
OPINION

Dicing with responsibility

Victoria has experienced a cultural revolution in the last five years. We have witnessed a fundamental shift in values; a shift categorised by the Kennett Government's propensity to see every issue in purely economic terms. Those issues which cannot be analysed in balance sheet terms are simply unimportant. Responsibility for providing basic democratic rights is either abandoned by the Government or shifted onto the community sector.

The monstrous casino dominating Melbourne's skyline is an all-too obvious symbol of how Victoria is dominated by the values of financial gain, while sections of the community get lost beneath the hype. The Kennett Government, while happily pocketing its share of casino revenue (integral to its claimed success in getting Victoria on the road to economic recovery) is less keen to take responsibility for other Casino fall-out: the enormously damaging effects on social and family life, gambling addictions, potential increases in crime and the adverse impact on small business, not to mention questions raised in relation to the awarding of the casino contract in the first place. The Government defunded the Victorian Council on Problem Gambling and the burden of response devolves by default on the community sector.

The sell-off of public utilities over the past five years is another example of how Victorians are living not so much in a participatory democracy as in a free market, where traditional democratic rights to participate, albeit indirectly, in management of public resources are replaced by the notion of consumer rights. Despite the rhetoric of competition and lower prices, privatisation of the electricity industry brings no clear benefits to domestic users who, in paying higher prices in the lead-up to the restructuring, effectively underwrite the reformed system for the benefit of big industrial and commercial users.

Accompanying the sense of loss of social responsibility to its constituents is the Kennett Government's apparent disdain for open and accountable government. State government inroads on accountability principles reached new heights in the unprecedented stripping of the Auditor-General's powers to conduct audits directly, and make public sector auditing open to a tendering process in which the private sector and Audit Victoria, an auditing body within the Department of Treasury and Finance, will compete. In the name of the National Competition Policy, and under the guise of 'enhancing the independence of the auditor general', the legislation removes all auditors from the Auditor-General's office. This leaves the office incapable of conducting audits and acting merely as a contract administrator overseeing the tendering process with no independent investigatory powers. This has prompted concern from well-attended public meetings as well as from the professional accounting bodies and the legal profession.

In a similar vein are proposals to amend freedom of information legislation to remove the right of appeal to the public forum of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal and replace it with private review of complaints by an Ombudsman (possibly as independent and effective as the restructured Auditor-General). FoI legislation has been extensively

used by the State opposition to obtain information about, among other things, the Casino, financial management at Victoria Legal Aid, and the privatisation of part of the State Electricity Commission. The proposed changes are part of a disturbing shift in government culture away from any willingness to support the existence of independent 'watchdogs' to enhance government legitimacy, to a position where legitimacy — or in the Premier's terminology, 'mandate' — derives solely from the fact of being elected, regardless of what happens while in power. We wonder whether this philosophical shift is a preview of developments in other States.

In another area of shrinking government responsibility, Commonwealth funding cuts to the already overstretched Victoria Legal Aid and severely capped funding guidelines imposed in line with State government policy have resulted in VLA seeking to shift responsibility for arranging legal representation to Victorian courts. This has resulted in the Victorian Court of Criminal Appeal's recent request to the criminal bar to act for free for almost half of the litigants before the Court. With funding cuts to Community Legal Centres also threatened, these sources of advice and advocacy will be heavily reliant on volunteers.

Unwillingness to acknowledge responsibility in the areas of rights and community welfare is echoed at the federal level in the lack of response to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) report on the Stolen Generation. While the need for responses from individual Australians and from institutions implicated in the separation of Aboriginal children from their families cannot be overstated, the issue is one which cannot be fully addressed until the Federal Government responds in a meaningful way.

Continuing reductions to the HREOC budget and the Federal Government's decision to restructure the Commission, and, significantly, rename it as the 'Human Rights and Responsibility Commission' neatly encapsulate the Government's position on social responsibility. Federal Attorney-General, Daryl Williams has reminded us that 'Making people aware of their responsibilities when it comes to human rights' is as important as protecting them from human rights violations. So it's the *people* who are the problem?

Our original idea as editors for this issue's theme was 'Rights and Responsibility' — human and civil rights, government responsibility and accountability. The turning on its head of this idea of responsibility in the renaming of HREOC demonstrates more effectively than we could articulate the importance of holding on to these notions. The mobilisation of the Australian community, including sectors that have traditionally been less willing to criticise conservative governments, is a hopeful sign that while prepared to take a share of responsibility for community welfare, it will not tolerate government shirking its side of the bargain for too long.

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