

From the Editor

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POLITICS is a prime method of handling conflict. Unfortunately, since politics is about the application of the coercive power of the state, either directly (through law and regulation) or indirectly (through the disposal of the receipts of taxation), putting something into the political arena also makes it more likely to be the subject of conflict. The pooling of resources and benefits without any automatic connection between the two encourages people to seek benefits while passing costs onto others. Political speech is thus often uncivil speech, as one elevates one's own moral claims, and denigrates others', so as to make the best claim on pooled resources.

This is typically quite different from what happens in marketplaces and in the networks of civil society, where decentralized decisions allow diversity; allow people to seek their own niches and solutions. Markets and communities tend to require much more reciprocity—and so more mutual respect and much less free-riding.

It is also quite the reverse of how matters are often put. A whole mythology has been built up about how political decision-making is the best form of social decision-making. Indeed, many people talk about 'social' and 'society' when they actually mean 'politics' and 'political'; as if 'politics' and 'society' were identical realms, instead of one being a very particular subset of the other—indeed, a subset of very limited virtues and of major disadvantages. Market exchanges and community connections are every bit as 'social' as political decisions, and often a far superior way to deal with matters.

Why this overweening inflation of the political?

The general appeal of free-riding and evasion of responsibility is one



reason. Vested interests also have a major role.

A central theme of modern politics is the clash between the values and perspectives of the private-sector middle class—a class which gains its income through daily acts of consent in the market-place—and those of the public-sector middle class—a class whose income comes from annual acts of coercion. The public-sector middle class has major advantages in framing political debates:

- it is much more directly concerned with them—politics is its business, provides its income and furnishes its career opportunities;
- it dominates the 'ideas professions', a domination greatly aided by the fact that political journalists are functionally members of the public-sector middle class—the elevation of politics is also self-elevation and they typically have little or no experience outside journalism and the public education system. The ABC—workers' collective and voice of the public-sector middle class—epitomises this; and
- its social position typically involves selling evasion of personal responsibility, a siren song that has obvious attractions. Indeed, this is why a politicizing age naturally becomes the age of the 'victim' and

'the culture of complaint'—alleged incapacity provides the rationale for political action, that is action without reciprocity.

Lastly, all politicians have a natural interest in the elevation of the political. Serious scepticism about the value of political mechanisms is not so much a hard sell, as an uncongenial and unnatural message for political animals.

The public-sector middle class also has significant disadvantages:

- no class is monolithic. We all have many diverse experiences and roles and the public-sector middle class itself seeks the benefits of market exchange and civil society—and the better-adjusted as individuals they are, the more they are likely to seek such. The reality of individualism confuses and softens class conflicts;
- members of the public-sector middle class frequently display a patronizing and 'colonizing' attitude to the rest of society. So many of its activist members clearly see themselves as bringing 'social justice' (defined according to the prevailing fashion) to 'the lesser breeds who know not the Law'—also known as their fellow Australians—that a certain capacity to set people's teeth on edge blunts their appeal; and
- what they are purveying so often simply does not work. They seek to have politics do far more than it is capable of effectively performing. In the end, this is the most crippling disadvantage of all. Unfortunately, they can do a lot of damage before it finally becomes clear that they are selling a series of dead ends.

Pointing out that what they are doing is both damaging and ineffective is often thankless work—you are destroying people's illusions—but a necessary part of the defence of freedom.

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