
FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Kevin Rudd might have learned a thing or two from Louis XIV. *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648-1815* is a magisterial new history by Tim Blanning, Professor of Modern European History at the University of Cambridge. In *The Pursuit of Glory*, Blanning examines how the ‘Sun King’ attempted to control and regulate every aspect of his nation’s political, intellectual, and cultural life.

Under Louis XIV (1643–1715) public discussion and enquiry, in what Blanning calls the ‘public space’, was first co-opted, and then subordinated to the service of the ruler. The public discussion and enquiry that did take place was either funded or licensed by the government. Those that engaged in public debate invariably relied upon the largesse of government for their livelihood.

Blanning contrasts the condition of France with that which prevailed across the Channel. ‘In England just the reverse situation obtained. So large and rich was the expanding public sphere and so limited was state patronage that intellectuals were driven to the market by both opportunity and necessity.’ It was during this period that Defoe, Swift, Pope, Richardson and Hogarth flourished. ‘Although not every English intellectual was independent, for royal, ecclesiastical and academic patronage did exist and could be important, London’s unique combination of size, wealth, literacy and relatively liberal censorship created a special culture whose libertarian character was recognised by contemporaries.’

France and England both established key cultural and scientific institutions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In France there was an Academy of Sciences (1666), a Royal Academy of Poetry and Music (1669), and a Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture (1648). In England there was a Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge (1666), a Royal Academy of Musick (1719), and a Royal Academy of Arts (1768). But:

in each case the initiative for the creation of these institutions was private in England but royal in France... The English equivalents came about in haphazard fashion according to the whim of private individuals.

In England the Royal Academy of Musick was a joint-stock company intended to run at a profit for its shareholders, while the Royal Academy of Arts ran its exhibitions at a surplus and didn’t require a state subsidy. The consequences of the ‘public space’ being under government control in France are obvious. There was no diversity of opinion and no competition of ideas. Compared to Britain at the same time, intellectual life in France under the Sun King was barren. The political idea that emerged from seventeenth century England was liberalism. The political idea that emerged from seventeenth century France was absolutism.

In France, the creativity and ingenuity of most of its artists and craftsmen was devoted to a single project—Versailles. For the French aristocracy, attendance at Versailles was compulsory—and there, in Blanning’s terms, it was ‘emasculated’ and then subjected to the ‘political and social control’ of the King.

In Australia the election of the Rudd government has been heralded as initiating an ‘intellectual and cultural’ renaissance for the country’s elites (*The Age*, 29 March 2008). It is a renaissance that is of course government-funded, and government-run. The highlight of the renaissance is the Australia 2020 summit. The 1000 of the country’s ‘best and brightest’ handpicked by the Rudd government know that Canberra is not Versailles, and Australia in 2008 is not the France of the *ancien regime*.

But those with a historical awareness should be wary. For as Blanning writes, at Versailles while an aristocrat might have enjoyed their dancing, gambling, and gossiping ‘so heavy was the hand of the state that even the most pampered beneficiary could see he was in a cage, however gilded the bars.’

(The Institute of Public Affairs is an independent, free market think tank—the IPA was not invited by the Rudd government to participate in the Australia 2020 summit. *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648-1815* will be reviewed in next edition of the *IPA Review*.)

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The last summit held at Versailles ended badly when Louis XVI was guillotined.