

Globalism and the Open Society

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The problem with the present debate over nationalism, globalisation and multiculturalism, and the local issues of racism and land rights, is that most of the participants are presenting as alternatives what in fact are complementary imperatives.

Many years ago, Lewis Mumford wrote that the urgent tasks of governments everywhere were that they must become simultaneously larger and smaller. This anticipated the green slogan, "Think globally, act locally." Both respond to the fact that as the world becomes more closely knit together, we need authorities strong enough to deal with the resulting national, regional and global problems, and at the same time we want the means to control what is happening, often as a result of globalisation, in our own neighbourhoods.

Unfortunately, public responses to these pressures have seen them as opposed rather than as inseparable, each integral to the other. The world's political and business elites have emphasised the irreversible nature of globalisation, and the consequent need for societies open to the world. This approach has generated populist responses from those who would like to go back to the days of closed societies on a flat earth. Racial groups challenge the integrity of nation states, weaker nations challenge the dominance of the strong. The political consequences within Australia include the rise of One Nation and the collection of conspiracy theorists who shore up their own insecurity by fantasising enemies from among those more wretched than

themselves. Internationally, the reaction to economic and military globalisation includes the breakdown of Russia, the conflicts in the Balkans, and the extension of the nuclear arms race to southern Asia.

The policy makers who promote globalisation and economic rationalism do not simply ignore the cost of their policies. This could be redressed by compensatory action to protect the immediate victims of change. More seriously, ^{they} refuse to [^] acknowledge that they are engaged in a massive piece of social engineering that undermines the structures of every civil, let alone democratic, society.

The objection to the common European currency, for example, is not merely that it erodes national sovereignty, but that it removes national policies from democratic control. The cost of opening Japan's markets would not merely be an increase in unemployment, but the destruction of the class of small peasants that is integral to Japanese culture. The Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) threatens the ability of all countries to promote their own educational ideals, nurture minority groups or sustain national cultural independence.

Yet, although these international agreements reduce the authority of national governments, they do little to promote global welfare. The practices of the market place are incompatible with human rights or ecological health. Competitive pressures push all countries in the direction of lowering wages and conditions while accelerating the devastation of forests, seas, farmlands and pastures.

We will not avoid these consequences of globalisation by trying to build safe havens where we can try to escape from the present behind the picket fences of a mythical past where everyone was relaxed and comfortable. Australia has never been

a safe place for women or for minorities. Even the majority has usually been uneasy. When guns were freely available, the pushes made city streets unsafe, while bushrangers roamed the countryside. In the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrations by unemployed migrants were labelled as riots and the government had to run a massive campaign against the prejudices that still denied them the rights of full participation in Australian society. In recent decades, these prejudices have merely been transferred, with equally little reason, to Aborigines and to migrants from our north. Even if the challenges of globalisation were starting to be felt in the 1970s, we were never as comfortable with ourselves as during those years when we took ^Pride in our multiculturalism and our ability to offer a home to people from around the globe.

If globalisation is to advance human well-being, it must be balanced by a strengthening of local institutions. This means we need to strengthen both our national culture and its component parts – not only the white rural communities that are suffering from the withdrawal of private business and government services, but also the rich variety of migrant communities in towns and cities who can contribute both to the totality of our national culture ^{and} ~~but~~ to our ability to communicate with older cultures beyond our shores.

The test of government policies should not be narrowly economic, but social and cultural. We need a social impact statement for all proposed changes. It is, for example, doubtful whether a GST, which will inhibit the possibilities of self-employment, artistic endeavour and community activity, would pass such a test. Similarly, while free trade remains a desirable goal, it needs to be accompanied by measures to promote the free movement and settlement of people, particularly people

fleeing from political and economic repression, and for the strengthening of local communities. This can only be achieved by specific government intervention, not simply by the kind of intrusive regulatory regime administered by the inappropriately named Competition and Consumer Commission.

Above all, if we are to establish the legitimacy of our claims to this land, we must recognise its prior occupants, and find reconciliation with their descendants, whom we continue to deny full participation in either our national or our local communities. It should go without saying that this reconciliation requires recognition of their land rights.

Even a majority is no more than a collection of minorities. Even the oldest and supposedly most ethnically pure nations are divided by ties of family and tribe. The criteria of democracy are both government by majority choice and protection of minorities. Properly understood, distinctions among minorities strengthen the whole, providing a framework of institutions that support the nation and allow it to play an independent role in the global community of nations.

Australia's potential strength is that as a nation it provides a place for a variety of ethnic, regional, cultural and religious groups such that all citizens can find a place where they can be at home and so together exercise control over their future.

Attempts to impose a monocultural framework will destroy this strength, and inhibiting our ability to act effectively in international affairs. Similarly, the refusal of our leaders to listen to all voices in this chorus of minorities, and to ensure that they are both heard and heeded globally, will deny both government and industry their legitimacy, and lead ultimately to a collapse of the state into a war of hostile

minorities. There are already too many examples of this collapse of civil order, in Africa, in Europe and in the United States, for Australia to venture any further along this path.

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