CONFLICT DIFFUSION: TOWARDS POLITICAL LEGITIMACY AND SOCIAL WHOLENESS

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Charles Taylor (1991) sees 'societal fragmentation' as a problem in modern societies. By his view, fragmentation arises when 'individuals… withdraw from active political participation; preferring to stay at home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life, as long as the government of the day produces the means to these satisfactions and distributes them widely' (Taylor, op cit, p.9). Fragmentation is a problem because it opens the door for what Tocqueville (1981) called 'soft despotism'. Not that tyranny of terror and oppression still common in some developing situations; rather a mild and paternalistic governance that maintains democratic forms like occasional elections, but in fact runs everything as an 'immense tutelary power' over which ordinary folk have little or no control. The only defense against such a power in Tocqueville's view is vigorous political action, but Taylor sees 'the atomism of self absorbed individuals' militating against such action. Most of us are left standing alone before a vast bureaucratic state, feeling powerless. This de-motivates us even further; 'the vicious cycle of soft despotism is joined' (Taylor op cit, p10.).

Fragmentation has been exacerbated in Australia since the early 1970s by the relaxation of immigration regulations. In Pre-World War II Australia, indigenous aborigine people were not permitted to vote and there was a White Australia policy in place that prevented people of Asian, Arab and African ethnicity becoming citizens of the Australian State. Since the change in the rules, significant numbers of people from a great variety of ethnic groupings have now settled in Australia. In the five year period 2001-2006, only 22.8% of immigrants were from traditional bases like the United Kingdom and New Zealand; Chinese made up 9.5% of immigrants, Indians 7.9%, with South Africans, Malaysians, Philippinos, Koreans, Indonesians, Sudanese, Sri Lankans and Vietamese making up the balance (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Non-Caucasian people have tended to form isolated ethnic social groups within the general populace, living to themselves rather than participate in wider political affairs. An exception to the rule is Muslim immigrants, some of whom have been politically aggressive in announcing that they have come to Australia to promote Islamic banking and Sharia law!

Taylor sees the problem with fragmentation (apart from a general loss of freedom) is that:

'People become increasingly less capable of forming a common purpose and carrying it out. Some people may feel linked to others via a common project but such groups tend to remain partial groupings rather than society as a whole. And the more people put their political energy into promoting the objectives of partial groupings, the less possible it is for them to mobilize democratic majorities around commonly understood programs and policies. A sense grows that the electorate as a whole is defenseless against the leviathan state. A well organized… partial grouping may…be able to make a dent but the idea that a majority of people might frame and carry through a common project comes to be seen as utopian and naïve', (Taylor op cit, p.112).

In other words, it is common in modern states for people to give up trying; political action seems a waste of time and effort.

RIGHTS

Taylor sees a fragmented society leading to politics 'taking on a different mould' (ibid, p.113). In particular, defending the rights of people deemed to be suffering discrimination becomes a principal focus, and this leads to shifts in the nature and site of political action. One result is that decision making tends to move from the parliament to the courts. Rather than the courts dispensing justice on the ground of legislation, the courts make decisions according to the constitution and legislators pass legislation that enshrines judicial decisions. A second result is the rise of single issue campaigns by advocacy groups that 'work fiercely for their favoured cause' (Taylor, op cit, p.115). The abortion debate as a case in point; in the United States of America the battle was essentially judicial but it was backed by 'lobbying, mobilizing mass opinion and selective intervention in election campaigns for or against targeted candidates' (ibid, p.115).

The rise of advocacy groups results in a lot of activity around isolated causes rather than the formation of democratic majorities around meaningful programs that can be carried to completion. In fact, in a fragmented society, the latter seems, and probably is, no longer possible. Politics becomes the domain of extremist groups that want to change the world. And it is a 'winner takes all' agenda; when one side wins the other side loses. The abortion issue is again a classical case. Whose rights are more important: the rights of mothers or the rights of the unborn child? Such issues are in reality dilemmas; there is no 'right answer', just open warfare to determine whose

position will win the day. The effect of this in reinforcing social fragmentation is evident. In our time, the great bulk of the general citizenry finds it increasingly difficult to identify with a society which has no specific character and unified belief system. National identity has becoming nebulous.

The question remains: Is there any action we can take to restore societal wholeness and get a genuine democracy back on track? Taylor sees the decentralization of governance as one policy initiative that has potential to break down the power of a centralized bureaucracy. But policies aimed at decentralizing governance, 'although compelling and popular in the abstract tends to carry the seeds of their own contradictions' (Weiler 1990). Christopher (2011) has provided a current concrete example.

POLITICIANS

So far we have focused the impact of fragmentation as a malaise experienced by an atomistic populace. Now we must ask how it affects the agency of our elected representatives.

Firstly, the sheer force of political activism has caused political parties to move away from their traditional agendas, in some cases substantially. The Labour Party in Australia is a case in point. Far from being an homogenous reference group[1] sharing common values, the 2011 Labour Party Parliamentary Caucus has a 'left wing' and a 'right wing' and everything in between. Partly this is due to the penetration of pressure groups into the party and partly it is due to the party's attempts to be seen as conformable with what it sees to be dominant public opinion. Policy is in a state of constant flux, the Party's allegiance moves with the public debate. The Party leadership has a full time job achieving a consensual position on just about everything, and this leaves traditional Labour supporters in confusion and disarray. They are unhappy with where their politicians are taking them but unwilling to vote for *the bourgeoisie*.

A second change over the past several decades has been that 'normal governmental matters' like international diplomacy and trade, law and order, public amenities and welfare services are no longer matters that feature strongly in the public debate. Rather, the matters focused in the public arena by politicians working together with the media are the controversial issues: abortion, euthanasia, same sex marriage and the environment. Politicians spend their time treading warily through a political mine field of pressure group interests which they are powerless to control; yet by 'playing the game' they inevitably contribute to the long life of such issues in the public debate.

A third change, which exacerbates the above problems in Australia, is that politicians are no longer people who have spent half a life time demonstrating their competence in the work place. Most Australian parliamentarians these days are career politicians, people who, on completion of a three year political science degree course have attached themselves to a sitting member as a press aid and within a short time gotten themselves nominated for a seat in the parliament. Very few politicians have had any business training let alone run a business successfully, yet they find this no hindrance to taking on the job of managing a national economy. Their argument is that the economy is run by the technocrats in the public service but we, the populace, are not encouraged by such an admission – who are these unelected bureaucrats who are making crucial decisions that massively affect our lives?

POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY

We recognize genius when complexity is reduced to a universal principal and a cacophony of argument is silenced by one precise statement. Newton's $F=ma$ and Einstein's $e=mc^2$ are cases in point. In his paper on redistributive governance in education, Hans Weiler (op cit) argues that the whole of **political science** may be understood in terms of **legitimacy** and **conflict diffusion**.

The relationship between the two factors can be understood this way: Re-election is a crucial issue for politicians; much of what they do is directed towards ensuring that they retain their seat in the parliament. And they understand that to be re-elected they must 'build **legitimacy**', i.e. convince the electorate that they are a person that can be trusted to make the right decisions for our general welfare. And the best way to do this, according to Weiler, 'is to demonstrate competence in **conflict diffusion**'.

For instance, if it is discovered that 17% of Year 7 school students are not competent in basic literacy and numeracy we can be sure that this fact will find its way into the daily press and electronic media. And we can be equally certain that the Minister of Education will be interviewed. The question is: how should an astute politician respond in such a situation? One response would be to become defensive. The Minister may say: "Look, we have hard working teachers and they are doing the best. You have to understand that some students have difficult situations at home that cause them to not do well at school; you cannot expect teachers to compensate for that". If this is the reply, the media can be guaranteed to pursue the story tenaciously, interviewing parents and officers from the Education Department, asking questions about the

curriculum - whether there is a need for special courses for those not doing well, etc. The story will have a long run and the Minister of Education will spend much time addressing it. In particular the Minister will look like someone who has lost control.

Far better it is for the Minister to say, in the first place: "The Government takes this matter very seriously; I share your concerns. This morning I have asked Professor X (a well known and respected person in the community) and several other people (senior education specialists) to conduct an investigation into the matter. I have asked the committee to indicate what steps need to be taken to improve the situation". In the normal course of events the media will lose interest in the matter right there. The committee will meet for eighteen months; they will present their leather bound report to the Minister but by that time the media and the general populace will have long since forgotten the purpose of the investigation. In Weiler's view, a politician who practices this kind of **conflict diffusion** will survive and one who promotes social division by being confrontational will not. Is there empirical evidence for this?

"WORK CHOICES"

John Howard, as leader of the Liberal National Party Coalition, was Prime Minister of Australia from 1996 to 2007. For most of that time he did not have a majority in the Upper House but he was successful in getting a whole range of legislation through the parliament, including a much debated GST, i.e. a Goods and Services Tax, not a General Sales Tax but a heavily disguised VAT[2].

In the 2004 election Howard's party won a majority in both houses and Howard decided that his popularity was sufficient for him to introduce a policy that would disadvantage his long time enemy the Trade Union Movement. "Work Choices" legislation empowered employees to contract with employers unilaterally, i.e. without Trade Union involvement or interference, and to put in place work place arrangements that substantially eroded hard won employment conditions that Unions held to be sacrosanct. The Act was clearly confrontational and the strong back lash that occurred was predictable. Howard not only lost the 2007 electorate but his own seat, a "blue ribbon" Liberal seat that he had held for over 30 years.

CURRENT ISSUES

The current Australian Labour Party Government that took power in 2007 has distinguished itself by demonstrating considerable incompetence. Taking its cue from Taylor (op cit), to keep the atomized electorate happy while it was attending to more important matters like reversing the work place relations law, it introduced a range of hand-out policies: lap top computers for all school children, free ceiling insulation for domestic houses, billions of dollars for school special building programs, etc. Unfortunately, its management of these programs did not match its political good will – the lap top program foundered, several people were electrocuted installing "pink bats" and a number of building contractors in league with State government officials were shown to have drastically overcharged for their services when constructing new school buildings. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd tried desperately to establish himself as a world leader in the Global Warming debate; he took one hundred and forty politicians, public servants and scientific advisers with him to the Copenhagen Conference in late 2009 but was unsuccessful in convincing the rest of the world as to the legitimacy of his case. The sum of these "failures" saw the Labour Party's popularity drop from 66% to a percentage in the low 30s. Rudd's parliamentary colleagues sacked him as leader and installed Julia Gillard as Prime Minster in his stead just before the end of the electoral term. Kevin Rudd's history suggests that the Australian electorate might not be so easily seduced by hand outs as Taylor's analysis might suggest (see above).

In fact, administrative incompetence and extravagant spending (the Government was borrowing $100 million every day) had alienated a sizeable number of traditional Labour voters from the Labour Party and the 2010 election saw the Party lose considerable ground. When the votes were counted the Liberal/National Coalition had one more seat than Labour in the House of Representatives but Julia Gillard's government survived with support from the first Green Party member to win a seat in the lower house and a small group of Independents. In the Upper House, the number of Green Party Senators had risen sharply due to Labour voters moving sideways to show their general dissatisfaction with what they saw to be Labour acting outside of traditional Labour values. The Greens now held the balance of power in the Senate and had a crucial vote in the Lower House. Julia Gillard's minority government hung by a thread but she survived, for the time being at least, by doing everything she could to maintain Green support.

Now the Green Party in Australia began as an aggressive environmental lobby group. Senator Bob Brown, a Tasmanian and the Green's parliamentary leader made a name for himself in the successful opposition to the Franklin River Dam. But along the way the Greens have picked up many fellow travelers who saw that an alliance with the Greens

gave them an opportunity to push their favoured agendas. The Greens are now the main voice in Australia for social change: abortion on demand, euthanasia, same-sex marriages along with action to reduce the impact of Climate Change.

Before the 2010 election Julia Gillard gave solemn promise that a carbon tax would not be introduced by any government she led; after the election and the dust had settled, Julia Gillard announced that she would be introducing a carbon tax – obviously a condition of the Green support she now desperately needed. To soften the blow, the Labour Party machine worked hard to produce a policy whereby only "the big polluters", especially operators of coal burning power plants, would pay. A tax on fuel for private use would be exempt and householders would receive a hand-out to cover the increased cost of domestic power bills. The back lash was considerable, not only from the Coalition but from science "skeptics" and the great bulk of the population who, while they were unsure that carbon dioxide, a tasteless, ordourless and colourless gas had any effect on climate, they did understood that unilateral action by the Australian Government would drastically disadvantage Australian export businesses, cause job losses in coal mining districts and probably do little or nothing for the environment. The announcement that a tax on carbon emissions would be introduced saw the Government's support, and Julia Gillard's popularity as preferred prime Minister drop to under 30%. The polls were unanimous: if there was an election, Labour would lose by a land slide.

Labour, together with the Greens, has the numbers in the parliament to pass carbon tax legislation; they can seize the opportunity to push their agenda. But, if Weiler's hypothesis is correct, they should understand that by doing so they are creating conflict rather than diffusing it and greatly increasing the risk of an electoral backlash at the next elections. Weiler's position would further argue that Julia Gillard's only survival option would be to take a step backwards and make the following statement:

"The Government believes that action on Climate Change is essential for the on-going welfare of the planet but it is clear that many Australian's do not as yet share this view. We are going to delay the introduction of a carbon tax for the time being and encourage the widest possible debate on the issue at a scientific level and at the policy level. The change to a Green technology is possibly the biggest social change we have every faced and it is important that we all agree and move forward together"

Such a statement would legitimate her as committed to fairness and social wholeness. Her poll rating could be predicted to rise dramatically.

Regrettably, on the evidence, Julia Gillard and Labour cannot be expected to make such a statement. The Greens would certainly oppose it vigorously because they are bent on radical change which would see all coal burning power stations closed down and 'Tasmania become one huge National Park with predominantly retirees resident in its towns'[3].

CLIMATE CHANGE: RELEVANT POLITICAL ACTION

In 2008, the eminent sociologist and Labour peer, Anthony Giddens, proposed a number of 'National Responses' to the Challenge of Global Warming. These were published by the London based Policy Network[4] in a Policy Network Paper entitled "The Politics of Climate Change" (Giddens 2008). The stated objective of the paper was 'to think about the challenges of climate change in a specifically political context' (ibid, Preface).

A superficial reading of the document would convey the impression that the author supports the 'green' lobbyist's position but closer examination reveals that it is a masterly project that has the power to diffuse the conflict evident in the Climate debate. For instance, the title is clearly phrased to ensure that Green lobbyists, who argue that 'the science is settled', do not reject the project outright but feel secure enough to "get on board". But the back ground statements put forward a number of propositions for discussion that would encourage Climate deniers that Gidden's project might at last give them a forum in which they will be heard. These statements are of a brilliantly conflict diffusing kind and worth quoting in some detail. (Note the specifically conflict diffusing statements which I have highlighted in italics, and note Gidden's comprehensive inclusion of matters that need to be addressed and resolved):

'Public discussion of climate change tends to be partial and disparate. Loosely connected debates hinge on: the evidence that climate change is occurring and on estimates of its potential impact; the prospects for agreement on an international economic framework… (like), for instance, carbon trading; futurology surrounding the potential for technological innovation that could solve the problem; and, scenario building that emphasises the necessity for dramatic lifestyle changes. But *the debate is limited in scope and too compartmentalized.* To truly come to terms with the increasingly urgent need for mitigation and adoption requires a broad policy perspective, because the impact of climate change (ideology)

challenges every corner of the 21st Century state. This (paper) aims to offer an *integrated platform* from which to analyse and respond to the political challenges of climate change' (Giddens, op cit).

The Preface continues its persuasive work by moving subtly from being 'a project' to 'a study' which will address four main political challenges (italics also added for emphasis):

1. The Management of Risk

'The prevailing scientific consensus… is periodically questioned. How in these circumstances can democracies construct a prudent… policy agenda to manage the risks, whilst also *building consensus* around the agenda?'

2. A Return to Planning

Actually Giddens is calling for a re-opening of the discussion but he is again non-confrontational in appearing to accept the climate change position. His purpose here is to make a clear statement as to what the issues for political decision making and governance are, e.g.: 'What new forms of interventionism would be the most expedient; how can the climate change dimension be built into every aspect of public policy; how can market-orientated approaches be balanced with state-centric ones…, carbon pricing, the role of regulation, energy efficiency, transport and land use, the promotion of specific technological innovation by government and lifestyle and behavioural changes?'

3. Creating a Political and Public Consensus for Action

This statement is clear evidence of Gidden's conflict diffusion agenda.

4. The Implications of Social Justice

The question is put: 'The social and economic costs of climate change will be large. How can we ensure that the impact of policies… are received as equitable by key groups in society and do not penalize the less fortunate?' (The reference to 'key groups in society' assures us that Giddens recognises *fragmentation* to be a problem in the modern state).

The body of Gidden's paper deals with the above matters in detail and is worth reading in full if we are seriously interested in adopting a conflict diffusion strategy. Suffice to say, that Giddens demonstrates how a complex and potentially divisive agenda can be managed at the policy level, how consensus may be found and a nation embrace

drastic behavioural changes *in a state of political wholeness*. In Taylor's words: how 'a majority may carry a common project through to a conclusion'.

CAN THIS WORK?

In 2009 I showed the Giddens' paper to several key climate change deniers. They were not interested at that time; they were convinced that they could 'fight this thing' and win with good scientific argument. Two years later they are beginning to accept the inevitable – unless there is some miraculous intervention, Julia Gillard will get her carbon tax through the Australian parliament and Australia will enter a Dark Age when cheap power will not be available and food will becomes short - perhaps desperately short (Potter, 2010).

Julia Gillard will press on with her project because she has to satisfy the Green agenda to stay in power and because she is optimistic in believing that two years will be a long enough time for people to get used to the new economic order, in the same way as they became used to Howard's GST. She is a "self actualiser", hard tasks for her are the opportunity to show how good she is. She forgets or perhaps does not know that 'after self actualisation there is nothing more to live for' (Maslow 1954). And she may find that the Australian public is not as naïve as she might think them and have longer memories than she gives them credit for. According to Weiler, she is in desperate need of a legitimate conflict diffusion strategy. Giddens provides a brilliant "ready made" way forward. It will be a pity if the current Australian Government and the Opposition do not together agree to adopt his project. If they did so the confrontational Greens would be silenced and the Australian State would be helped to regain a unified character and identity.

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NOTES

[1]see Homans (1965)

[2]The introduction of the GST saw Australian's paying an extra 10% on all goods and services except fresh food. It was a considerable imposition but it had the effect of eliminating Australia's financial debt and provided the Federated States with considerable income to local upgrade services.

[3]A proposal put forward as a genuine option in an Australian Broadcasting Program "Q&A", Monday 25th July 2011. What the retirees would eat was not considered let alone explained.

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