

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE ?

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Most peoples in the world today, whatever their age, position or nation, suffer high levels of anxiety. Governments are failing to provide living conditions which are reasonably free of poverty, injustice, violence and crime, or a physical environment which provides for future generations.

This is the case whether governments are, in Australian terms, Labor or Liberal, capitalist or communist. Despite significant organizational differences, all authorities operate within basically the same traditional power-elite structure. The party parliamentary system, introduced in many Western European nations to give a voice to the previously alienated and underprivileged, established an adversarial system, and from the perspective of those who are expected to conform, the traditional power structure remains. Even major alterations in institutions leave the existing we-they structure in place. When a communist government was introduced into Russia, it retained a similar power-elite structure.¹

All political systems being of this power-elite structure, it follows that throughout the ages, and in all societies, the individual citizen has been required to adjust to existing institutions and norms. We have always assumed that a human being is wholly malleable, and that compliance is always possible, either because individuals have a sense of social responsibility or because they can be compelled by rewards and punishments. For example, we have assumed that young people can accept being unemployed and deprived of a social role, that people generally can accept gross inequalities of income and opportunities, that they can accept sex, class and race discriminations, without reacting anti-socially to their sense of deprivation.

Reactions Against Traditional Power Structures

But now we must question this basic assumption for civilisation is in a crisis situation. Our experience is that individuals are subject to the effects of "structural violence" that is that they are hurt by the institutions and norms of society, including such inequalities and discriminations. Furthermore, sooner or later they respond accordingly. Frustration behaviours include drug usage, domestic violence, youth suicide, gang violence, robberies and school violence. Even in the work place and in other relationships which fail to recognize the individual as more than a robot, we see negative behaviour such as lack of cooperation and absenteeism.

In the same way at the international level it has been assumed that we can deter any movements for independence or ethnic identity. Economic and military power have been regarded traditionally as reliable means of preventing challenges to power elites. The failure of a great power and the UN to defeat independence movements in Vietnam and North Korea should have demolished this belief.²

Within a power-elite frame, failure to coerce successfully is explained by the insufficient use of coercive power. Military governments obstruct any movement towards democracy, and great powers have relied on thermonuclear threats, or more recently economic muscle, to maintain their interests. Forms of slavery and colonialism, once so widespread, still exist. But what is different today -- and why I believe that civilization is in crisis -- is that new weapons are now readily available to any protestor. Moreover, communications make possible mass protest in many places at the same time, and there are substantial minorities, such as trade unions, religious organizations and small political parties, able to voice protest.³

The Market as "Solution"

Faced with these unprecedented challenges governments, almost universally and in desperation, are handing over the future management of much of the society to the "market". The usual justification for this abdication is that, in competitive global conditions, the economic management, and even administration of essential services such as education, health, communications and energy services, law and order and the administration of prisons, is best left to the judgment and competitive incentive of private enterprise.

But clearly it is hiding the source of this contemporary crisis to argue that a government and its public servants have less intellectual or administrative capabilities to deal with the ever-emerging economic, social and environmental problems than the impersonal "market". The reality is that the problems of any society must be the consequence of the way in which elites and leaderships have responded to interest pressures, including self-interest, usually by taking a short-term perspective. Now faced with the uncomfortable political implications of confronting a demand for decreased income inequalities (which imply taxes on the richer) and to provide a better quality of life, withdrawal seems the best tactic.

The market comprises the same interests which historically have brought about the problems now faced: the domination of workers by the powerful; the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor; the growing accumulation of privilege. The less that

governments intervene to curb this now almost universal trend, the more we will see an increase in social problems.

This abdication of responsibility inevitably neglects many in need, because of their special individual and community circumstances. No less importantly, it brushes aside problems of population control and destruction of the environment by the "market". The expected costs of this alternative competitive, "market" approach are beginning to emerge.

The major change in handing over to the "market" is that the source of social problems will no longer be attributable to identifiable political parties, persons or processes. Instead of youth unemployment being dealt with as a social and personal problem it will be left to the "market" to offer less pay than it takes a person to live on, and trade union bargaining power will be curbed.

But these politically unpopular measures can be pursued by the "market" anonymously, outside political decision making.⁴

An Alternative Approach

In the interest of all peoples, rich and poor, there is now no sensible option but to explore whether there are significant changes that can be made, consensually. These would need to provide conditions, even within this continuing power-elite structure, that would help to reduce anxiety, that would promote less anti-social behaviour and greater security and, perhaps most important and pressing of all, that would avoid continuing class, ethnic, and (possibly) global conflict.

It is important in policy making and promoting change to realize that the widespread consequences of change cannot always be anticipated. This rules out revolutionary change as a solution. Even step-by-step change in institutions requires constant reconsideration. Unfortunately, problems emerge unnecessarily because there is a reluctance by leaders and governments to admit error or to alter declared policies. Political ideologies control thinking amongst all politicians.

It is unreasonable to assume that, if there were a widespread understanding of the nature of our structural problems, there could be consensual agreement to take a long-term view and to alter existing institutions that are fundamentally adversarial. Far more bottom-up decision making could be introduced by encouraging local community consultation and activities. Industrial relations in a capitalistic society could, with advantage to all concerned, become more collaborative. The parliamentary party system could become less debative and involve more problem-solving. 'Democracy' could be made more representative: presently so-called "democracies" are ruled by elite minorities, with many other minorities and view-points not represented in the legislative process. A gradual

breakdown of political parties and the election of more independents and members of small parties could provide wider representation. Such members, working together in an atmosphere of dialogue rather than debate, could create a political decision-making institution that was also a public service.

Given the fundamental importance of satisfying human needs, of the endangerment of our fragile planet, and of the inevitable failure of coercive policies, there is a call for altered legal process, so that the sources of conflicts are treated. Conflict analysis and resolution, problem solving practices, rather than legal processes, are required.⁵

Conclusion

These are all steps which can be initiated without threatening our basic structure. None would interfere with the essentials of the power-elite system. On the contrary, it would be made more acceptable. Nor would the market system be threatened, although its destructive practices would be controlled. These steps are being advocated by observers and writers in Britain and in other places where the same anxieties generated by the market system are being experienced.

There is an additional and important observation to be made. These anxieties will, in the course of time, also be experienced by those directly involved in the market system and now doing well out of it. They, too, will find that the societies they are creating will ultimately threaten them, their offspring and the system itself. The abdication of government to control them is not in their interest either. Indeed, some of the most powerful statements of support for contemporary trends towards "market" control are coming from successful industrialists, such as the Canadian, John Ralston Saul (1993).

Let us no longer go along with the escapist policies which are being pursued. Let us, of course, focus on help for those who desperately need it, but not without also dealing with the sources of their problems. Let us no longer leave policies solely to party politics or to their market forces. The needs of peoples must be acknowledged.

Anti-social behaviour, violence and crime, sources of our insecurities, require society, not people, to be "punished" by altering its institutions, and people to be rehabilitated in changed circumstances.⁶

Notes

1. It is not surprising that this is so. In any adversarial structure there are always those who have personal, job and status interests in maintaining the status quo. In industries such as coal mining or timber, the environment is of little concern. Dominant today are arms industries, national defence forces and intelligence agencies, the members of which have

a personal interest in defending the conflict generating status quo, and the continuing tensions associated with it (See Timberg, 1996).

2. In 1979 a group of scholars, reacting to these realities, met in Berlin and put forward the view that there could be development in individuals only if certain human needs - not confined to physical needs such as food or housing - were met. (Lederer, 1980). In 1988, this group and others interested in the sources and resolution of conflict met in Virginia and arrived at conclusions which explain why individuals, in some circumstances, defy social conventions to the extent of confronting great powers. (Burton, 1990) The traditional assumption that a human being is malleable and can be coerced into desired behaviours was challenged as false if a human being has inherent needs (perhaps shared by other species). In particular, these include the need for social recognition through a social role and the need for personal identity. If, as has been argued by many who have researched this area, these needs will be pursued, regardless of costs, then punishments and other deterrent strategies must fail.

3. Indeed, contemporary studies show how the demands of adolescence, of parenting and partnering, of workers in relation with their employers, and of people generally for rewarding work opportunities, for development, for educational and health services, for greater equality in quality of life, are challenging governments in the most developed of economies (See Kegan, 1994).

4. Writers today deplore what appears to be an acceptance of these trends, as they did of past ideologies. "In reality we are today in the midst of a theology of pure power - power born of structure not dynasty or arms. The new holy trinity is organization, technology and information. The new priest is the technocrat." They urge a far greater questioning by the public. "To govern a democracy, you require constant vibrations from the population" (See Saul, 1993).

5. Looking to the future, more attention needs to be given to childhood education. At present, all children are educated within adversarial institutions, including schools and the family and, later in life, in politics, industry and global relations. Even physically aggressive sports need to be reassessed and much more attention given to those in which there is competition in skills but no aggressive physical contact. Movement in this direction is becoming more and more important. See Kegan (1994) for an outline of the main challenges to traditional norms and Burton (1997) on contemporary adversarial institutions and possible changes and (1996) on means of handling specific conflict situations outside legal processes.

6. If anyone should wish to pursue the quest for sources of our social problems, the books referred to below provide a holistic background. Regular, informal dialogue in groups of seven or so in communities could help to provide the insights now needed.

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