



On the Waterfront ...

DAMNED RORTS AND GOD'S REFORMS: THE LANGUAGE OF THE DOCKS DISPUTE

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Canberra's suburbs are named after important politicians: Pearce, Fadden and Menzies, for example. In the early seventies, Les Murray (1994:93) wrote a poem in which he imagined Canberra suburbs named instead after the ideas which had shaped Australia.

I shall play a set of tennis
In the gardens of Red Menace
Shall I scorn to plant a dahlia
In the soil of White Australia?

If the current federal Government were to take up this notion, there is little doubt a new suburb called Waterfront Reform would soon spring into being. The waterfront dispute has been the most bitter industrial confrontation since at least the pilots' strike in 1989, and probably since the South East Queensland Electricity Board dispute in 1985. We have seen mass sackings, angry confrontations on the wharves, extraordinarily intemperate language from public figures, and a bewildering tangle of litigation.

At the time of writing, the wharfies appear to have won, although their victory may turn out to be hollow. Despite this, the Government and its

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allies, which include Patrick stevedores and the National Farmers Federation, have experienced major setbacks, both in courts of law and the court of public opinion. Despite this, they are determined to push ahead. "We have not changed our resolve to go forward and reform the waterfront," says the chairman of Patrick, Chris Corrigan (*The Age*, April 24 1998). "Court decisions come and go, but the Government's determination to reform the Australian waterfront will remain undiminished," says the Prime Minister, John Howard (*The Age*, April 24 1998). "Waterfront reform has overwhelming public support," and indeed is "inevitable," (*The Australian*, April 27 1998) says workplace relations minister, Peter Reith. But what exactly do they all mean when they talk of 'reform'?

The argument is based on the principles of free market economics, and runs something like this: the Maritime Union of Australia is a monopoly supplier of labour to the stevedoring industry; all monopolies are bad, but this one is especially bad because of a deep-rooted workplace culture of greed, obstruction and thuggery; the result of the MUA's intransigence is a slow, costly and unreliable waterfront which adds to the cost of Australia's imports and exports.

In a radio interview, the Prime Minister defined waterfront reform in these terms: "This is not a debate about ideology. This is [a] debate about Australia's economic future ... my Government will do everything it can to deliver the most productive, competitive, and successful waterfront in the years ahead" (*The Australian*, April 28 1998).

These are the key words: productivity, competitiveness, and success - that is, economic success. The inference is that these are aims of indisputable worth. Judging from the results of opinion polls, most of us agree. The judges of the Federal Court certainly do. In announcing the Court's decision to turn down Patrick's appeal against the order to reinstate the sacked wharfies, Justice Wilcox said: "As individuals, each member of the bench, like all sensible Australians, is in favour of a more efficient waterfront" (Judgement of the Federal Court, April 23 1998).

The dark side, in the Government's scheme of things, is unionised labour, and again there are three key terms used: ports, overmanning - also described as 'bludging' - and inefficiency. The use of 'port' here is

interesting. 'Rort' is an Australian word, not found anywhere else in the world that I am aware of. Like much of the Australian vernacular, it is derived from 19th century English slang. To speak of 'a rorty time' a century ago meant an enjoyable time, a day out. A rort came to mean a rowdy and drunken party, and later an underhand scheme, a racket. It is a good Australian word. Like 'bludger', it appeals to the Australian heartland, the 'battlers' who the conservative parties so energetically wooed during the last federal election.

The language is perfect. Asked whether we support 'reforms' which will end 'bludging' and 'rorting', few of us could say no. But does this apparent consensus entitle the Government to label its efficiency drive as 'reform'?

The waterfront dispute is just the latest example of an economic change which is described as reform. We have seen 'telecommunications reform,' 'banking sector reform,' 'public service reform,' and many other 'reforms' which, to be cynical, seem mostly to involve sacking people and closing offices in country towns. So persistently have the advocates of these changes hammered away with the word 'reform' that it has become a fixed part of the debate. Journalists who are reporting in an otherwise even-handed and impartial manner will talk of 'reform' as an agreed basis for debate. It has entered the strange lexicon of headlines: 'Defiant minister will press on for reform' (*The Age*, April 24 1998). The word 'reform' is even used by those who are critical of the process. In a front page lead story the Melbourne *Age* revealed an alarming decline in the quality of the Victorian health care system. The first paragraph read: "The quality of care in public hospitals has deteriorated as a result of State Government health reforms ..." (*The Age*, 12 May 1998).

This careless and indiscriminate use of the word is unfortunate. Reform is a loaded word, one which carries with it a veritable shipping container of historic and emotional associations. While dictionaries do list relatively neutral definitions of 'reform', meaning an improvement or rectification to something faulty or inefficient, in general usage it carries strong moral overtones. It is a word which harks back to the Reformation, the great religious movement which attacked the scandalous abuses and corruption of the late Mediæval popes, and which

eventually gave rise to the Protestant and Reformed Churches. More strongly, it revives the memory of the great Reform Movement of Britain in the 19th century, and in particular the Reform Acts of 1832, 1867 and 1884, which extended the right to vote to wider and wider sections of society. Other important reforms were the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, improvements in the legal status of women, universal elementary education, and the end of child labour.

The driving forces behind such reforms were moral and religious, not economic. Indeed, these changes were vigorously resisted by many conservative interests of the day. They argued that reform was a ticket to economic ruin, and the thin edge of the revolutionary wedge. Charles Dickens satirised this resistance in his novel *Hard Times*, which is set in a fictional northern industrial town, Coketown. Dickens (1984:145) wrote of Coketown that, despite its imposing grimy brick buildings, it was a wonder that it existed at all:

It had been ruined so often that it was amazing it had borne so many shocks. Surely there was never such fragile china ware as that of which the millers of Coketown were made. Handle them never so lightly, and they fell to pieces . . . They were ruined, when they were required to send labouring children to school; they were ruined when inspectors were appointed to look into their works; they were ruined when such inspectors considered it doubtful whether they were quite justified in chopping people up in their machinery; they were utterly undone when it was hinted that perhaps they need not always make quite so much smoke.

The reformers believed that society was faced with a simple choice. Either it could reform, and create a more just, equitable and moral society, or it would face bloody revolution. In the words of Shelley: "Choose reform or civil war."

The nineteenth century was an age which believed strongly in moral uplift and the improvement of society. This aspiration was symbolically reflected in the soaring cathedrals they built in the Gothic Revival style. It was also an age of humbug, of course. Being human, the reformers had failings. They could be sanctimonious, pompous, and hypocritical at times. As one wit observed, "All Reformers, however strict their social

conscience, live in houses just as big as they can pay for" (Smith 1931). Even so, it was period of lasting achievement, one which created many social institutions which have made great contributions to society: the independent press, sporting clubs, the civilian police force, state education, free hospitals. Oh yes, and trade unions.

Back to the twentieth century, and to the pickets blocking port gates from Fremantle to Botany Bay. At the height of the dispute, the Productivity Commission released two reports which supported some of what the Federal Government and Patrick had been arguing. The reports argued that there were restrictive and inflexible work practices on the waterfront which raised costs. The reports also blamed poor management by stevedoring companies, high government taxes, and inefficient quarantine and customs services.

Mind you, this is not the end of the argument. The Melbourne *Herald Sun* described the work of the Productivity Commission as "a damning report showing Australian dock operations to be among the world's most inefficient." But three paragraphs later, clearly struggling with the subtlety of it all, the article said that "a rival report by Drewry Shipping Consultants has found Australian port operations are close to the world's best" (*Herald Sun* April 28 1998).

But let us accept, for the moment, that the federal Government is right. Let's accept that the MUA is the problem, and that Patrick's actions in dismissing its entire workforce could indeed have been a step towards significantly improving waterfront productivity. This result would be good for many people. It would allow stevedoring companies and those involved in the import and export trades to increase their profits. Perhaps they could then employ more people, and invest in new areas of business.

But it would not in any way improve the moral and spiritual life of the Australian community. To the contrary, it could do a great deal of harm. As parents are constantly reminded, it is what you do, rather than what you say, which teaches children how to behave. And the lesson which everyone in the community, including our children, would take from the success of the Government's waterfront strategy is this: that secrecy, legal trickery, deceit, and brute force are permissible means to achieve

economic gain. This, surely, is not something which can legitimately be called 'reform'.

References

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