

NANNY'S SECURITY BLANKET

Parents who try to wrap their children in cotton wool fail. Either the children rebel, seeking out risk, or else they remain milksops who never learn to weigh risk.

While milksops seldom fail they seldom succeed either, and they are always at risk because they never learn to cope with things that go wrong at inconvenient moments.

When governments become 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, becoming milksops, 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. By assuming the role of final protectors, the governments are assuming the role of final decision makers.

For instance, we are all forced to pay for Medicare in spite of our preferences. We may not purchase drugs without prescription, may not drive "dangerous" vehicles, may not buy meat killed in unregistered abattoirs, and even if we are dying, we may not be prescribed drugs not approved by the Drug Evaluation Committee.

Our bodies have become the property of the state. Nanny says "Don't darling.

Nanny knows best." But does she ?

Further, Nanny is increasingly using our taxes to "educate" us. Sums spent justifying rather than explaining Medicare stand condemned as misuse of the taxes for partisan politics, but what of the politically uncontentious "Life Be In It" and 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 might be just for Nanny to take a little from every child that has pocket money to see that each child has at least the price of one ice cream. It is certainly not just for Nanny to use her authority to take over the risk of spending the money unwisely, by subsidising mistakes or restricting choice.

Only a foolish and unjust Nanny imposes her taste in ice cream 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, and strong Australians have developed the habit of crying on the government's lap.

It is common for people who are quite wealthy to be subsidised because they happen to be victims of some temporary or partial disaster. Subsidies protect businesses and households from losses occasioned by fires, floods and droughts. Businesses are protected, even against the risk of competition from cheaper products by tariffs and import quotas, by taxi plates, air route licences and other government favours. Lawyers', doctors', and stock brokers' anti-competitive privileges, farmers' price guarantees and minimum wages absorb the risk of over production or over pricing. The government tries to protect consumers from themselves by licensing services from plumbing to medicine to travel, by banning countless products, and by complex labelling and packaging codes.

While parents and nannies 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. Not only are governments singularly ill-suited to risk evaluation themselves, they destroy those skills in their people.