

THE POLITICS OF HATRED

Reading some 1950s Hansards of the Federal Parliament, I was struck by the relative good nature with which men (there were no women) disagreed with one another. I can't say how much allowance to make for MPs' tendency to exaggerate, but the ideological gulf between the parties seemed to be greater than today. Even so the argument lacked venom. Issues were debated more, and personality almost not at all. There was less consensus about how we should be governed, but a civil acceptance of opponents' good intentions.

Somehow hatred politics has acquired a bigger hold over us than it seemed to have 25 years ago.

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Take the Noonkenbah dispute: although both sides of this argument may very well be wrong, in logic both can not be right. Noonkenbah is thus a proper issue for public disagreement. However, much needed debate about the difficult issue of how to discriminate between very different peoples has been stifled by acrimony. I have friends on opposite sides who will not accept each other's good intentions, and cannot disagree calmly.

The issue reached its unhappy state because, becoming embroiled in politics, it became subject to the exaggerated name calling, pejorative language and mindless head kicking of those who grind political axes. It has been encouraged to prejudice that consensus on which liberal society depends - the consensus to 'live and let live'.

Revulsion and intolerance does have a proper place in us, but it should not be turned against political opponents - who may be wrong but are hardly evil. Attempts to build political success on hatred, rather than a positive allegiance to an ideal, are both wrong and dangerous. Not only might they end in violence, but rational debate is stifled.

A few petty hatreds that Australian politics could do without, concern: Asians, Aborigines, bosses, unionists, Fascists, Communists, Socialists, Capitalists, Womens' libbers, Women Who Want to be Women, The Left, The Right, Canberra, States Righters, and opposed political parties and leaders. All of these may be wrong but they are hardly fit subjects of enmity. Even the Fascists and Commies I have come across are more eccentric than evil; and even if they were

evil, they would still be more effectively opposed by argument than invective, which makes martyrs of them.

Fear and hatred of external threat is an old trick employed by despots to gather and hold internal support, but it doesn't win support in the wider world. Similarly, those who employ 'hatred politics' may hold power for themselves within political parties, but their parties don't win elections.

Hawke sensed that the public was sick of hatred politics and offered them consensus. The public would have settled for civility and mutual respect.

With due respect to Mr. Hawke, there is much nonsense talked about consensus. There is no value and some danger in a consensus around ideas that are wrong, and only reasoned disagreement will establish which ideas are in fact right. We need, at least in the first instance, not more consensus but more good nature, good manners and reasoned disagreement from our public figures. An error of the Summit was that it papered over really important differences rather than airing them with civility.