

## *From the Kitchen*

5 August 2009

I'm feeling feisty today, possibly because I've just finished rewriting a story set in a future, fragmented, totalitarian Australia.

Benevolent dictatorship could be the way to solve all the stupidity around us. But I am the only person who could head such a regime in such a way that everyone would be better off, the environment would be cleaned up, species extinction would halt, peace would be the norm. However, I would no longer have the time to write or walk the dog.

It is a question that continually engages me: why is it so hard for governments to do what is right? I don't know the answers. 'Right' does *not* include supporting buddies and vested commercial interests.

We repeatedly elect governments with the hope (sometimes expectation) that things will change for the better. They seem to for a short while and then it is almost like watching a brand new car take off on a freshly-laid road, only to soon get bogged in the soggy ruts left by previous incumbents.

Who am I to talk? From the kitchen table I can see the paint flaking off the passage walls. I've been meaning to repaint them for years. And outside the back door it's a soggy mess. There's a pile of paving stones waiting to be laid, now with lichen and moss growing on them in places. The new clothes hoist has been leaning against the outside laundry wall for over a year. But they're just small things – running a country is surely about the bigger picture and I'd have lots of servants to do the actual work.

My grandparents in the Netherlands had servants when I was little. A cook and a woman who did the laundry came in frequently and I'm sure someone came in to clean the house. My father-in-law grew up in a Pacific island society where servants were an everyday part of life, at least for the westerners. We have grown away from that being the norm – certainly in the circles I move in. Someone living in a seven-bedroom mansion probably pays for help.

'Servant' has become a pejorative term, no longer politically correct. Yet service to others is a high calling, whether for pay or otherwise. We expect friendly and efficient service in shops and restaurants. We talk of our elected representatives being there to serve us.

Those who can remember that far back, often bemoan the loss of 'service stations' – petrol stations where you drove in and someone pumped the petrol, checked the engine oil and radiator water levels, checked the tyre pressures and washed your windows, all while you stayed in your car. And you paid with 'real' money.

There is little service in many shops these days either. I've often roved through a large shop looking for something I needed and then had to rove even longer to look for a staff member to help me who, when I found him, had to rove around looking for another staff member who was then able to help.

The other day I actually had a shop assistant in a large store ask me if I knew where the alarm clocks were. His response to my raised eyebrows was to explain that he had only started that day and couldn't find any staff to help him. Alarm bells should be ringing in response to such a situation.



My wife often points out to me that I am sometimes too willing to go out of my way to help other people. She's probably right – I see someone in need or a situation that needs fixing and I step in. That may be taking service too far and I suspect it's me fulfilling some deep, inner need.

When I finally become Australia's benevolent dictator, I will have to compensate for that deep-seated need to serve others and ensure that I don't go too far in looking after others' needs, otherwise I might find myself walked over. The best thing would be to surround myself with minders who can protect me from the demanding masses.

Anyway, the modern trend is for self-service, even when it comes to accessing government departments. We are encouraged to go on-line, where we can fill in forms and wait for whatever we need. And most people have no idea what they need, so as benevolent dictator it would be incumbent on *me* to work out what they really need and offer it to them – at a price.

Now I need to take the dog out. He knows what he needs and is clear in communicating it. And he's clear about the master-servant relationship, even if I'm not.