

27 June 2012



Trying to second-guess what people want to hear can lead one into a morass which grows ever deeper and murkier. Unfortunately, politicians and bureaucrats are doing this more and more and we are all the worse for it, including the politicians.

This behaviour of politicians seems to be based on fear – fear of non-acceptance – and on an erroneous assumption that the populace is not intelligent enough to deal properly with complex information about complex issues. It is the very intelligence of the populace that causes the problems for the second-guessing politicians. It becomes a game of trying to work out what information is solidly based and what is a confection aimed at eliciting a favourable response from those the information is aimed at.

This behaviour – giving people what the politicians think the people want – also has the consequence of dividing the populace along the lines of those who feel looked after and those who don't believe in the need for the government's actions in the first place. This skews the natural divisions of a society between what are commonly described as left and right. Despite this division, there are usually enough people of neither persuasion who can be convinced by cogent arguments to vote one way or the other at any given election.

It seems that we are losing rationality in political debate, if you can even call it debate anymore. I am probably wrong, but it seems to me that many politicians, and many others involving themselves in politics, argue from immovable, entrenched, ideological positions, with no chance of a well-argued idea receiving any consideration. Even matters that have been established 'beyond reasonable doubt' by scientific enquiry, experimentation and challenge are often opposed, even ridiculed, from ideological stances. I know that this is not entirely new; for instance, Einstein faced violent opposition in the 1920s to his theory of relativity, the opposition coming from groups organised for the purpose of opposing, just as there are groups now set up for the sole purpose of opposing those who say that we (humans) are causing the earth's climate to change in possibly dangerous ways.

The knee-jerk responses of governments to the bleatings of unthinking people, often amplified by the media, tend to divert resources and in many cases tend to restrict our freedoms. Law and order is one area in which these knee-jerk reactions are common. That police forces already have sufficient powers to deal with the perceived increased threats to personal safety does not stop the bringing in of new laws to 'address the situation' and put the bleaters' minds to rest.

Some commentators are pointing to a reduced understanding of civics in the community as being at the heart of the disinterest in politics so many people demonstrate and these commentators call for a return to the teaching of our political history in schools. It *is* important for people to have a good understanding of how the governing of our society works in order that they may play an active part in it – at least through voting – and to appreciate the importance of that participation. People talk about those who fought on behalf of the country in the two major wars last century as having saved our freedom, and this is celebrated every year. However, they seem to forget where those freedoms came from and how fragile they can be. Our freedoms are currently more at risk from apathy, disengagement and ignorance than from any outside threat.

Apart from bringing back into the school classroom the teaching of civics and relevant history, there need to be changes in attitude amongst politicians and in the media. Politicians need to be less fearful of the electorate, treat it with more respect and be less cynical about evidence of how the world is and how it is changing. The media needs to be less inclined to do the bidding of political parties, vested interests and groups of fundamentalists in all areas of human endeavour and belief.

It is also essential that those who wield power respect the separation of powers. For instance, when a politician attacks the judiciary because she doesn't like a particular decision of the court, she is undermining the separation of powers and undermining the public's confidence in the judicial system. Unfortunately, the media tends to uncritically report such incautious attacks.

We need more statesmen and women and more robust people in positions that matter. By robustness I mean having less fear and at the same time being willing to listen and consider – a demonstration of strength, wisdom and humility.