Appendix II:
Civil Identity and the Anglosphere in Australia

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The Hudson Institute in the United States has recently been considering setting up a unit to study what it calls the "Anglosphere", an idea explored by the writer James Bennett. The Anglosphere refers to something common to all of those countries which were strongly influenced by the British. It assumes that such countries share some elements of a common morality. They speak the same language, of course, but this intercommunicability extends beyond mere vocabulary to the terms of mutual understanding. On Bennett's view, this leads to societies in which a high level of trust is possible between people not directly known to each other, and to a consequent richness of social and economic initiative.

The notion of an Anglosphere is clearly an exercise in self-identification, and it raises the question of what it is and how we might explain it. English historical evolution would clearly be important. It might well be taken as a form of social capital, but is not to be identified with what political scientists called "political culture"; it is more fundamental than that.

The English language has become global, and the kind of civic identity which has given Anglophone countries their enviable power and stability has also been widely copied, but it is harder to acquire a culture than learn a language. Australians have had the good fortune to inherit it, but as we shall see, this kind of civil identity is subject to continual change. In order to explain what I take its character to be, I must first make some remarks about the – alas – all too fashionable idea of identity.

1.   History as the key to identity

We must begin by throwing overboard the journalistic idea of identity as whatever a nation, or a person, wakes up one morning and decides to be. A lot of what people say about their own identity is the source of dangerous illusions. The kind of geographical fundamentalism that leads publicists to say that Australia is an Asian nation, or Britain essentially European, for example, merely responds to a political anxiety taking the form of a fear of isolation from neighbours. The odd thing is how prevalent this kind of anxiety has become in a world in which modern transport has rendered mere closeness of decreasing importance.

What we should expect from an opinion about identity is some light on the springs of action that reveal the character of someone. This means that the current vogue for imagining that one can "reinvent" oneself merely reveals a shallow grip on reality, as if people actually were what they imagine themselves to be on New Year's Day.

In happier times, of course, people took their identities for granted, unless they were unfortunates suffering from what psychiatrists call an "identity crisis". This happy innocence was lost as identity became a political issue during the ideological frenzies of the last two centuries. Enthusiasts conceived the notion that it was possible by a revolution to seize the levers of power and transform the character of entire peoples. Communists tried making over whole societies into what they imagined were perfect communities, and the Nazis tried to create a racially pure state. Perhaps the most absurd example of this national disorientation was Mussolini persuading the Italians that they were a race of warriors. Such disorientation is a mistake about reality which can have the most serious consequences.

Identity is not something to be treated lightly. Nor is it treated lightly by those who have suffered from serious disorientation. The generation of Germans emerging from the ruins of 1945 had a vibrant sense of what they were capable of, and they were determined not to repeat those

mistakes. The sad fact is that political wisdom about identity seldom long outlasts the generation that felt the pain.

Identity is the revelation of character, and it emerges much less from what people say than from what they do. What people say about themselves is cheap compared to how they act when challenged. And identities are constantly in flux. Australian nationalists often look back on the way Australians responded to the two World Wars as a tragic mistake about where Australia's real interests lay. They see support for Britain as a mistake, partly caused by a surviving subjection to imperial demands.

What involvement with Britain and the Allies actually signified was that most Australians at that time thought of themselves essentially as both Australian and as part of the British Empire. And it was in pursuance of that conception of their identity that they exhibited the virtues – especially the courage and resourcefulness of the Anzacs – which have continued to nourish Australian self-understanding to this day. Only a shallow partisanship would think these virtues compromised by the fact that they attached to a loyalty at variance with what Australian nationalists are inclined to hold today.

The point about identity is that it is capable of surprising us. Given human vanity, it is hardly surprising that we often find we lack the virtues we thought we had, but sometimes we surprise ourselves by being better than we imagined. Any national identity is, of course, a rough and ready construction out of the immensely varied responses we make to life. Philosophically, the very idea of identity – both individual and national – has been under attack. Is the person who committed the crime the same as the person who faces the punishment? Perhaps not, but there is no doubt that remorse can last a lifetime and punishment often deters people from repeating a crime.

That individuals have selves, souls, characters – in a word, identities – is one of the postulates of Western civilisation, and for all the pretentious disdain for things called "stereotypes", we talk confidently about the character of a person and the national characteristics of peoples. This is not less useful because some of the beliefs are false. Identities are contestable judgments to be argued about, and philosophical scepticism is largely irrelevant to this area of practical judgment. Our assumptions about identity are in fact so much instinctive to us that we call "mad" precisely those individuals who cannot sustain a "self".

An important element of identity is negative. It is particularly true in the moral sphere that we show what we actually are by being careful not to be what we are not. We do not steal from the till because we do not want to be recognised as having the identity "thief", and we refrain from eating pork because we have the identity "Jew" or "Muslim".

It is fundamental that we can only acquire a real identity by becoming one sort of necessarily limited thing. Because one becomes a carpenter one cannot become a historian or a brain surgeon. To follow one direction is not to travel another. In being – shall we say? – robust, practical, inventive and resilient, Australians by and large sacrifice elements of delicacy and sensitivity. You cannot be everything. And with every virtue, there tends to come a corresponding vice or defect. The most prudent are seldom the most generous. And it is a further reason identity must be a limitation that, in the human world, identities invariably contain internal tensions each of which checks the other. After the Revolution, the French were long torn between glory and piety, between state and church. British history is full of tensions between Anglicans and Dissenters, between Whig and Tory. In all the British settler colonies, nationalist and loyalist impulses have always come into conflict.

The tensions and limitations inseparable from complex identities can often lead to the prevalent Western pathology of self-hatred. Xavier Herbert notoriously thought poorly of his fellow Australians, and harsh words have been said by Australians about other Australians in the republican debate. Again, there is obvious relish when the Communist Oxford historian Christopher Hill writes: "Now that England's historic destiny has whimpered to its close ...". With

which Manning Clark's attitude to Australia might usefully be compared.

It is worth rehearsing these elementary points about identity not only because the word has acquired a dangerous vogue, but because, although grand ideological projects of national self-transformation are out of fashion, we are still at the mercy of political fantasists who want to declare some favoured definition of the people they rule. Paul Keating was notable for this propensity, and the ludicrous Tony Blair, with his talk of "modernisation" and "Cool Britannia", is a current example in Britain. No doubt there are occasions when a statesman must become a leader of his country, and by fiat declare an identity to fit dangerous circumstances, however uncertain the realities may be. In that situation, the declaration determines reality itself. Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill are examples of this kind of response to a political crisis. Lesser men should not attempt it.

What I now propose to consider is what I shall call the "civil identity" which emerged in Britain and was carried abroad by the settlers who spread the "Anglosphere" over the globe.

2.   The Civic Culture of the English

On St George's Day, 1961, Enoch Powell made a speech in which he remarked that the basis of English identity is:

> "... the palace near the great city which the Romans built at a ford at the River Thames, a palace with many chambers and one lofty hall ... to which men resorted out of all England to speak on behalf of their fellows, a thing called Parliament".

Powell was concerned not with Britain but with England, and the distinction is one which keeps tripping up anyone who ventures into this field. Yet for my purposes, England stands for Britain, because the *political* history of the British Isles has revolved around the British monarchy to an extent unique in European history. England has dominated the British Isles both politically and demographically. The Celts, especially the Scots and the Irish, have not always been happy about this, and the result has been an alternation between the unity and disunity of the British Isles, an alternation which continues.

Powell's remark makes clear that whatever unity was achieved has always been focused, to an extraordinary degree, around the sovereignty of Westminster. The Anglo-Saxon heptarchy became united under Wessex, then under the Danes and finally under William the Conqueror, and British history from that time on has been the story of an evolving national sovereignty. We follow the kings and their quarrels with barons and Parliaments, the absorption with difficulty of Scotland and Ireland, the expansion of the English over the globe and their recent contraction, but at all points it is a story focused around the one political centre. It is quite remarkably autonomous.

A comparison with Italy or Germany will make the point clear. To follow the story of the Germans, one must pursue the Holy Roman Empire, the rise of the Hapsburgs, the character of the many principalities of Germany at least until the 19th Century, the emergence of Prussia, and the coming of German unity and its consequences. There is little in the way of a continuing centre. The same is true of Italy until modern times. Even France, whose national development in some respects parallels that of Britain, never achieved until a couple of centuries ago the sort of national cohesion that the English had created by about the time of the Tudors.

England was autonomous above all in its legal institutions, and this dated from about the reign of Henry III in the 13th Century. As the immortal Maitland remarks at the end of the 19th Century:

> "....from the beginning of Edward's [the first] reign, English law becomes always more insular, and English lawyers become more and more utterly ignorant of any law but their own. Thus English law was saved from Romanism; by this we lost much – but we gained much also. The loss, we may say, was juristic; if our lawyers had known more of Roman law, our law – in particular, our land law – would never have become the unprincipled labyrinth

that it became. The gain, we may say, was constitutional, was political: Roman law, here as elsewhere, would sooner or later have brought absolutism in its train".[1]

I take the view, with J.H.Hexter and others, that this separation was what Hegel would call "world-historical". It became a matter of global significance. Constitutional balance survived and prospered in England at a time when the rest of Europe went absolutist. It was there and waiting in the 19th Century, when Europe had had one nasty dose of absolutism and many Europeans were looking for a way of avoiding the choice between Jacobinism and some version of the *ancien régime*. And there before them, as a possible constitutional direction, was the Anglosphere: a set of peoples living free and under law.

It is not, of course, that the absolutism of European states was arbitrary and lawless. They had their own traditions of consultation and accountability, but these traditions were significantly less open than those of the English, and this fact was recognised by figures such as Voltaire and Montesquieu from the 18th Century onwards.

3.   Politics in the Anglosphere

Before we move to explaining how this civic identity fits together, we need briefly to consider the political development of the Anglosphere. Our question becomes: Why did it not remain a single political entity? The answer lies in an element of self-government built in to the character of an English monarchy. Here was a system in which a powerful monarchical executive was always counterbalanced by the social weight of notables on the one hand, and the political institution of Parliament on the other. This balance looks easier to sustain than it actually is. It collapsed into civil war under Charles I, in large part because of political incompetence, and it degenerated into a kind of civil war under George III.

Americans construed the War of Independence in terms of the Enlightenment rhetoric of rights and the pursuit of happiness, but historically it seems to be another version of the forms of conflicts that have marked English politics back at least to Magna Carta and Simon de Montfort. Because Britain and the American colonies were separated by the Atlantic, and because those colonies had developed a distinct social culture of their own, the outcome was a new country, and in some ways a new order of things. But that outcome was unmistakably a replication of the original civic identity: rule by a monarchical president balanced by a strong legislature. The tradition has continued to this day.

British politicians from the 19th Century onwards recognised (as for example in the Durham Report) that this thirst for independence was part of the political culture of the empire, though for more than a century, imperial grandeur was such as to tempt some thinkers into conceiving of the empire as if it could also be an economy. That conception would have involved a specialisation in which the British did the manufacturing and the colonial countries the agriculture, a division of labour which would have crippled their economic development. It would also have made the elements of the empire dangerously dependent on unforeseeable political events. The unforeseeable happened for Australia and New Zealand with the Japanese war from December, 1941, and for Britain as it thought to solve its economic and other problems by acceding to the European Economic Communities (as they then were) in 1972. But political divergence did not qualify the fact that the countries of the Anglosphere remained tenaciously English in their civic identity. Let us now consider what this identity was.

4.   England as a legal entity

English civic identity is explicable in terms of two related postulates – law and distance – which, properly understood, merge into each other as the moral practice of individuality.

In the course of the Middle Ages, England became a remarkably coherent state in which the law reached to its most remote corners. The Norman and Plantagenet kings created the most resilient of all forms of civil cohesion: namely, institutional consent. Royal courts toured the

country enforcing justice by the use of a jury system which involved large numbers of people in civic obligations. Whereas what ultimately became representative institutions on the Continent commonly fitted into a scheme of three Estates (Nobility, Clergy, and City-dweller or Third Estate), English society was more complex, and generated a distinction between Lords and Commons. Historians of the 13th Century and even earlier can talk without palpable absurdity of people called "the middle class".

Violent as the mediaeval period often was, the law had a remarkable reach, and Parliament – then basically a court as the High Court of Parliament – was its apex. The principle of consent was so far built in to this form of monarchical government that the lords of the realm had a right to bring a King to order if they felt he was misgoverning them, and this they did on numerous occasions, Magna Carta at the beginning of the turbulent 13th Century being merely the most famous.

By the 14th Century Fortescue distinguished the King of France as exercising *dominium regale*, from the King of England who exercised *dominium politicum et regale*, a more complex and consensual government. Fortescue himself served Henry VI, a feeble ruler, and England was soon to know more masterful Kings, such as Edward IV and soon Henry VII, the first of the Tudors. But a basic dislike of the arbitrary exercise of power remained a powerful theme of English political culture.

So far, then, my argument is that the English civil identity which Australia inherited, and which reveals the character of a people, was based upon the rule of law in a sense different even from the law-governed realms of the Continent. And it is this difference we must specify.

An association of people living under law is interestingly distinct from other social forms. It means that each person must socially construe each other person as significantly a fellow-subject. The point can perhaps be illustrated by a remark made when the corruption of this culture was well advanced: "If", wrote the novelist EM Forster in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1937), "I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country". To betray one's country is, of course, to betray all one's friends, for friendship is, in a sense, the career grade of association under the rule of law. One has, no doubt, natural affinities for lovers, family, co-religionists and so on, but in the practical business of life, the impartialities appropriate to a fellow subject must play a vital, and in some areas (choosing candidates, for example) an overriding part in moral conduct.

A relationship between fellow subjects is, as Michael Oakeshott has observed, slightly "watery", though it is still a moral one.[2] It entails a certain *distance* between individuals. Indeed, we may agree with many writers in finding individualism as the basic mode of association between English speaking peoples. Individualism assumes a certain distance between people. Attacks on this civic culture identify this distance with bad things such as fragmentation, atomism and alienation, but this is a mistake. What it actually means is that relations between people are conscious and chosen, with the result that they are often vastly tougher than the natural bonds of clan or tribe.

It happens that distance has often been a contingent feature of English life. It was the practice in Tudor times for aristocratic families to send their sons away as pages to other households. The nurse and the governess became prominent figures in wealthy households. All too soon for many young Englishmen at a later time, family gave way to boarding school, where disciplines were strict. In the 19th Century, when parents discovered the pleasures of sending their sons away, they set up boarding schools for their daughters as well. Space became a central part of the English understanding of moral and social life.

An Englishman's home, it used to be said, was his castle. When Virginia Woolf wanted to state the conditions for the flourishing of feminine creativity, she did not bother with claptrap about rights, but thought it involved "a room of one's own". The English conception of freedom has only recently succumbed to the machinery of rights; indeed, according to the radical Tony

Benn (originally Lord Stanisgate), the English don't have any rights. Alas, these days rights have been showered upon them like sweets at children's parties.

Every guaranteed right, of course, sets up the conditions of its own control. What the English traditionally had is a space within the law in which, having complied with their duties, they could conduct themselves entirely as they wished. They have always found this much preferable to having their rights defined for them by some authority. What authorities define, they can redefine, or remove. Initiative comes most easily from having a free space rather than having a right.

Many things follow from this postulate of distance. The first is that there is a much greater element of *chosenness* in English civil association than in societies in which tribal, clannish, family or ethnic association pre-empt an individual's judgment of those he should associate with and support. Having to choose one's associates, as part of the practice of individualism, sharpens one's nose for character and personality. Similarly, distance is the soil in which eccentricity may grow. These are characteristics which have marked the development of the English novel, by contrast with the rather more metaphysically oriented Continental novel. Political parties are essentially free associations of individuals, which is the reason other cultures often have difficulty making them work.

What facilitates distance between people is formality, a character derived from law in the sense that law (like morality) is concerned with the formal conditions in terms of human association. There is a proper way of doing things, and among those who share the same conventions, it may often be indicated less by a definition than by a casual "not done". Formality obviously contrasts with violence, and it constitutes a discipline of the emotions, a channel which alone allows them to express themselves without excessive social friction. David Stove has suggested of cricket that "it requires gentlemanliness, and teaches it".[3] It is notable that while the human race has no doubt played games since the beginning of time, the formalisation of games only happened in England in the course of the 19th Century.

Formality and distance jointly entail the fact that the English have a taste for dealing with other individuals as equals. The contrast here is with other civilisations, in which a moral response to others must begin with discovering where each party stands in some notional hierarchy. Such civilisations often have a command of etiquette which the rough and ready Anglophone can only envy, but they certainly do not incorporate equality in the English sense.

In the Anglosphere, the first thing even the most snobbish person appreciates in another is his or her specific individuality. This individuality could not emerge if such a person were above all concerned to ingratiate himself with those he met. Uriah Heeps are a notable embarrassment in English life, and "creep" is one of the strongest terms of dismissal. No classical Greek ever disliked prostration with the passion the English bring to dislike those who give them excessive respect. This has had notable consequences for the position of women in English life. And it is this taste which is one of the central characteristics of the "gentleman", widely recognised as an archetypal English figure, and one not found in its perfection outside the Isles.[4]

I have earlier remarked that in matters of identity, there is no virtue without a corresponding vice, and in explaining the significance of distance in English political culture, we must recognise that many people encountering this culture find it cold and remote – by contrast with other visitors, often from more enclosed societies, who find it immensely liberating. It is perhaps a little odd that many Australians dislike the English of the home counties as rather "stand-offish", and find the British only become tolerable as one moves from south to north – which commonly means, as one moves away from the English towards the rather warmer Celts.

Again, one of the common beliefs about England is that it is an intensely class bound society. Certainly there is no less in England than elsewhere of those indicators human beings invariably create in order to feel superior to each other. But class is a strange and alien territory to foreigners, and much that is attributed to class is actually a form of the reserve I have suggested as

lying at the base of English life. Appearances can be misleading. "Continentals", George Mikas famously remarked, "have a sex life. The English have hot water bottles". Yet it has recently been reported that there are more crimes of passion per capita in Britain than elsewhere. God knows who did the counting.

We have, then, moved from the rule of law to the postulate of distance as the key to English civility, but we have by no means exhausted the significance of this particular understanding of the practice of being human. It determines the moral life of the English. One might consider that a moral practice so much shaped by law would be particularly rule-bound, but this would be a failure to understand the peculiarity of the very law by which the English are ruled. It is the common law, in which principles are elicited from a sequence of earlier cases.

In other words, the basic principle of English law is not command but coherence. The moral life in English civility consists less in compliance with rules (though it does, of course, include that too) than in constantly finding a coherence between one's obligations and one's desires. Here, the ultimate source of the basic principle is Christianity, but it is most explicit less in Christian writings than in those of sceptical philosophers. Reason, said Hobbes, is merely a scout to spy out the land, and David Hume (*pour épater les bourgeois* in part) remarked that reason not only is, but also ought to be, a slave of the passions. Reason in both these cases is some overriding rule, and the passions are the set of desires that constitute an individual's project or plan of life. It often takes foreigners to make these meanings explicit, and in the 20th Century it was the Austrian Hayek who rejected the rationalist "top down" morality of central Europe in favour of the English (or, given his favourite 18th Century sources, Scottish) system of internal coherence.

What makes it plausible to elicit the essence of English political civility from the rule of law is that the law was, for the upper classes of Britain, their basic form of education. They were required to serve on juries, as Justices of the Peace, and as electors to Parliament. An interesting example of the way in which monarchical dominion gave way to the usages of consent is the decline of the Sheriff (the King's representative in each county) and the rise of the Justice of the Peace. The form taken by legal processes was adversarial. The rights and wrongs of an accusation were subject to debate.

About the 17th Century, juries changed their character. They came less and less to be involved in judicial proceedings as witnesses, and more as judges of fact, deciding between different interpretations of events put before them by lawyers. The outcome of a criminal trial, on which the defendant's life would depend, rested upon something very like a game. Until quite late (till the 19th Century in fact), the alternative technically available to a defendant was trial by battle. In other European countries, the aim of a trial was to get at the truth of the matter, which is one of the reasons why torture was used abroad and not (except for limited purposes in the Star Chamber) in England. The English rejected the idea of inquisition on the ground that, while a trial may get at the facts, truth itself is bottomlessly ambiguous.

Here then is the briefest sketch of what I take to be a general understanding of the civic identity of the English, as it has been diffused throughout the Anglosphere. Law and distance are its key postulates, and a great deal more could clearly be drawn from them. The English attitude to distance has, for example, been part of the reason why they have spread so abundantly over the globe: between 1815 and 1913, it is estimated that 25 million people emigrated from the British Isles. Many of them, as Australians will be particularly aware, left their country for their country's good, and others were driven by the spur of need. But what these people all had was a certain resourcefulness which Michael Oakeshott calls "the civil condition". It allowed them to replicate this kind of open civil texture wherever they went.

In encapsulating "the civil condition" on one occasion, Oakeshott used a fable borrowed from Schopenhauer which supplies a perfect image of what it is:

"There was once, so Schopenhauer tells us, a colony of porcupines. They were wont to huddle together on a cold winter's day and, thus wrapped in communal warmth, escape being

frozen. But, plagued with the pricks of each other's quills, they drew apart. And every time the desire for warmth brought them together again, the same calamity overtook them. Thus they remained distracted between two misfortunes, able neither to tolerate nor to do without one another, until they discovered that when they stood at a certain distance from one another they could both delight in one another's individuality and enjoy one another's company. They did not attribute any metaphysical significance to this distance, nor did they imagine it to be an independent source of happiness, like finding a friend. They recognised it to be a relationship in terms of substantive enjoyment but of contingent considerabilities they must determine for themselves. Unknown to themselves, they had invented civil association".[5]

5.   Changes in Australia's Civic Culture

I now want to change gear, by considering how Australia has modified this inherited identity. This is necessarily a much more contentious exercise. One has to explore this theme in terms of social conventions and political culture as expressed in contemporary rhetoric, and we can only scratch the surface. But two general points may immediately be made.

The first is that this civic culture is largely unaffected by the fact that large numbers of immigrants have settled in Australia from Asia and other parts of Europe. English civil identity has always been remarkably open, and to participate in politics and society in Australia necessarily requires assimilation to the civic culture I have described. Everyone soon takes on board Magna Carta and the rule of law, even if (given the present level of education) they have never heard of these things. The last set of foreigners who made any difference as foreigners were the Normans, and they came as conquerors. A useful comparison in exploring this form of life would be the case of India, in which an Anglospheric political culture fused in interesting ways with a civilisation quite different in many respects (it has, for example, little history and less politics). Yet the fusion seems to have been a great success.

The second point is simply that the individualism of this civil identity is very commonly misunderstood throughout the English speaking world as the vices of atomism, alienation and fragmentation. Contemporary rhetoric is full of praise for "community" (which is turning into a moral rather than a sociological term), and contempt for the supposed selfishness of individualism, as if (to continue the fable above) the porcupines had lost their quills. Here concept is being confused with value.

Some of the changes which have affected Australia have resulted from rearrangements of internal tensions within British civic culture; most notably, perhaps, the stronger place of Irish attitudes, and the fact that Catholic and Protestant tensions continued rather longer in Australia than in Britain (except, of course, for Ireland). But of the main changes that I think worth noticing, one results from Australia's sensitivity to international currents of thought, and one is genuinely indigenous.

The indigenous modification may be explicated in terms of the rhetoric of "*cringe*". Cringe is clearly an aggressive variant of the idea of equality, expressing contempt for those who give exaggerated respect to others. It refers to a supposed propensity of Australians to defer to foreign reputation in such a way as to make it impossible for them to recognise Australian talent. It is a variant of the complaint that a prophet has no honour in his own country. Using foreign reputation for local leverage is in fact an old game, but in Australia this familiar charge acquired a more than usually lethal quality because it was advanced as the contemptible cause of political, social and cultural attitudes thought to be merely dependent. In radical politics, R.G.Menzies became the symbol of an Australian policy supposedly subservient to that of Britain.[6]

Cringe was, then, merely an adaptation for local partisanship of one element of the English civil culture I have been describing. It was usually ascribed to a colonial past, something Australians now had to transcend. Australians of an earlier generation, such as Len Hume and Max

Hartwell, have been appropriately derisive of the whole idea, and speaking as one who grew up in Australia in the 1940s I can say that excessive respect for foreigners was not our problem; arrogance perhaps, humility not.

The point, however, is that this rhetoric is part of a larger complex of thought and feeling. If "cringe" is to be taken as a vice, then there must be some specific understanding of a corresponding virtue, and it takes the form of self-ascribed independence of mind, which we might appropriately call "*swagger*". The attraction of republicanism for many people was the notion that a republican Australia would be more independent, would at last stand on its own feet, that a new constitutional deal would transform an Australian population which many republicans regarded as pretty comprehensively unsound. It may be remembered that Communists used both to flatter the masses by notionally deriving all virtue and wisdom from them, and at the same time despise them as hopelessly sunk in false consciousness. The dialectic of cringe and swagger is not unrelated to this élite pathology.

The basic point to make is, of course, that both cringe and swagger, the underestimation of others and the overestimation of oneself, are higher level attitudes irrelevant to the question of truth: namely, is this or that admired foreigner worth the admiration (or denigration) offered? But these attitudes are illustrations of the way in which the fundamentals of civil culture generate a continuous stream of rhetorical froth.

Let us turn now to the way in which widespread political changes in the Anglosphere have modified the civil identity I have analysed. Democracy in these countries has led governments increasingly to dispose of the wealth of Western states and to regulate the social and economic life of their subjects. Economic enterprise, the conduct of firms, clubs, universities, the arts and sport have all felt the shaping power of governments. Indeed, it is hard to find anything untouched by this passion to incorporate everything within some "national strategy" or other. Both the private sphere of the family and the internal space of subjective attitudes have been the object of official plans to construct a better society. And the basic engine of this movement has been the egalitarian principle that whatever the rich and enterprising have created must also be provided for the poor and unfortunate. This is a programme which has so much the appearance of a political version of the Sermon on the Mount that many clergymen have been induced to forget about sin and direct their energies to worshipping so benevolent a power.

The clerical response is important because the changing role of government has transformed our moral landscape. Who is it that we must admire as keeping good causes going? Obviously the government, which taxes us in order to provide health, education, welfare and even opera, drama and music. Governments not only sustain law and order, but also enforce admirable attitudes such as respecting people different from us who might become the victims of prejudice. Democracy infallibly creates government as moral exemplar.

The process amounts, if we consider it in terms of current ideas of morality, to the nationalisation of virtue, but it has been done by stealth. No government ever actually said to its electors:

> "Let us nationalise your prudence by giving you guaranteed pensions, your charity by
> making the help you might give to neighbours more efficient, your rationality by
> legislating against irrational prejudices you might carry in your head, etc.",

but this is what has happened. The individual is left with about 60 per cent of what he or she earns, and much of that is understandably taken up by personal and familial necessities. Even some of that 60 per cent is described in terms of tax "allowances" which a government remits for good cause to individuals.

The result is that we steadily acquire an image of the world in which we live as a contrast between moral government and immoral society. It is, after all, the thing called "society" (which is to say, you and me) that is often castigated for racism, sexism, homophobia and the current litany of sins. Correspondingly, individuals are regularly attacked as greedy and selfish. Upmarket

commentators yearn for something called "community", in which we (or our government) would be basically concerned for our brothers and sisters.

It is of course absurd to imagine that governments are morally superior to the peoples they rule; not merely absurd, but also dangerous. And the absurdity of this picture has called forth a countervailing image in which politicians are regarded as themselves greedy and deceitful. The more they talk of their benevolence, to adapt Emerson, the more the people count their spoons.

Everybody knows that governments have over-extended themselves, that their nationalisation of virtue has actually destroyed moral relations in society, and that a system that trumpets its virtue merely reveals its corruption. But perhaps it must be said that the contrast between virtuous governments and vicious politicians is simultaneously one between different parts of Australian society. It is the people, as evidenced by their judgments in referenda, who are increasingly disillusioned with politicians, and it is the media where we find commentators forever suggesting uplifting ways for governments to behave. And the proposals always involve an increase in the power of authority.

It is in pursuit of the conception of government as moral exemplar that Australia has signed up to international treaties locking the moral fashions of today into place so as to subject future generations to international harassment and bullying. Moral vanity is a powerful force in governments, who realise very well that the resulting disasters will happen after they are gone. It is true indeed, that many of these lines of conduct (usually formulated in the servile language of rights) are concerned to establish sanctions against pretty primitive and unsophisticated forms of conduct – domestic violence against females, bashing "gays", and so on. But they constitute a significant transfer of power away from the people towards the judiciary, and away from Australia towards weirdly unpredictable committees of international bureaucrats and politicians. And they feed the taste for collective moral attitudinising in which individuals, without in any way cultivating their own virtues, demand that governments should apologise for the sins of earlier generations.

The basic civil identity Australia inherited generated a political culture that was entirely clear on the fact that in politics *everything* involves both power and justice. The present corruption consists in the unbalanced belief that in public life there can be purely moral relations between collectivities, relations in which the element of power is entirely absent. Today, victimhood (which begins as a purely moral conception) *is* power. I do not know of any political situation which can seriously be treated as if it were nothing else but a moral issue.

6.   The Australian Disorientation

My aim has been to describe a tradition and one or two of its adventures. One value of attempting to do this is that the Anglosphere is probably the most successful political tradition in the modern world. You cannot put the reasons for such success into a formula, but taking our bearings from such a tradition might at least have the virtue of encouraging a kind of thoughtfulness that might weaken the moral faddishness of contemporary political discussion. A certain distance, we have seen, has been central to the Anglospheric tradition, and that has included distance from the current enthusiasms which have done so much harm in our century. Just consider how much of contemporary politics consists in undoing the follies of the recent past.

The original English had several advantages we all lack. Their education was largely conducted in Latin (and to some extent Greek). Their mental world included not only the English but the Greek and Roman experiences. In such a civilisation, distance and detachment are possible. Further, in a Christian culture, the idea of God in some degree counterbalanced that of society. Australians largely lack this cultural substance, and fanatics demanding relevance are bent on narrowing them even further, bending their thoughts to a single right-thinking orthodoxy. This is so much to lack inner lives and substance that, after the recent referendum, some journalists were raising their eyes to heaven and crying out that Australia would be a laughing stock in the eyes of

the world. That was egocentricity gone mad. But it is far from being the only sign of national disorientation in Australia.

Endnotes:

1. FW Maitland, *The Constitutional History of England,* Cambridge University Press, pp. 21-2.

2. See particularly the second essay, *On the civil condition*, in Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1975.

3. David Stove, *Cricket versus Republicanism, and other essays*, Quakers Hill Press, Sydney, p. 1.

4. But as against this last judgment, see Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Gentleman in Trollope: Individuality and Moral Conduct,* Macmillan, London, 1982, especially the *coup de théatre* on p. 74, in which the archetypal English "gentleman" in Trollope's novels turns out to be Mme Max Goesler, a Viennese Jewess.

5. Michael Oakeshott, *Talking Politics*, in *Rationalism in Politics and other essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Liberty Press: Indianapolis, 1991, p. 461.

6. Thus in a recent book on Australians in Britain (Stephen Alomes, *When London Calls*, Cambridge University Press, 1999) the author can hardly mention Menzies without an accompanying sneer.

Melbourne, 21 February, 2000.