



A WEEKLY COMMENTARY

ON TARGET

- NEWS HIGHLIGHTS
- BACKGROUND INFORMATION
- COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The price of Freedom is eternal vigilance -

Print Post Publication Number 381667 00258

Vol.33, No.39

October 10th, 1997

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK: *"Without vision a people perish."*

LESSONS FROM THE CANBERRA CIRCUS by Eric D. Butler:

It is not surprising that events in the Federal Parliament over the past few weeks have resulted in John Howard's rating in the public opinion polls dropping to the lowest level since he became Prime Minister. John Howard and his advisers have only themselves to blame for what has happened. It can be predicted with complete certainty that John Howard's re-shuffled Cabinet will, in the absence of any major policy shifts, do little to restore the sagging electoral stocks of the Howard Government. In one of those paradoxical statements for which he was famous, G.K. Chesterton said that the plight of the world was the only hope for the world. The circus which has been performing at Canberra in recent weeks has demonstrated to an increasingly cynical electorate that party politics are now so bereft of any value that they can perhaps not do much worse than replacing them with some Independents and representatives of the small One Nation and Australia First Parties. It is a reality of politics that it is much easier to unite people **against** something than **for** some alternatives. John Howard and his advisers benefitted from this reality at the last Federal elections, with a large section of the Australian electorate united in their hostility against Paul Keating. But having benefitted electorally from the widespread detestation of Keating, they made the fatal mistake of claiming that they had a mandate for their programme. Howard and his advisers scored one **temporary** victory by their manipulation of the Port Arthur tragedy. But as the Liberals and National Party will find at the next Federal elections, their gun control programme is going to cost them dearly. Combined with a continuation of the economic rationalism which they inherited from the Hawke and Keating Governments, the gun control issue will play a major role in the demise of the National Party.

What has been happening in the Federal Parliament revealed for the Australian electors to see, that much of the alleged controversy between the Coalition Government and the Labor Opposition is completely phoney. As former Independent Member Ted Mack has pointed out, the rotting of the system of travel allowances for Federal Members has been widely known for many years, with both sides in Canberra politics tacitly agreeing to shut their eyes to what was taking place. Simon Crean did not raise this issue because he and his fellow Labor Members were concerned about matters of high principle, but because they were convinced that if they could force any of John Howard's Ministers to resign, this would help them politically. The present system of travel and other expenses for Federal Members has always been vulnerable to cynical exploitation by the Members of Parliament. In his attempt to reform the system, making Members much more accountable, Ted Mack received little or no encouragement from the Liberal and National Parties while they were in Opposition.

The Labor Party closed its eyes to what Senator Coulston was doing while he was a member of the Labor Party. But when Senator Coulston demonstrated that many Members have a price, and deprived Labor of the potential to block the Howard Government in the Senate, the enraged Labor Party turned on their former colleague. On the subject of many politicians having their price, it is worth recording that it was Napoleon who made the cynical comment that he was not surprised that every man had his price, but was only surprised at how small the price often was.

In today's world of a dominant money culture, the erosion of the degree of representative government which did exist, to be replaced by the concept of highly paid professional politicians, has opened the way to increasing corruption of varying kinds. The concept of Big Government is one which inevitably produces widespread corruption. It should be recalled that before the last Federal Elections John Howard promised that he would reduce the size of government. It should be noted that as a result of his Cabinet re-shuffle, it has been increased from 28 to 30. This will result in increased Government spending. Those who argue that John Howard had no alternative but to make the increase, that he had to carefully consider geographical factors, to ensure that all Liberal Party State Branches had to be considered, merely demonstrate that once the premise undergirding power politics is accepted, the results are inevitable. John Howard's major concern is how to hold onto political power until after the next Federal Elections. Fundamental principles have got little or nothing to do with modern politics. What is happening at Canberra is demonstrating this to the Australian electors. It is not surprising to read that the man often described as the Victorian Liberal Party "power broker", Mr. Pietro Georgiou, who replaced Andrew Peacock for the electorate of Kooyong, declined to accept John Howard's offer of a position as a Parliamentary secretary, demanding instead a place in the new Ministry. The man who played a major role in changing Liberal Party policy on multiculturalism reveals his philosophy: that is one of power. He wants more of it.

One of John Howard's most important Cabinet changes is the replacement of Senator Amanda Vanstone, responsible for education and employment, with Victorian Dr. Kemp, a former academic and political adviser to former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. *The Australian* of October 6th quotes Dr. Kemp as saying that "*Youth unemployment remains a top priority*" adding that "*We've already got a very big reform agenda under way*". But there is no evidence that the programmes mentioned are going to have any serious affect on high unemployment. Suggestions have been made that youth unemployment can be reduced by reducing the minimum wage paid to the young, this in turn making it possible for more small businesses to employ unemployed youth. Like all labour "reform" being proposed, this is designed to force down further the general standard of living. It is an adoption of the ruthless American approach.

The writer believes that a combination of worsening economic conditions, together with more circus performances such as those of the past three weeks, should be welcomed as concrete evidence of the complete bankruptcy of the major Australian political parties. Every decent person deplores the effect of the Canberra circus on Senator Sherry of Tasmania. But while the Federal politicians are lamenting the attempted suicide of their fellow politician, they might ponder on the fact that the policies which they have all contributed towards imposing upon the Australian people have resulted in one of the highest youth suicide rates in the Western world.

Australians are going through a harsh education process which hopefully will result in a grassroots movement uniting people behind a campaign to use the next Federal Elections to vote from office every politician who has endorsed in any way the policies which have brought this nation to its present state. Such a campaign could have a most salutary effect on the politicians of all the major political parties.

FUTURE CONTROLLED BY THE PAST by David Thompson:

Government-by-opinion poll has become increasingly prevalent, and under Mr. Howard has almost become an art form. Political and moral principles are often sacrificed to political expediency, as indicated by opinion polling. Polls now indicate that a majority of Australians would vote for "a republic", and "conservative" politicians increasingly bow to what is now widely presented as "inevitable". Even the Treasurer's brother, Rev. Tim Costello, is reported to be preparing to stand for election as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention **in favour of a republic**. Rev. Costello is quoted as saying that if a republic is "inevitable", then at least it had to be "one that cared for everyone". In the light of the last two weeks of Federal Parliament, it is not clear how the elevation of a politician to an office of "president" will achieve a "more caring" environment. Many Federal politicians have found ways of caring for themselves through rorting travel allowances, but this will hardly help Rev. Costello's underprivileged poor.

The power of the press is universally blamed by politicians and others as forming the views of a majority of Australians, and it is suggested that it is the power of the press that makes the republic "inevitable". But there is another overlooked element that arms the media: ignorance.

The rise in political and constitutional ignorance in Australians is accounted for by the failure to teach history. Professor Wilfrid Prest, a University of Adelaide historian, believes that up to 60% of final-year students learned history a decade ago, but that figure has now fallen to as low as 6%. At a British studies conference held in Adelaide last week, Professor Prest said that the lack of understanding of history is now having a dire effect.

"An electorate which does not have an understanding of politics and does not understand why we have trade unions, why we have a two-party preferred system and judicial independence and so on, really does have a lot of difficulty and this breeds disillusionment," he said.

Professor Prest claimed that a poor knowledge of history meant that young people had little or no understanding of the nation's white Australia policy, and could not form their own opinions on Pauline Hanson's policies on issues like immigration. As a result, they depend on the media's portrayal of Mrs. Hanson to make up their minds for them.

Such an appalling ignorance of history places an entire generation of Australians at the mercy of the global press organs in the hands of people like republican Rupert Murdoch. Because they know little or nothing of the past, they permit a poisonous press to form their views on vital matters such as the Constitution, immigration, etc.

"There is a lack of understanding and knowledge among the rising generation of school students who may not be in a sufficient position to take an informed stand," said Professor Prest (*The Australian*, 1/10/97).

Rather than continually bow to the "inevitable" subversion of Australian institutions through the power of the press, politicians could ensure that real history was taught. The Liberals have only themselves to blame for a party split on the republican issue. They had the chance at State level to ensure that the school and university curriculum included an understanding of our heritage. They did not take it, and must now suffer the consequences.

It was George Orwell who said that those who control history will also control the future. The teaching of history is vital to the future of Australia as a sovereign nation.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN UPPER HOUSE THREATENED: The Report of the Constitutional Advisory Council (C.A.C.) in South Australia has suggested that the Legislative Council in S.A. should be abolished. Although not a part of its terms of reference, the Report says the S.A. Parliament has "substantially diminished responsibilities" and only sits for half as many days now as it did before federation, suggesting that "there may not be the same need as formerly for retaining a House of Review in this State's legislature".

This raises an obvious point about the centralisation of power in Canberra. If more and more powers are exercised in Canberra rather than in Adelaide, no wonder the Adelaide Parliament doesn't need to sit as often.

The C.A.C. was established by former Premier Brown to report on constitutional change if the Commonwealth were to cease to be a Constitutional Monarchy. Presumably the C.A.C. believes that the event of the Federal Government being reformed as a republic will mean even more centralisation of power in Canberra, and thus less need for State Houses of Parliament, or perhaps even State Governments themselves!

Control of the S.A. Legislative Council has been an important issue in the recent S.A. election campaign. Mr. Olsen's Liberal Party controlled the Assembly, but could not also dominate the Council, where the A.L.P. and Democrats had a majority. Mr. Olsen would dearly like to gain control of the Council, placing him in a similar position to that of Premier Kennett in Victoria, with little check upon measures he might want to push through.

The A.L.P.'s policy on the Legislative Council is to abolish it, while many senior Liberals would also like to see it "reformed" or abandoned. To modern politicians any check upon their power is regarded as a problem to be overcome, not a safety measure for their constituents.

BLAIR AND THE MONARCHY: The early messages coming from the office of British Prime Minister Tony Blair are that he proposes to "modernise" Britain. This may be a mixed blessing, and coming from a Labour Prime Minister would be greeted with great suspicion among conservatives. For example, it has been reported that Mr. Blair would like to reform the House of Lords, eliminating hereditary peerages and making the institution "more democratic". This alone is enough to ring the alarm bells.

But more detailed research indicates that other aspects of Mr. Blair's "reforms" might be highly positive. It appears that Blair and Prince Charles, of a similar age, and perhaps similar outlooks, have established a friendship, and that Blair is determined to assist in creating a positive environment for Charles to succeed the throne when the time comes. Blair has announced that in his view Charles must become King, and hopes to reduce the pressure for Prince William to succeed his grandmother.

Blair's pro-Charles campaign includes arranging for the Prince of Wales to spend time with Labour back-benchers because he has discovered that Charles in the flesh is not the dull bumbler depicted by the press, but a decent and intelligent man. This message might begin to flow back into Labour constituencies through Labour M.P's.

It is also reported that Mr. Blair might consider moving to "dis-establish" the Church of England, meaning that he could remove Parliament's supervision of the Church, forcing it to accept responsibility for its own affairs, like the ordination of women, and the accommodation of homosexual priests and priestesses.