

Chapter Eight

Soft Totalitarianism and Centralism

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Last April Peter Coleman addressed The Samuel Griffith Society's fifth conference. His topic was political correctness and his theme was one of hope -- that the oppressive orthodoxies that blight debate in Australia might be receding. He titled his speech *Dividing the Great Australian Consensus*, and it was an influential and timely contribution to that process.

One of the most important elements of Peter's speech was its definition of the problem. "Political correctness" is a phrase which has been so loosely used and abused as to verge on being useless. Instead Peter offered the more diagnostic term "soft totalitarianism". He said:

"If you offend, you do not get a bullet in the neck or end up in a slave camp in the Gulag. But you will be marginalised, boycotted, perhaps vilified, and in a bad case brought before the thought police and fined. Your career will be damaged, perhaps ruined."

He also pointed out how the new orthodoxy is enforced, using the Orwellian analogy of Newspeak:

"In 1984 the department that invents all the political lies is the Ministry of Truth. Government-sponsored Diversity does not mean diversity in ordinary language -- that is tolerance, pluralism, a pleasure in variety. The New Diversity means Conformity, enforced by the opinion formers or network managers of the media, academia, the political parties."

Peter invoked people like Geoffrey Blainey, Commissioner Fitzgerald, Gabriel Moens and David Stove, each a melancholy example of why the notion of the thought police is not merely overblown rhetoric. He found comfort though in the fact that some whispers of dissent were coming from unexpected quarters. Helen Garner's analysis of feminism's fiercer tribes in *The First Stone* had been released the week before. David Williamson's play *Dead White Males* was playing to packed houses, exposing post-modernist relativism to the kind of attack it has far too seldom received and championing liberal humanism, another intoxicatingly rare response. On the multicultural front he cited the example of Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors*, and the Maori writer's embrace of the ethic of self-help, independence and spirited involvement in the modern world. In the realm of gay politics he singled out the writings of Robert Dessaix and he was also kind enough to mention my work.

He concluded:

"There are other straws in the wind which suggest that the Great Australian Consensus is losing ground, that its heyday is passing. The question remains : what can we do to hasten the process?"

When I read a condensed version of his speech the next day I rang him and said: "What we can do is to compile a book of essays on the subject, and you must edit it." Peter was convinced; within a matter of days Jennifer Byrne, publisher of Reed Books, was convinced and on the Monday following the federal election we launched it, with a splendid speech by the novelist

Peter Goldsworthy who, I'm delighted to see, is here this evening. We called the book *Doubletake -- Six Incorrect Essays*, and I commend it to those of you who may not have seen it yet.

Mention of the federal election is a happy reminder that political correctness is a soft totalitarianism rather than the hard kind. Peter Coleman would, I'm sure, have been with us tonight if it weren't for the fact that he's in Russia, researching in the KGB's archives. But were he here, I'm equally sure that he would have been warning against any blithe triumphalism about the end of P.C., and reminding us that the Liberal Party has not wholly escaped its taint. I shall return to that theme in a moment. But first I want to turn to the People's Convention which has formed a significant part of today's deliberations. I believe that there is a strong case for deferring the Convention until after there has been an indicative plebiscite, and that there could be no more fitting occasion than this to make it.

Prior to the election, the Coalition promised to hold a People's Convention to mark the centenary of the Adelaide Convention at which the bulk of the Australian Constitution was settled.

The People's Convention would:

- * be half appointed, half elected, with some delegates appointed to ensure that minorities were represented;
- * consider the question of the Head of State first; and
- * then consider other matters such as overlap between the Commonwealth and the States, a Bill of Rights, and the use of the foreign affairs power.

If the Convention reached a consensus about the Head of State -- a consensus which was not defined -- the Coalition promised to put that consensus to the people in a referendum which the Government would support.

If no consensus was reached, a Coalition Government would hold an indicative plebiscite to gauge people's views about the Head of State, with a range of options on offer (such as the *status quo*, a ceremonial President elected by the Parliament, a ceremonial President elected by the people, or an executive President elected by the people).

Presumably, if one of the republican options received a plurality of votes, it could form the basis of a possible referendum.

At that time, the Coalition had two objectives: to remove republicanism as a potentially divisive issue in its own ranks; and to ensure that the constitutional debate was driven, as far as possible, by the people and not by the then Prime Minister, Mr Keating.

Unfortunately, implementing this policy in precisely this form could damage the Government.

A type of general election for the delegates to the Convention means that constitutional issues and pro- and anti-republican personalities will dominate the political landscape for the three months prior to any election and from then until any Convention concludes.

The Convention and its delegates -- because of their novelty -- will eclipse Parliament and MPs as a source of political interest and even, symbolically, of potency.

No doubt it will all be very jolly for the delegates, swanning about Canberra, dressed in a little brief authority. It will be like the United Nations writ small -- an unedifying prospect best not lingered over. And yet the unemployed, small farmers and small businessmen, and everyone else who is feeling the pinch, will know a protracted bunfight when they see one.

The election alone will cost about \$50 million, at a time when health, education and welfare budgets are being cut, and proceeding with it would be a grotesque distortion of priorities. If

other gatherings, such as the Constitutional Centenary Foundation's convention of April last year, are any guide, the People's Convention will end in deadlock over the Head of State. To the extent that there is agreement, it is likely to be that other subjects have more urgency. It is a very expensive way to deal with Keating's great political diversionary ploy now that its author is himself politically dead.

If an indicative plebiscite is almost certain to be necessary, why not skip the Convention and go straight to the vote? This will shortcircuit much argument over who should be appointed delegates, the basis for election and the nature of consensus. It will save \$50 million. And it will most likely find support from both sides of the constitutional divide, who think that the issues have already been amply canvassed.

If the plebiscite is conducted concurrently with the next federal election, taxpayers will save the cost of electing delegates *and* the cost of running a separate vote on the issues. Running the plebiscite at election time means that the politicians and the media will have other things on their minds (such as who will form the next government), it won't happen in a political vacuum and people will be able to consider this issue more or less unpressured by the hectoring classes.

The Convention should then take place *after* the plebiscite, not before. The same arguments against electing delegates will still apply, so why not ask the States to appoint two-thirds of the delegates if there are concerns about the federal Government stacking the Convention? If a republican option gains most support, the Convention can look at its implementation. If, however, the existing Constitution is the most favoured option, delegates can then consider the other possible changes.

This proposal involves no broken promise. The Government promised a vote and it promised a Convention, and the people will get both. But they will get them in a way which is cheaper and more likely to produce a "clean" result one way or the other.

If there is any sense of the adventurous -- of daring -- that still attaches to such a commonsense suggestion, it is not because it involves a breach of faith with the electorate, but because it begins from the premiss that governments have a responsibility to set their own agendas rather than following those of their predecessors, and some elements of this Government have only just begun to get used to the idea. The Greiner-Fahey Governments and the Brown Government are, among other things, reminders of the danger of spending so much time second-guessing your opponents and thinking in their terms that you become difficult to distinguish from them.

It's different in federal politics. I doubt, for example, whether we will hear very much from the Howard Ministry on the subject of `social justice'. But is it too much to hope for a definitive analysis of that cant term and all the objectionable rhetoric that goes with it? It would be a long-overdue purification of the dialect of the tribe, and that of journalists in particular.

Talk of social justice and cant brings us back to the subject of soft totalitarianism and Newspeak. One of my more intriguing tasks over the year since Peter Coleman's speech has been to note the ways in which P.C.'s defenders have dealt with criticism. Some, like Philip Adams, want to have a bob each way. That is to say, they deplore its more comical excesses while seldom questioning the solid core of left-liberal pieties. Others, like Eve Mahlab and Pat O'Shane, think that P.C. is just good manners turned into public policy and that to question it is, in the latter's phrase, "rubbish talk". The more devious exercises in denial have come from John Clare, Eve Mahlab and, more recently, Chris Puplick. P.C. is no more than conformity, which they say has been with us from the beginning of time. It is a moral equivalence argument -- this year's orthodoxy is no worse than its predecessor and may even be better, more progressive.

Chris Puplick goes even further. On the 27th of May he delivered a remarkable speech in which he claimed that all talk of political correctness was "nonsense on stilts". The term, he said:

"... is a piece of American Newspeak about 5 years old, imported into the Australian debate in exactly the same way that the Thatcherite terms `wet' and `dry' were imported previously. They were imported for the same reason -- to obscure debate and label the political enemies you were not prepared to debate; and by the same people -- those without the moral and intellectual capacity to win their arguments without recourse to the use of meaningless slogans."

I am sure that I am not alone in being struck by the impudence of all this. As I hope to persuade you, if anyone in this debate is lacking moral and argumentative capacity it is the former Senator and now President of the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board. When Newspeak is being spoken, his the tongue. Others have called him the Crown Prince of complaint. But given his attitude to the Constitution, I think it more apt to conceive of him in terms of the Roman Empire in decline and the title then given to sub-imperial despots -- "Corrector of the East". In the same speech he talks with pride of being "an unashamed social engineer". It is something which, I think, no serious person nowadays could say, inviting as it does the charge of moral cretinism as well as dimwittedness. Perhaps we should be content to call him Nanny Puplick and leave it at that.

But a bad nanny may do a lot of harm, unchecked, so let me pursue the argument. First of all, Nanny's history is awry. It was that former doyen of the New Left, Bob Catley, who recently pointed out that they first used the term, and in earnest. I recall a variant of it in the gay movement in the mid '70s, when people were forever worrying about whether, as Chairman Mao used to say, "error has been committed" and whether they were "ideologically sound". I remember straightfaced feminists in the early '80s debating whether positions were "politically correct", and in Aboriginal activist circles like the Central Land Council there was interminable discussion in the mid-'80s about "correct line thought" -- or C.L.T. for short. It may be painful evidence of what humourless numbskulls the Left and members of the "social movements" of the last 40 years have tended to be -- and how preoccupied with orthodoxy -- but this little history lesson will I hope make it clear that P.C. is not a recent, American, right-wing import. Oh Nanny, No Nanny, No.

Puplick's speech repays close reading -- not for the quality of its logic, but because it is a classic example of the way in which P.C. attempts to colonise the world of argument. He starts from a basic premise -- the concept of equity -- so much more fashionable these days even than motherhood and at least as rhetorically manipulable:

"The concept of equity itself derives from something which is far older, far more deep-seated and resonant than any formal system of law could be -- it derives from a sense of how we see ourselves as sentient creatures, which in turn determines how we see others and how we interact with them. It derives, as does the concept of fairness, from some deeper, spiritual, moral sense -- something which we know even if do not understand; something we can recognize even if we cannot articulate."

Now this is simply visceral politics, the appeal to gut feelings. And, as Les Murray memorably put it, "the emotions are not skilled workers." Sorting out what is fair is often a complex matter, calling for the judgment of Solomon, often counter-intuitive and a process in which instinct has no role. The idea that a sense of fairness is innate, universal in human beings is at best naive.

Still, from asserting that we all share an understanding of this sacral urge to saying "I'm from the Government and I'm here to help you" is no vast step for Puplick. Who could object to ending unfairness and discrimination, after all? Besides, Nanny knows best. Doesn't she? Oh Nanny, No, Nanny, No.

An example of how complex the issues are and how far from perfect the Anti-Discrimination Board's understanding of them emerged last week. Marlene Goldsmith wrote about it in *The Sydney Morning Herald* of Monday, June 3:

"The NSW Legislative Council is about to debate new transgender vilification legislation that will, in effect, allow transsexuals free access to most female sport. In spite of a theoretical exemption for women's sport, the legislation will, by providing female birth certificates to transsexuals, allow them to compete in all but the elite levels, where chemical testing may occur.

"If women should have separate sporting competitions from men because of their different physiology, then this legislation is grossly unjust. While transsexuals identify as female, they have physical characteristics that give males an advantage in sports.

"Yet in 1991, when sportswomen tried to point out the unfairness of allowing Ricki Carne, a transsexual, to compete in female sports, they were howled down and attacked by the media."

There are many for whom transsexuals are intrinsically funny or contemptible and a concern for their civil rights seems ludicrous. I don't share those views, and recently found myself defending those transsexuals who were threatened with exclusion from the revels which follow the Mardi Gras. But the idea that self-defined identity should triumph over biological reality is bizarre, utterly misconceived and profoundly unfair. It is noteworthy that the media, our moral arbiters, should have attacked the sportswomen who objected -- a lesson in how contemporary power élites work.

I have referred to a certain obtuseness in Puplick's argument and some of you may think that I have made out my case, perhaps run the risk of over-egging the pudding. Even so, let me conclude by trying to sort out one last categorical confusion into which Nanny has fallen.

"The first truth about so-called political correctness," he tells us, is that it represents "the emergence into the Australian political debate of the heretofore marginalised and ignored -- women, indigenous Australians, gays and lesbians, the poor, people with disabilities, non-native English speakers, those concerned with political agendas which are not about economic growth, making money, distributing wealth or rearranging the deck chairs on the financial Titanic."

First another short history lesson. Curtin and Chifley's shades would be distressed to think that the poor and the marginalised had had to wait until Nanny and the 1990s to enter the political debate. Catherine Helen Spence would take a similarly dim view on behalf of last century's feminists. Note again how his argument expects the past to suck up to the present -- as a pale, shabby portent of our enlightenment. Such is his triumphalism that he cannot resist quoting Tennyson -- Arthur speaking from the barge: "The old order changeth, yielding place to the new

And God fulfils himself in many ways,

Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."

Casting a cold eye on these triumphs, it is clear that P.C. disenfranchises people in a different dimension to the economic, corralling them into the world view and the political constituency Robert Hughes identifies as the culture of complaint. It is not, as far as I can see, true of those who have written about P.C. in Australia that they object to the enfranchisement of the economically or socially marginalised, that they support gay-bashing or are indifferent to the predicaments of Aboriginal people. Rather they tend, like the rest of us, to look at actual trends in the distribution of wealth and actual erosions of liberty, and to distrust the *hubris* of Big Government and the tactics of Big Brother.
