

SUNDAY INDEPENDANT JOHN STONE AND ALL THAT ... John Hyde
The great English Statesman Edmund Burke once wrote:
'The principles of true politics are those of morality
enlarged, and I neither now do or ever will admit of any
other.'

Mr. John Stone's outburst - The Shann Memorial Lecture 1984, titled 1929 and All That - bore the hallmarks of anger and frustration. I have some idea how he feels. My own outbursts, when I was a back-bencher of the Fraser Government, though not as elegant, erudite, perceptive or effective in condemnation bore the same hallmarks. Like John Stone's critics now, my critics preferred to debate the propriety of my criticism rather than its accuracy. The political process, and its people stand condemned, not by John Stone, but by the economic and social condition of our nation.

Stone is disgusted by the sight of representatives of big companies, unions and industries literally queued in the anterooms of Ministers' offices to petition for grace and favour. An ardent patriot, I am sure he is offended by people who let interests, like re-election, come between them and the duties of office. Stone has the patricians' concern for the under privileged - in this case the unemployed.

No one should doubt that Stone is genuinely fearful for Australia. His trenchant criticism of economic management by both parties has been consistent over a long time.

Until the first World War Australians were, by an appreciable margin, the wealthiest nation on earth. We are now less wealthy than the people of at least fifteen other nations. Between 1975 and 1980 Australia's per capita income increased by 7% compared with the average of all OECD growth rates of 14%. In the same period private consumption increased by 13% while OECD average private consumption increased 18%; but Australian government consumption rose faster than the OECD average - 24% compared with 14%. Australian fixed capital expenditure rose 8%: the OECD 16%. Our exports increased by 27% but OECD exports rose 37%. Public debt is climbing to New Zealand-like proportions. The current government has just passed up the easiest opportunity to significantly reduce the budget deficit it is ever likely to see. The Opposition, trying to be all things to all men, wants tax cuts, maintained outlays and reduced deficits all at once.

There are 9%, or as Stone points out 11% when fully measured, of the work force unemployed yet unions and the Arbitration Commission who are responsible for this crime against our weakest people are in the name of "consensus" above criticism. Defence is one area of government expenditure which has not been maintained. Australians are experimenting with at least some aspects of a style of government which between 1929 and 1939 led Italy and Germany into very deep water.

If on top of all that we might be about to face world markets similar to those of the early thirties then we are ill prepared. We are also militarily and economically ill prepared to face armed aggression.

It isn't that the business of government is too difficult to conduct properly; several nations have done better. It isn't that our governments do not know what to do; not only are they advised much better than they perform, but Ministers in their speeches advocate fiscal restraint, balanced budgets, wage restraint, reduced trade barriers, and equal treatment of citizens before the law. The failure of governments to live up to their own prescriptions and then to dissemble about performance is fundamentally a moral failure. Edmund Burke understood!

John Stone's wrath is needed to wake us up. If it is not dismissed for specious and extraneous reasons The Shann Memorial Lecture may yet prove to be not only of exquisite wit but of historical importance.