A WEEKLY COMMENTARY

ON TARGET

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The price of Freedom is eternal vigilance –

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THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK: *"If power was decentralised, and if free men and women, understanding their own historical heritage, were to take that understanding wherever they went, there you would find the growth of a society in which freedom and security both flourished."*
– Eric D. Butler in ***"The Moral Implications of Centralised Power"***, 2003

THE VULNERABILITY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT by Jeremy Lee:

Good local government is woven into the history of the English-speaking peoples. The idea was that as much as possible should be decided on a local basis, for it was at this level that the most basic interests of people lay. Their homes, families, education, entertainment, church and productive activities were lived at local level.

Before Australia existed there were councils, shires, parishes, mayors and aldermen in the British system. Each elected person was known locally, and woe betide him if he started lording it over others. In the lovely villages that bedecked the hills and vales of England there were no Town Clerks, CEOs, town planners, council engineers, etc. Development was by local consultation. When a young couple wanted to build a cottage, all the locals met to decide which was the best site. The result was quaintness, with winding streets, village squares and, of course, the "Common", on which everybody had the right to run a few geese, a cow or a goat. The English village was an island of charm and contentment. The few petty thieves and rogues were sat in the stocks for all to see and jeer at. A little public humiliation was better than a lot of jail.

Many local ideas appeared in early Australia. Local Government Acts in our early history contained a lot of rights for ratepayers – which have disappeared without trace. In New South Wales a ratepayer who was short of cash could pay in work or kind. In other words, he could pay with an agreed quantity of wheat or vegetables; or he could demand of his shire some work to pay off his rates. The shire was obliged to accept his offer. Naturally, every effort was made to keep rates within the reach of all.

The late Professor Gates of the University of Queensland, who specialized in Local Government, stated that a Council with more than 10,000 inhabitants quickly lost touch with ratepayers.

And, of course, councillors, aldermen and even mayors gave their services free.

RATIONALISATION: All that has gone. Councils have been amalgamated and increasingly subjected to State Planning Legislation – so much more 'efficient', you know! The Gold Coast Council is near enough the size of Tasmania in terms of numbers. The Brisbane City Council is the largest in the southern hemisphere.

No State has suffered as much as Victoria. Under that paragon of Premiers, Jeff Kennett, Local Government was literally torn apart, amalgamated, and made into administrative regions of the State Government. Elected councils were dismissed, or put under non-elected CEOs who trod roughshod over local desires, traditions and customs.

Ironically, Kennett had campaigned passionately against such a move before he became Premier. He swore that no such move would take place without local referendums. One or two were held. But when they indicated a preference for things as they were, no more referendums were held.

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND: The latest news from Victoria (Michelle Rose, ***Herald and Weekly Times***, 17/10/03) tells the sad story:

"Lavish credit card spending by council bosses has left ratepayers with a million-dollar bill that includes boarding kennel fees, Grand Final tickets and fancy dress costumes.

As ratepayers buckle under their highest-ever bills, a Herald-Sun investigation found 110 councillors swiped ratepayer-funded credit cards thousands of times in the past two years.

Personalised number plates, limo hire, valet parking, staff awards, gifts, deluxe car washes, international phone calls, liquor and clothing are among items billed to council credit cards.

A former Greater Dandenong Mayor even used his card to pay for a $7.05 McDonalds meal.

Credit cards are used in addition to reimbursed expenses – annual allowances up to $57,500 for suburban councilors and $110,000 for City of Melbourne councilors.

Council executives collect annual salary packages of up to $250,000, plus bonuses.

As allowances and salaries rise, so have rates – up an average 7 per cent across Victoria this year.

Documents obtained under Freedom of Information shows details of credit card spending at hotels, restaurants, car parks, shops, travel companies and online stores.

Greater Dandenong was the biggest spender, running up $160,000 on 11 cards over the past two calendar years.

Outer-eastern Casey spent the most per capita, splurging $157,000 on four cards – almost $40,000 each.

Both councils' average rates just rose $41 to $599 in Greater Dandenong and $674 in Casey. Documents also reveal:

CHIEF executives, directors and councilors at the 20 councils have access to at least $506,000 credit each month, with monthly limits ranging from $1,000 to unlimited.

TWO councils – Bayside and Darebin – have no policies on credit card use and Stonnington allows its mayor to use the card for personal expenditure as long as it is reimbursed.

DIRECTORS and councilors were ordered to pay back almost $1,000 for personal items bought with ratepayer-funded credit cards.

COUNCIL leaders spent almost $150,000 on meals at some of Australia's top restaurants and $150,000 staying at ritzy hotels across the globe.

GIFTS to staff and visitors, including jewelry, shoes, electrical goods, fine china and flowers cost ratepayers $16,000.

MAROONDAH Council refused to release its card statements, claiming use of the ratepayer-funded cards was private.

SEVERAL officers breached policies, including two who used cards for cash advances.

The Herald-Sun found council policies on credit cards ranged from one paragraph to 20 pages and some did not include a list of banned items.

Municipal Association of Victoria chief executive Rob Spence called on councils to develop strict rules for credit card use

"There needs to be limits and controls on what they can spend on," Mr Spence said. He said most councils used credit cards wisely and use was monitored by the Auditor-General.

Dandenong Resident and Ratepayers' Association spokeswoman Christine Ware said spending by Greater Dandenong Council was staggering.

"We accept there is going to be some level of expenses ... but the fact they exceeded Melbourne, who could have a far bigger need in that area, is unbelievable," she said.

But Dandenong chief executive Warwick Heine said the council used credit cards instead of reimbursement to have more control over spending.

"It has significantly reduced cash handling, which is one of our biggest exposures to the potential for fraud," he said.

Casey residents were "stunned" council director Jennie Lee used her credit card to pay almost $800 in boarding kennel fees while on eight business trips.

"Everyone else who ever goes away needs to find someone to look after their pets," Cranbourne and District Residents Association spokeswoman Joanne Blanch said.

The council said in a statement it paid kennel fees "to allow (Ms Lees) to attend activities for and on behalf of council where it is necessary that she be away".

A Moonee Valley council spokeswoman said former mayor Don Cornish paid $468 for Grand Final tickets in 2001 "when Moonee Valley's only team, Essendon, featured in the Grand Final".

Moonee Valley, where average rates jumped $89 to $856, also paid $550 to hire costumes for a staff revue.

Melbourne Council paid fines of $500 for an overdue car registration and $40 for a CityLink "no tag in vehicle" fee.

Banyule, in the northern suburbs, paid $496 for personalized number plates BCC 01 for its $40,000 half electric, half petrol pool car.

Boroondara, Frankston, Glen Eira, Kingston, Monash, Moreland, Nillumbik and Whittlesea councils do not issue credit cards to executive management and councillors. *(end of article)*

Whew! And we thought that Peter Reith was the only Victorian to have trouble with credit cards! Does anyone care? Or do we just shrug our shoulders as though we expect nothing less? Perhaps irate Victorians will be the first to bring the stocks back!

ECCLESIA ANGLICANA LIBERA SIT: So reads the great *Magna Carta* of 1215 ("The Church in England shall be free ")

Without in the least wishing to offend the many good Anglicans in our midst, that venerable institution does seem to have got itself into a spot of trouble! The English journal *Right Now!* (Oct-Nov. 2003) gives the following disturbing picture:

"In the 50 years between 1930 and 1980 the Church of England lost half its members. This decline continued, albeit at a slightly slower rate, during the 1980s. It seems actually to have accelerated during the subsequent 'great leap forward of the Decade of Evangelism'. There is, however, one figure which has gone up. 'There are now double the number of bishops and dignitaries than there were when the Church was more than twice its current size....'"

Which makes one wonder? If present trends continue, will the C of E diminish to one last final figure – a future Archbishop of Canterbury? And, if so, what happens to the vast investments made by the church over the centuries? It looks as though the last Archbishop will be a very lonely, but very rich, prelate.

COMMONWEALTH BANK'S 'REPUBLIC MARKETING SYSTEM' by Philip Benwell, National Chairman, Australian Monarchist League:

"At the time of the Referendum we saw many people, including heads of corporations and banks – who should have known better, enthusiastically promoting a republic. Following the devastating defeat of their fundamentally flawed 'utopia' these misguided creatures were thereafter conspicuous only by their silence. However, we are now outraged to learn that the Commonwealth Bank has named its new marketing initiative as the "Republic Customer Relationship Marketing System", or the 'Republic CRM'.

One wonders why a bank would use a name which is today synonymous with defeat. Unless, that is, they have an agenda we know nothing about. Whatever the reason, the more the word 'republic' is used, the more these people hope that the electorate will become conditioned to accept constitutional change

The Chairman of the Commonwealth bank is Mr. John T. Ralph AC, and the Managing Director Mr. David V. Murray. The Bank website does not include an e-mail address, only an on-line form. However, they do have a toll free complaint hotline at: Phone 1800 805 605 and Fax 1800 028 542.

The Bank may think that it is being clever. IT IS UP TO US TO PROVE THE OPPOSITE TO THEM. Please therefore give consideration to phoning this toll-free number to register your outrage at the Bank's use of their shareholder's (and customer's) resources to promote a republic."

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