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CATCHLINE: ON THE DRY SIDE 405

## Modest Members

*John Hyde*

You don't just catch an idea: someone gives it to you. Political ideas can have powerful consequences, but even people who expect them to have consequences often do not realise how they were given their own ideas. Club-like activity is one effective means of propagating ideas.

Membership of the "modest members' society" (usually spelt with the lower case to emphasise modesty) is open to those members and former members of Australian parliaments who claim to believe in a free society and a market economy. In practice the society does not insist upon modesty.

This society is neither the most nor the least successful of several loosely structured organisations that have increased the understanding of liberal [subs: please do not capitalise "liberal"] economics and politics. These organisations are similar to those which furthered the socialist ideal during the fifties and sixties with, I think, two differences. They have not, except when connected to universities, had any money from the taxpayer, and they take themselves less seriously than their socialist counterparts.

Such organisations are repositories of the ideas and the focus of the camaraderie which are essential to any 'revolution'. (Although there has been more of it in many countries over the past ten years, there has been a revolution in political and economic thinking in Australia.)

The history of the modest members society is rather typical and offers an insight into one way that, in free societies, ideas are deliberately disseminated. Modest members has had little publicity, not because it is secret, but because its press releases were not reported. Its budget, some \$2-3,000 per annum, derived from membership and margins on functions, is indeed modest. It is, nevertheless, sufficient to buy the stamps and offer a small annual prize to a journalist who furthers the cause of liberty. In spite of its modest size, modest members has often managed to be around when wanted.

It was formed in 1981 by some Federal MPs, of which I was one, to spread 'dry' ideas into State Houses and to provide moral support for people who agreed with us but who, in their own parliaments, lacked allies. Len Bosman, formerly Member for St George in NSW, is its current president.

Having been through the experience a few times ourselves, we were painfully aware of the difficulty of standing alone. Although, in truth, in my day, in most debates it was fairly easy to ensure that individual dries were not left to fight alone.

The most important speeches are, unfortunately, those that people don't want to hear. It is, however, damned hard to speak well when you know almost every one in, for instance the party room, is wishing you'd shut up. In such circumstances, we, in the Federal Parliament, had all at some time benefited from having another or our number support us against the crowd. (Although I no longer remember what it was that I was saying, I vividly remember my relief upon an occasion when Jim Carlton interjected: "He's right you know, Malcolm".)

We named the society after Bert Kelly who wrote the 'Modest Member' column in the Financial Review. Kelly had in earlier times stood alone in defence of what today is regarded as no more than economic probity. But, at the time, because of the orchestrated opposition of vested interests, he was often dismissed as nuts. He enjoyed the support of academic economists and Treasury and Reserve Bank officials, but he had stood alone among politicians more often than any of us was ever likely to stand.

A week ago seventy modest members and friends assembled in Parliament House, Canberra, to eat, drink and listen to Nick Greiner talk about the difficulties, opportunities, successes and failures of a reforming government. Greiner, if not a foundation modest member, was a very early recruit. He is, today, the society's most successful son. He and his ministers alone have experience in the implementation of 'dry' policies. (I doubt those modest members who were ministers in the Fraser Ministries would claim to have been part of a reforming government, although at least one of them sometimes tried to make it so.)

Although not everyone at last week's bash would have understood the economics of what the Greiner Government set out to do, the Premier spoke to us almost entirely of politics---that is, he spoke of winning and holding support for chosen policies, rather than of the policies themselves. He had far more to say of his mistakes than his successes---somehow, modest members is like that.

He recommended choosing goals that, if achieved, will have big enough economic consequences to be worth the inevitable political costs of taking away some people's privileges. He spoke wryly of the managers of public-sector corporate entities who, having been given management guidelines and having already made substantial efficiency

gains by following them, were not now prepared to make any concessions at all to politics.

He told us of the need for sweeteners---for instance, if senior public servants are to lose tenure, then they should be given salaries that are broadly equivalent to those they could command in the private sector. He advised us about using the career public service. I remember, particularly, his describing the role of the old hands who prevented his government from making serious mistakes. Greiner will benefit at the next poll from comparison of his Government with that of Victoria. Cain cannot have listened to the old hands in his bureaucracy.

He spoke also of the role of new blood that understood where the government must go and how one group of bureaucrats and ministerial advisers tempered the other. He spoke ruefully of the gutting of his industrial relations legislation by the Upper House, and speculatively about how he might have handled the issue. And of much more.

Greiner's insight ought to be invaluable to a future Hewson Government or to its equivalent in any State. There are, moreover, no adequate text books covering these sorts of things and, indeed, there is plenty of room for argument about them. Such knowledge is passed on best by people with a common cause listening and arguing---by clubbish, though 'modest', activity.

*John Hyde is Executive Director of the Australian Institute for Public Policy*

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