in party and in parliament, who give nearly all their attention to power play rather than policy, in truth, exchange the substance of their faith for its trappings.

Before I am accused of advocating headlong pursuit by the party in power, of the New Society I will declare that my own ideal is one of gradual but purposeful change toward goals to which the community is lead by argument. In the long run the winning of the hearts and minds of the voting public will have a greater effect on the way we live than will winning the treasury benches.

Politicians tend to follow those arguments that have already been won. Exaggerated political gamesmanship portrays the political parties as champions of opposed ideals, but more often they are apologists for interests; reluctant to run risks on behalf of their faith.

Consider the twenty years fron I952 to I972: even though the Labor did not hold power in Canberra for a day Australia steadily adopted socialist policies-- it was as though Labor governed from the opposition benches. The socialists, most or whom were not in the Parliament, won the arguments even though Menzies won the elections. In the end the arguments were much more important. While we steadily travelled toward a socialist ideal, the ideological distance both parties travelled was much greater than that which at any stage separated them.

At the time, the drift toward collectivism was occurring all around the free world and it occurred irrespective of the party in power: a little faster under socialist governments, a little slower under liberal governments but always in the same directi Collectivism has not worked well in practice and the pendulum of opinion is swinging back-- slowly and none too steadily, but swinging back none-the-less. Collectivist/ Statist argument is gradualy giving away to liberal free enterprise argument.

Australia is certainly not in the vangard of this intellectual movement but even here it is affecting both parties. An overtly socialist Hawke is saying that the budget deficit he inherited from the Liberals is "not on". A socialist party has at least temporarily captured the reputation for offering the more responsible fiscal policy.

The problem for liberal values in Australia is that, unlike the socialists of the fifties and sixties, they do not have enough champions to win and hold the allegiance of the public. The Liberal Governments both in Perth and Canberra honoured those values only in the breech, and there is now every risk that values that were not seriously adopted will be seen to have failed.

Politicians, like Margaret Thatcher who willingly run the political risks of leading instead of following public opinion are rare. Liberal free enterprise values will not be adopted by Australian politics unless the public want them. There are no short cuts; public opinion must be won. Then the politicians, followers as always, will tag along.