

Policy Implications and Reflections

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I always like being on the same panel as Bob Gregory, and especially to have him go before me, because I always learn a great deal.

I want to talk from the perspective of a historian and political scientist who is interested in civil order. I have read all the papers and have learnt a lot from them, as one always does, and I keep being struck over the last 10-15 years by the same kind of worries.

What the papers give me are the epi-phenomena of the kind of class struggle that we will get in the 21st century. What you see there and what Bob has shown very well is the development of an underclass of people who missed out on a whole lot of things that members of this room would have taken for granted: 'achievement at school', 'the acquisition of marketable skills', 'participation in the workforce', 'political and social skills', 'long term income and credit', 'good housing' and 'self confidence'. But the underclass will still have acquired babies, and obligations of all kinds nonetheless. They will not have a great sense that the good things in life have been shared equally.

I was particularly struck by the remarks in the last two papers about young people. My wife and I share the parenting of 9 adults – the two eldest are in their late 30's and are financially independent, but the rest are family dependent in quite a material way. Neither of us ever thought that there was anything odd about this, and we do it and I'm sure many others here do as well. Yet in comparison, I was fully independent and a father at 22.

My eldest daughter is 39, not married and no children; my second is 38, married with children. None of the others are in those kinds of relationships, and only one of them is secure financially. They are all well-educated, all of them.

Now none of this is new. There have always been deprived and disadvantaged people in every society including ours, and I think that there will always be; it is simply a part of human society and our imperfection. But the political and philosophical context today is different to all those that I know of in the last hundred years. Let me give you some six accounts of that difference.

First of all, there is not in our country at the moment any sense of the 'national project'. We are not shaping or building Australia in any conscious way. The last people who talked confidently about that were Sir John McEwen and Gough Whitlam. That sort of talk is gone, and it is certainly not the talk of the current government. It wasn't, in my view, the talk of the Hawke or Keating governments, and unless people talk like that there isn't a sense of people being on a shared journey of some kind.

We are not yet in a global world, and there is no sense of the world shaping itself. 'Nation-building' is a term we now reserve for under-developed or developing countries.

Secondly, there is a lack of confidence and optimism about the future. In comparison, one hundred years ago in Britain, the US, Canada and Australia there was enormous confidence about the approach of the 20th century and all the possibilities that appeared in its coming – largely technologically driven expectations, but attached to them was the sense that 'the common man' or 'humanity' was going to be much better off socially, culturally, in equality and all the rest of it. I think you would have to look very hard to find anything like that about the approach of the 21st century, and for very good reason.

Thirdly, there is a pronounced sense of individualism in our society and a lack of interest in the condition of the whole. I have written about that elsewhere and I won't labour the point here.

Fourthly, there is an extraordinary concentration on the 'economy' as the engine of everything, and a relative lack of interest in society.

Fifthly, we have a generally sluggish economy with high unemployment, and sixthly, there is no fiscal increment. For government the reality is quite the reverse. For much of the postwar period, or at least for half of it, Australian governments were able to do things largely because each year they received an increment that was related to the difference between taxation rates and the actual growth of the economy.

Not only is there nothing like that now, but each year governments are facing rather larger social welfare problems than they faced the previous year, and the money supply to deal with then is less than it was.

If you put all those together, you have an unusual philosophical and political context for our country. Societies in my view are more or less civil according to their members' sense of shared value and good outcomes, the level of force that is available to governments and the preparedness of governments to use force, and the likelihood or desirability of any obvious alternative (which usually means what the country next door is doing or the likelihood of war or famine or something else). You can look at some European countries or Bangladesh or South East Asia to get that sense of 'it's not that good here but next door it's worse, we don't want to be like them.'

Because Australia is a large island continent a long way from anywhere, Australians have always had a somewhat parochial sense of themselves. The people don't actually look at alternatives. The alternatives are looking from one state or city to another, rather than from looking from us to Sweden or Canada or whatever. We social scientists do that a lot – it's been my stock in trade for years – but Australians generally don't do it.

The conditions throughout our history since the gold rushes in 1851, but if you like, since 1950, have been the reverse of the ones I just mentioned. That is, on the whole there has been a sense of the national project, there has been confidence about the future, there has

been a strong sense of 'us' rather than of 'me'. There has not been an extraordinary concentration on the economy as the be-all and end-all, there hasn't always been a sluggish economy and there has often been a fiscal increment. They were all positive contextual elements of government in our society, and we do not have them now.

I don't believe that Australia will go onward indefinitely with our present conditions and a pleasantly high level of civil law and order. The US has been mentioned, and it is relevant that the California now spends more on prisons than it does on higher education. Within the US there is a high level of force available within the society, and a high level of imprisoned people, mostly men and mostly from the underclass.

To digress for a moment, I once wrote a political science text book which didn't have a chapter on law and order. A critic pointed this out, so my co-author and I wrote one. We learned a lot of things for the first time because political scientists in Australia don't think of the police and the army as being part of the Australian political system, but of course, they are. When you look at other societies, of course, you are instantly aware of the importance of the police, the army, the legal system and so on.

I don't want to sound somber and over the top, but I just don't see how this society will go on with pleasantly high levels of civil order and the conditions that have been referred to in the last day.

So where do we go from here? Actually, I feel somewhat helpless. I've been saying some of these things for 10 to 15 years and I feel that my audience is diminishing because like me they are all old and dying. In exactly the way Bob was talking, I think Bev and I have a good family and we give our children a lot. We eat with them a lot, we talk with them a lot, and they have a sense of frustration and their values are not always our values. In many respects they have higher moral standards than I would have had at their age, and are more sensitive to what they see as the inequities of our society than I would have been at their age. One reason is that there are more of those inequities now, and they are aware of them. I think Ann's point is very pertinent.

One of the things that I think needs to be done is raising the consciousness of what makes for a good society. We don't hear this sort of talk nearly as much as we did a generation ago. It is the wrong place to introduce it, but I have become powerfully converted to the view of Howard Gardner, the American educationalist, that all humans are intelligent. There are seven or eight domains of intelligence, and everybody carries within them the capacity to do just about anything. That is, provided that the family conditions are such that whatever talents are revealed are enhanced and brought forward and developed, and that the person has a good sense of herself or himself, and is not afraid of hard work.

With those conditions, in my view, anybody can do just about anything. But the notion that intelligence is a rare thing and few have it is still alive and well in this society. Until that is changed, we will not have some of the conditions for what I would call the necessary renaissance of our society.

The second is to strengthen the economy. This is easy to say, and hard to do. Another is to do small things, do them incrementally, and see how they work. An example is to look at job creation in impoverished country areas, rather than adding a second problem by bringing country people to the cities.

A third, which I have said before, and I think the Dusseldorp Skills Forum has said: can't we start redefining what work is? Conceptually, in discussion and in other ways. To be out of work is not simply to be unproductive: it is to be diminished as a human being. So much of our sense of ourselves comes from our social location and our work. Without work and without a positive sense that what one does is good, people are going to be deeply deprived emotionally and spiritually.

I think this is one of the great costs of unemployment. Anything we can do to redefine the role of work, and find alternatives for it is important. I think it was William James who wanted moral alternatives to war; I want moral alternatives to work. I can't see how we are going to have meaningful, useful work for everybody, and nor I think can anybody else.

Finally, get back to values, arguments and the sorts of discussions that societies have had since nation states came into being in the late 18th century. That is: there is great advantage in belonging to a nation because it spreads the possibilities for people, provides a government able to provide a context for those opportunities. A straightforward notion of economics is that a nation state's economy is a bigger and better and more useful economy than any small regional, provincial, town or village economy.

What we call modern societies are a menage a trois between politics, economics and technology. They are all important. None of them is dominant. They mix and meld and marry, and have done so for the last two hundred years. The nation state is still, despite globalisation, the best environment in which to do the sorts of things this conference is talking about. Let us imagine a better way of doing things and then put our imagination to work in building it.

I have listed some things we can do, and to some degree they are contradictory, and life is like that. Let us not be afraid to do things which look contradictory, provided we can say what the expected outcome is, and why that is a good thing.

Thank you very much.