

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS (ACSSO)

The national voice of parents of students in Australia's public schools and their school communities

OPINION – ACSSO's Guest Columnists address values- driven issues in education

THE 2006 SIR ROBERT MENZIES LECTURE DELIVERED BY THE HON JULIE BISHOP MP THE LIBERAL FRONTIER: BUILDING A CIVIL SOCIETY

6.30pm Friday 3 November 2006

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the retirement of Sir Robert Menzies from the prime ministership of Australia. His legacy as the founder of modern Australian Liberalism cannot be challenged, but the flavour of liberalism that he bequeathed us has evolved and developed, as has modern Australia over the last 40 years.

Tonight we honour Sir Robert's great contribution, as the man who did more than anybody else to define the contours of modern Australian Liberalism with its conservative and classical liberal traditions, and nurtured it into a modern, successful political movement.

It has become a cliché to state that the Menzies years were the golden years for Australian Liberals. But, with the passage of time and a couple of stints in opposition at the Federal level, Australian Liberalism has undergone further evolution and development.

Australian Liberalism is a philosophy whose values have needed to be related to the challenges of the moment. Just as Australian Liberals did in 1909, when Alfred Deakin's liberals fused with George Reid's free-traders, the broad church that is the modern day Liberal Party has re-examined its direction in the course of the last forty years. It has continued to keep pace with modern Australian aspirations. As we did in 1909, over the last forty years, Australian Liberals have struck a healthy blend between the intellectual legacies of Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill.

The passage of time has seen some things change over the last forty years – in some areas, Australian Liberals have changed their outlook.

This point is well illustrated by looking at Australian Liberals' approach to federalism. In his series of lectures at The University of Virginia a year after his retirement, Sir Robert spoke of the two forces which operate in a federation; the centripetal and centrifugal. He said:

"... all modern experience has shown that in a federation, where powers are distributed between the National Government and State or provincial governments, there will develop either a movement, conscious or unconscious, to increase powers at the centre, or an opposite movement to increase the State or provincial powers at the expense of the central authority."^[1]

In short, "federations tend either to become more dominated by the centre ... or to break up into their fractions".

Fortunately, the course of Australian political history has been a process of centripetal. Of course, there are notable exceptions to this, and as a Western Australian, it would be remiss of me to not point out that the 1933 Secession referendum is a case where centrifugal appeared to occur.

In his American lectures, Sir Robert declared that for a large continent with widely scattered communities, he was “at our present stage of development”^[2], a federalist.

In some respect, this has changed. Australian Liberals have sought to find a sense of balance between what, in some areas, can be seen as the competing claims of federalism, and the desire to advance Australia as a prosperous, just and free society.

But in many other areas, the outlook of Australian Liberals remains, by and large, the same as it did forty years ago.

An obvious example of this is the importance Liberals place on the Australian-United States relationship. Sir Robert realised, long before Curtin’s famous speech, that our relationship with the United States was critical, particularly if Japan took action in the Pacific in World War II. Indeed, Sir Robert is recorded at the outbreak of the War as having written to former prime minister, Lord Bruce confidentially telling Lord Bruce that so seriously did he regard the Australian-United States diplomatic relationship, that he had considered resigning the prime ministership and taking up Australia’s diplomatic post in Washington himself^[3].

On the domestic front, we are still the Party that places great importance on the expansion of educational opportunity.

It was with pride that Sir Robert wrote in his memoir, *The Measure of the Years*, of his Government’s record in expanding opportunity to study at an Australian university, and of breaking the sectarian divide through state aid to non-government schools^[4].

In 1956, Sir Robert established the Murray Committee which saw the first major expansion in the number of universities in this nation; and today, under the Howard Government, we have almost one million students attending Australian universities. Similarly, the funding by the Menzies Government of science buildings and equipment as well as funding to Catholic schools in 1964, and the Howard Government’s commitment to funding both the government as well as the non-government schools sectors shows that Australian Liberals have always valued independent and Catholic schools.

In this sense, the Howard Government’s very successful Investing in Our Schools Programme – a one billion dollar fund to pay for projects at government and non-government schools across Australia is inspired by the Menzies Government’s funding of science classrooms and equipment.

Australian Liberals are guided by a rich body of thought and experience that has been handed down since early colonial days, and from those who come from beyond these shores. From a practical point of view, the Liberal Party’s Federal platform spells out the broad parameters of Australian Liberalism. But rather than being ‘pre-determined abstract theory’, Sir Robert Menzies considered the character of Australian Liberalism as “an attitude of mind and faith”^[5]. The Party’s platform draws together those attitudes which inform our outlook. The platform is an admirable collection of touchstones, including the belief in the innate worth of the individual; encouraging initiative and personal responsibility; of basic freedoms; living in dignity; the family; in fostering a cohesive society; and in mutual obligation.

I believe that the golden thread that connects the touchstones of Australian Liberalism is a desire to build a civilised society.

Civility is a common value and a standard to be expected throughout the community, and in all walks of life, regardless of economic means or position in society.

So how should we define civility? Attempting to define civility, and examine its building blocks has become the topic of some academic interest of recent times^[6]. While civility encompasses the traditional ideas of manners and etiquette, it has been defined to include three core elements – respect, relations with strangers, and self-regulation.

Under this definition the first element – respect – involves communicating an attitude of respect towards others. The second element - relations with strangers - is the general stance taken towards strangers, and the third element – self-regulation - involves the holding back, or self-sacrifice of one's own immediate self-interest. Under these three elements, we can begin to identify behaviour that constitutes civility.

Our understanding of what constitutes civil behaviour is informed by a number of sources. Certainly, the Judeo-Christian heritage and ethic of Australian society has influenced our understanding as to what is, or is not, civil behaviour. Arguably, "*Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*"^[7] forms the historical bedrock of our society's expectation of civil behaviour. In addition to the Judeo-Christian heritage, our inheritance of the principles emanating from the English and Scottish Enlightenments has helped to build our understanding of civility.

The political debate about what is, or is not civilised behaviour is only just starting to emerge in Australia. However, this debate has been happening in Britain for some time. Former Blair Government Minister for Welfare Reform, Frank Field has called this area of public discussion, "the politics of behaviour"^[8] or the "respect agenda". Field says that:

"Fundamental to learning these rules of responsibility was the family. It was here that each individual learned that they were part of a small group of people to whom respect was owed. Families lovingly taught us how our self-respect was bound up with the respect we had to give other family members. Learning these skills enabled us to negotiate the world outside our door."

I contend that there has been a decline in civility in Australia.

How have we come to that point? Australian Liberals believe that there has been, over the last generation at least, a too great an emphasis on teaching young people their rights, to the detriment of teaching them about their responsibilities. A rights-centric understanding of citizenship does not build good citizens of the future. I do not believe that we can improve the education of our children, raise our national productivity, or better care for older Australians by further entrenching the language and culture of rights in our public discourse, to the exclusion of responsibilities^[9].

Regrettably, there is a misconception that liberty equates to licence. Personal liberty and personal self-restraint are bound together. As Liberals, we believe that rights and responsibilities are co-equals.

What are the signs that we have a diminished civility? The modern phenomenon of road rage, ugly parent syndrome; the prevalence of offensive language in a variety of settings; young people not giving up their seat on public transport for the elderly; boorish conduct; schools having to take out apprehended violence orders against students' parents; and intrusive use of technology can all point towards a less than desirable level of civility.

The home and family should be the first and foremost place for the institutionalisation

of civility. Good manners begin at home. But civility and manners must also be institutionalised in the other institutions of our nation. Our schools have a duty, or should have a duty to champion a sense of civility, good manners, tolerance and respect in their students.

I have personally observed how teaching young people basic civility can have a profound influence on their lives.

Years ago, while a university student in Adelaide, I and a group of my friends had part time jobs in an after schools activity centre that operated in one of the poorest areas of the city.

The children came from - in the main single parent families, often with high welfare dependency, often the children had been in trouble and were sent to this centre to keep them occupied after school.

In my first few weeks, the children were literally rounded up by the local police and escorted to the centre – to put it politely - these were troubled children who knew no boundaries - and this made it less likely that they would get into mischief – or worse. We had no training in social welfare or counselling. Yet we found that if we treated them with civility and respect, they responded accordingly. No more police escorts. They came to the centre willingly.

Now, naturally, we cannot legislate to impose civility, but we can, in the everyday decisions we make, develop a culture of it. Governments have a role to play in supporting this development.

In a school setting, it is broadly accepted that students should show respect for their teachers, no matter what age the student.

Indeed, teachers deserve to be more respected in the wider community.

And coupled with a need for greater respect for teachers is the school's obligation to reinforce the teaching of that important facet of civility – good manners. A young child should start to develop a strong appreciation of good manners in the family environment, but schools do have an important role in re-enforcing the teaching of manners.

Recently, we have seen two competing views emerge from the judiciary about whether common values and standards exist. Last year, New South Wales magistrate Pat O'Shane dismissed a case brought against a young person who swore at the police. Magistrate O'Shane opined that: *"I am not sure there is such a thing as community standards anymore"*.

Shortly after, a view - with which I agree - was expressed by the Chief Justice of New South Wales, Justice James Spigelman.

The distinguished Chief Justice made an interesting speech at the opening of the law term dinner to the New South Wales Law Society. *"Australians,"* the Chief Justice said *"have long since accepted the importance of cultural diversity in a tolerant, cohesive and inclusive society"*. But *"we must always remember the overriding importance of those institutions which give cohesion to the whole"*. His Honour spoke of the importance of civility and described it as not only relating *"to matters of etiquette and manners, but as a manifestation of respect for other persons"*. And then perhaps provocatively, the Chief Justice proffered the view that *"criminal behaviour is not the only form of conduct to which a zero tolerance response may be appropriate."*

"In a complex society such as ours," he said, *"relationships of civility, tolerance and trust cannot be established or maintained only on the basis of interpersonal relationships. They must be institutionalised"*.

It hardly needs to be said that there is a growing concern in the community about what is acceptable manifestations of behaviour, particularly in regard to young people, and how we, as the Chief Justice put it, institutionalise civility.

He stated that there does “*appear to be a growing concern with personal conduct in many areas of discourse*” and the loss of civility. As an example, he cites the “*virtual disappearance in common discourse of words such as ‘please’, ‘thank you’*”, as lost civility that should concern us all.

In the United States, former Mayor of New York Rudolph Giuliani embraced what he called the ‘*broken windows theory*’ in establishing a zero tolerance approach to crime fighting.

According to Mayor Giuliani, “*The theory holds that a seemingly minor matter like broken windows in abandoned buildings leads directly to a more serious deterioration of neighbourhoods. Someone who wouldn’t normally throw a rock at an intact building is less reluctant to break a second window in a building that already has one broken. And someone emboldened by all the second broken windows may do even worse damage if he senses that no one is around to prevent lawlessness.*”^[10]

Rudolph Giuliani’s approach to law and order, by having a zero tolerance approach to what might seem the small things, might – as Chief Justice Spigelman seems to suggest - have a wider application in terms of the politics of behaviour. If, as a society, we refuse to accept as a minor matter a lack of civility, then we might go some way to stemming larger problems.

Governments can never replace parents. The responsibility of governments is to assist parents, by re-enforcing what parents want for their child’s futures.

As Liberals, we see the role of schools as creating educational opportunity for future citizens, and complementing the parent’s role, by supporting the creation of a civil society. We see education, as British Tory parliamentarian David Willetts does, as the mechanism for giving everyone and anyone access to our literary and historical tradition^[11]. If our education system is not focused on these objectives, then future generations will have suffered a cultural disinheritance.

Some people might think that it doesn’t matter if children are taught manners and encouraged to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, and apologise when they have wronged another, but if we are to institutionalise civility, we must ensure that schools are re-enforcing community standards, and common values.

I am not advocating a harking back to days gone by. On the contrary, I see the creation of a civilised society as very much a modern, progressive goal.

In terms of contemporary schooling, we have arrived at a point where it is necessary for us to decide what is the proper role for our schools in the future. Whereas once, our schools kept primarily to the task of providing an academic education for future Australians, now schools are faced with a multitude of non-academic functions and roles.

Sections of the community are not living up to their responsibilities and are shifting general responsibility for the upbringing of their children onto schools. Schools and teachers seem to be becoming more and more *in loco parentis*.

The Howard Government's support for values education in schools has as its starting point the fact that parents expect that schools will support them to help students develop basic values, including civility, from an early age. Values education is central to equipping students in Australian classrooms for their world today and for the future.

Values education is integral to all aspects of school life.

The Australian Government is committed to making values a core part of Australian schooling through its Values Education programme. Evidence of good practice is being collected through one of the Values Education programme initiatives.

This evidence indicates that the explicit teaching of values contributes to calmer classrooms, positive relationships between teachers and students, an increase in students' capacity for reflection and self management and it can change teachers' professional practice – in effect, greater civility.

We recognise that school chaplains play a significant role in supporting many students throughout Australia. School chaplains offer valuable guidance to students, support their spiritual wellbeing and can play an important role in offering religious and ethical guidance. The Government has responded to the call that their services be made more widely available to all schools in all states – if they so choose.

Institutionalising civility and respect for others in schools goes beyond our schools placing an emphasis on good manners.

Respect should also be shown by students to the school as an institution itself.

Outwardly, respect for the school can be demonstrated by school students for example through the wearing of a school uniform, with the knowledge that whatever they do while wearing that uniform reflects upon the school, and their fellow students.

Along with having respect for one's self and others, and the school, the institutionalisation of civility means having respect for society's institutions. In the school setting, the playing of the national anthem at school assemblies should be seen as a normal and solemn part of a students' school life.

Respect for the institutions of our nation is fundamental to a civil society. The legislatures and judiciary of this nation should be held in high-esteem. Coupled with this respect, our parliamentarians and judicial officers should exemplify civility.

Not that long ago, Australia had a leader of a political party who lacked basic civility. A man who stated – proudly - that he would teach his young sons to hate those who don't share his political convictions - is a man who does not have the civility to occupy public office. The electorate seemed to share this perspective.

It is one thing to passionately disagree; it is entirely another thing to preach hatred.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are assembled here to celebrate the life and achievements of Sir Robert Menzies. Sir Robert's library is on display at the University of Melbourne's Baillieu Library. We are told that in it is contained a "well-thumbed paperback selection of the writings of Edmund Burke"^[12].

No doubt, in his readings, Sir Robert would have come across a famous quote of Burke's: "*There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-informed mind would be disposed to relish*"^[13].

I am confident that Sir Robert would have approved of this maxim as he was, by all accounts, a model of civility in public life.

I thank the trustees of the Lecture and the Monash University Liberal Club in honouring me with their invitation to deliver tonight's address.

- [1] Menzies, R.G., *Central Power in the Australian Commonwealth*, The University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1967, at 2.
- [2] Menzies, *supra* at 3.
- [3] Nethercote, J.R., *Liberalism and the Australian Federation*, The Federation Press, Leichhardt, 2001, at 173.
- [4] Menzies, R.G., *The Measure of the Years*, Cassell Australia Ltd, North Melbourne, 1970, at 81.
- [5] Nethercote, J.R., *supra*, at 9.
- [6] Billante, N., Saunders, P., 'Six Questions about Civility', The Centre for Independent Studies, Occasional Paper 82, 2002.
- [7] Romans, 13:9
- [8] Frank Field, *The Australian*, 28 February 2006.
- [9] An adapted from Howard, J, *supra*.
- [10] Giuliani, R. W., *Leadership*, Little Brown, London, 2002, at 47.
- [11] Willetts, D., 'Modern Conservatism', *Political Quarterly*, v 63(u) Oct/Dec 1992, 413 at 420.
- [12] Brett, J., *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class*, Cambridge University Press, at 14.
- [13] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*