

From the Kitchen

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Have we ever had democracy in this country? We don't seem to have it now. The word 'democracy' denotes government by 'the people'. The system in place in Australia and many other countries is that the people delegate their right to govern to a group of elected representatives. Often that is where the power of the 'demos' stops.

Between elections, we have little say in things that affect the society in which we live. This is also often true at the time of elections. There *are* countries, such as Switzerland, where those allowed to vote are given the opportunity to vote on the proposed introduction of new laws. (Mind you, Swiss women did not receive the right to vote until 1971.) There are other jurisdictions, such as California, where citizens may initiate laws and vote on them. In such places, enfranchisement is continuous, not just something to be exercised every three to four years.

There have been a few times, in my own experience, when citizens imposed their power on government between elections. One such was the string of Vietnam War Moratoriums, which saw hundreds of thousands of people, in many cities, take to the streets and demonstrate their demand that the government of the day withdraw from the war in Vietnam. Similar events took place in the USA. It is telling that such mass demonstrations are rare.

It could be argued that the periodic election of members of parliament masks our real lack of power. And I doubt that the real power vests in the parliament; it is more likely in the hands of large corporations. One can only surmise, because citizens and most members of parliament are not privy to the terms of contracts made between businesses and governments, the latter ostensibly acting on our behalf.

There was a time when almost all essential services were run by public servants in government departments and instrumentalities. The provision of these services, such as public transport, supply of gas and electricity, telephony and postal delivery, were on terms that were by and large transparent. Now, with most of these services in the hands of public and private corporations, we are not allowed to know the contents of contracts which form the rules for the provision of these services. The reason for the secrecy, we are told, is 'commercial-in-confidence' provisions. Governments argue that, if the terms of the contracts were made public, companies would not want to enter such contracts and we would all be worse off. I am confident that what would change, should these 'public service' contracts be public, is that we would pay less for the services, because the basis of fees and charges would be transparent. Companies would still tender to supply the services, but they would have to be prepared to openly justify their charges. I am not suggesting that intellectual property such as business systems be divulged – these can give one company an edge over others and are rightly kept under wraps.

What is also often put forward as a mark of a democracy is the raft of freedoms and rights we think we enjoy. I say 'think we enjoy' with sadness, because these rights and freedoms are being steadily and stealthily eroded. There is an increasing number of offences for which the onus of proof (of innocence) has shifted to the accused person. The principle in our legal system has always been that the prosecutor must prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, lest an innocent person be wrongly convicted and to put something of a brake on the might of the State. There has always been a gap between allegation of wrongdoing and a finding of guilt.

These erosions of what we thought we treasured may be unnoticed and unmourned, except by a few stalwarts and scaremongers. Maybe the manner in which rulers come to power is irrelevant in that there will always be rulers and the ruled. Maybe the rights and freedoms are always limited to what those in power allow. A very cynical and dark view, I know. Maybe it is all about balance.

There have always been people who crave power, for power's sake or to protect their interests. There have always been people who fight against those in power in order to secure for themselves a better life – one with more rights and freedoms – which has meant that those in power have had to let go of some of that power. This has in some cases been achieved through the genuine concern of rulers for their fellow human beings and in many cases through violent uprisings, revolts and revolutions. The result has often been that those who revolted have ended up as the new despotic rulers.

There are also many people in the middle, who don't seem to care who rules or what rights and freedoms the rulers allow them, as long as they can get on with their lives. These are the people who need to be convinced that getting on with their lives is going to become more difficult if they don't wake up to the erosion of the principles that form the basis for their quiet lives.