



A WEEKLY COMMENTARY

ON TARGET



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The price of Freedom is eternal vigilance –

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THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK: *"Shakespeare had conceived with extraordinary force, humour and sympathy, a man to express the ideal of technical justice, formal morality, and the claim of a man to his rights: the man Shylock.*

"Over against him he set a figure representing the larger conception of generosity and persuasion, the justice that is fused of a score of genial passions, the compromise that is born of a hundred worthy enthusiasms. Portia had to represent the ideal of magnanimity in law, morality, religion, art and politics. And Shakespeare made this figure a good woman because, to the mind of his day, to make it a good woman was to ring it with a halo and arm it with a sword."

– The Heroines of Shakespeare" by G.K. Chesterton (republished 1990)

CRAVEN VICTORIAN IGNOMINY by Jeremy Lee:

Despite the widespread community opposition, the Victorian Upper House finally approved the Racial and Religious Tolerance Bill. One Member, the Hon. Chris Strong, wrote to an elector in these terms:

"Thank you for your letter in which you expressed interest on the progress of this Labor Government legislation. This Bill has now been passed.

It was passed in the Legislative Assembly on the 5th June 2001 with 69 members voting for, 11 against and a further 8 members not voting.

It was then passed in the Legislative Council on the 14th June 2001: with 32 members voting for, 9 against and a further 3 members not voting.

Although the Liberal Party supported the Bill, the Leader of the Opposition, the Hon. Denis Napthine, took the unusual step of allowing Liberal Members of Parliament a free vote.

I was one of those who took up the opportunity for a free vote and **voted against** the Bill. My speech to the Legislative Council sums up my very great concern with the Bill.

Below, I have extracted some key points from that speech for your interest:

"The Bill is extremely difficult for me, as it touches on two of the principles that I hold to be enormously important. Intolerance and racism are abhorrent to me, as I am sure they are to most members of the house.

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Conversely, freedom of speech is one of the most important things our society possesses. The Bill limits society's right to free speech in the name of furthering racial and religious tolerance.

How does an individual evaluate this trade-off between these two important principles? Each individual can, on the one hand, abhor intolerance and racism, but on the other hand see great dangers to our society and the democratic principles from limitations to free speech.

The Bill is an insult to the tolerant society we have built in Victoria because by its very existence the Bill says that we have a problem. Otherwise why would we need it? By its very existence the Bill takes out of society's hands the need to work together and find solutions to this problem. It relieves society of the discipline of the need to find solutions and simply hands that problem to the politicians and the lawyers. That is hardly a step forward, because both those institutions by their very nature are adversarial. That is not what is needed to build an inclusive solution to society's problems.

But can we outlaw racism and hatred, or legislate away religious intolerance? We simply need look at what is happening today in Israel and the Middle East generally to get an answer. The truth is that simply passing a law achieves nothing. Free speech in a free and open society, that acknowledges that all people have the right to believe and say what they think, where no individual or group in society can have their voice silenced or be muzzled by the law of the land, this is the first, continuing and enduring prerequisite of building a tolerant and inclusive society.

I note that the United Kingdom has had racial vilification laws on the books for many years, and given the recent race riots this illustrates again that simply passing a law to outlaw something like racial hatred is a simplistic and unrealistic solution. Society has to work through these things together.

I, like most of us here, am an adherent of the philosophy built round the primacy of the individual – characterised by the saying 'that while I may totally and utterly disagree with what you're saying, I will equally as passionately and vigorously uphold your right to say it'. That to me is absolutely fundamental to our democratic system, to our rights, beliefs and freedoms, and something I strongly believe in.

This Bill turns that in its head – saying 'that while I totally and utterly disagree with what you are saying.... I am now going to make it illegal for you to say it'.

Yours faithfully, The Hon. Chris Strong, MLC, Member for Higginbotham Province.

We can only nod in agreement with the Hon. Chris Strong, and note how well his speech contrasted with the shallow-thinking of the majority of his colleagues. The threat to Australia's freedom has been immeasurably heightened by this Bill.

Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly* just before World War I the internationally-known journalist and commentator Walter Lippman made these points about free speech:

"..... there is a much stronger foundation for the great constitutional right of freedom of speech. The compelling reason why, if liberty of opinion did not exist, we should have to invent it, why it will eventually have to be restored in all civilised countries where it is now suppressed, is that we must protect the right of our opponents to speak because we must hear what they have to say

"If we wish to understand why freedom is necessary in a civilised society, we must begin by realising that because freedom of discussion improves our own opinions, the liberties of other men are our own and necessary.....

"This is the creative principle of freedom of speech, not that it is a system for the tolerating of error but that it is a system for finding the truth. It may not produce the truth, or the whole truth all the time, or often, or in some cases ever. But if the truth can be found, there is no other system which will normally and habitually find so much truth.

"In a totalitarian state the people are being addressed through one broadcasting system by one man and his chosen subordinates. The orators speak. The audience listens but cannot and dare not speak back. It is a system of one-way communication. Nothing comes back to the rulers from the people except the cheers.

"Even a dictator cannot govern by his own one-way inspiration alone. In practice, therefore, the totalitarian rulers get back the reports of the secret police and of their party henchmen. If these reports are competent, the rulers may manage to remain in touch with public sentiment. Yet that is not enough. It is indispensable that there should exist the freedom which causes opposing opinions to be debated The essence of freedom of opinion is not in mere toleration as such but in the debate which toleration provides Experience tells us that it is only when freedom of opinion becomes the compulsion to debate that the seed which our fathers planted has produced its fruit. When that is understood, freedom will be cherished not because it is a vent for our opinions but because it is the surest method of correcting them

"By bringing men face to face with their opponents, forcing them to listen and learn and mend their ideas, they cease to be children and savages and begin to live like civilised men. Then only is freedom a reality, when men may voice their opinions because they must examine their opinions"

Such enlightened concepts, developed through centuries of striving towards liberty in Britain and America, have been trampled in Victoria. Behind the legislation is an agitated fear that suppressed facts of history might be forced through into the light. Those accused of disobeying the global form of censorship being remorselessly expanded may not even use truth in their defence. The Victorian legislation has been fostered and lobbied for by those who are in deadly fear of an open debate on historical events since World War II.

It is heartening to see some discomfort, even in the mainstream media, with the sort of legislation just passed by the Victorian parliament. But the main battle is yet to come.

THE CENTRALISED CORPORATE WELFARE STATE: *The Australian Financial Review* (19/6/01) reported on a detailed survey, comparing the administrations of federal Coalition and Labor governments over the quarter-of-a-century since the end of the Whitlam period. The study examined such things as growth rates, foreign debt, the stock market, interest rates, unemployment and inflation. It was remarkable for the fact that the differences between the major parties were so marginal. In one area, however, the Coalition outpaced Labor governments. That area was "Government Spending and Taxing as a share of GDP". The report said:

"This section looks at the size of the total government sector in Australia; that is, the sum of Commonwealth, State, territory and local government sectors. Figures for the Commonwealth, in isolation, are often distorted by payments undertaken by the Commonwealth on behalf of the States In terms of the size of government, the Coalition has an undoubted propensity for big spending and high taxing. Under Fraser, general government outlays as a share of GDP rose from 30.6 percent in 1975 (the last Whitlam budget) to 33.7 percent of GDP by 1983-84. After 13 years of ALP rule, when Keating lost to Howard in 1996, Budget changes were all but unchanged at 33.8 percent of GDP.

"In the Budget handed down on May 22, 2001, total general government outlays as a share of GDP are estimated to have risen to 37 percent in 2000-01, a figure without precedent in the 40 years of Budget history compiled by the ABS"

Such findings don't tally well with the repeated claims of Howard and Costello that theirs is a "low-taxing government".

THE POWER OF THE LOBBY: Another *AFR* survey (19/6/01) gave some idea of the clout of lobby groups in Canberra.

" As chief executive of ACCI (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry) Mark Paterson presides over an organisation that is by far the most influential business group in terms of access to government and influence on policy.

" It is also one of the richest. It has retained profits of \$4.3 million, 35 staff and a collection of policy directors churning out research on topics such as the environment, education and small business"

The article pointed out that membership subscriptions from corporations and businesses could cost up to \$300,000 a year. It's nice to know that our constitutional democracy is in such safe, secure and prosperous hands! And that members, apparently, get such a good return on their investment!

GLOBALISATION AND THE PRICE OF EGGS by Antonia Feitz:

On a talkback radio show (Howard Sattler, 19/6/01) the president of the Egg Producers' Association said the price of eggs could double before too long to about \$6 a dozen. The reason? Low returns have forced farmers out of the industry. Consequently the national stock of laying hens is currently a huge third less than it was a year ago. He said unless the exodus from the industry is halted, things will get worse.

Well it seems things will get a lot worse. Why? Well coupled with the problem of low returns is the fact that the industry has to make a \$300-400 million dollar investment in new cages to prepare for the looming ban on battery cages already in legislation. For many farmers, it's the last straw. They just don't have the money so they're getting out. As usual, green activists won the battle without suggesting any fair way to pay for their reforms which nevertheless make us all feel so very virtuous, don't they.

Zeus and Sisyphus:

In Greek mythology Zeus punished Sisyphus by ordering him to roll a huge stone up a hill only to have it roll back down every time. It's a good image of the human condition: we improve things and then revert. Guarding freedom and progress is like housework: It's never done. Like Sisyphus' boulder, housework is there every day anew – as is the requirement to be vigilant about freedom and progress.

But it seems man is doomed to ever re-invent the wheel. He never learns from the mistakes of the past and so must keep on making them. Perhaps the economic rationalists are unaware that the whole point of regulating the egg industry in the first place was to ensure a reliable supply of eggs at a stable price in an ordered market. Ditto with milk.

If things keep going the way they are, before too long Australia will be a net importer of food. Perhaps that's the plan. We'll grow truffles and flowers for the Northern hemisphere luxury markets and import our eggs and milk.

Advance Australia – where?