



*'Heads I
win,
Tails you
lose!'*

**TRUTH
& INTEGRITY
IN
PUBLIC LIFE**

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The Costigan Royal Commission and the Fitzgerald Inquiry have brought to the public notice the need for improvement in ethical standards in many facets of public life in Australia. This need is seen, also, in other countries: there is the Mansfield Conference in Montana so named in honour of former US Senator Mike Mansfield who was renowned for his integrity in public life. In Britain in an interview in 1987 Cardinal Hume said that what distressed him most about the modern world was the loss of truth.

Fr Tom Ryan focuses his paper on the Australian scene. He does this in a highly readable style which should help to bring this subject to the consciousness of a wide range of people.

The ACSJC hopes that this Occasional Paper will interest people in discussing it in small groups and at seminars. We would welcome feedback from these discussions with a view to publishing some of the ideas in *Justice Trends*.

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Telling the truth is the one principle of morality common to all cultures. It is the essence of all successful human interaction. It is the foundation of everything worthwhile. No marriage can be built, no business can prosper, no country can flourish except on the basis of truth-telling.

Telling the truth means keeping one's own promises as well as rejecting the lies told by others. It means admitting to ignorance, confessing failure, showing fear, giving credit to foes and, above all, sticking to principle irrespective of gain. It is food for the soul, balm for the spirit — and, quite probably, death to political success.

The Australian, Nov. 13th, 1989, p.16

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*



Mr. G. E. Fitzgerald, Q.C. hands over his report to the then Queensland Premier, the Hon. M. Ahern, MP.

Photograph: Melbourne Herald.

Investigations and Inquiries into the behaviour of public officials seem to be almost a trademark of our age. Watergate and Irangate are paralleled in our country in the Costigan Royal Commission or the Fitzgerald Report. Attitudes are changing. People are asking more questions and loss of face by those involved in dishonesty is increasing. People will not countenance the debasing of public institutions by deliberate corruption. They are also wary when such deviance becomes an issue that retards the main goals of the political process and of a society's life.

When we talk about truth and integrity we understand these to mean vision, fidelity to the real, conviction and standards together with the living and applying of these consistently. This entails a basic integration between who one is and what one does, between the private person and public performance.

Public life in this paper refers principally to those people who hold office in the political, civic or business spheres and who are accountable in some form to the wider community. The term can also apply to all of us in our lives in society.

The business world, civic and political life both reflect and shape attitudes and values in Australian society. The incidence of corruption in high places tells us something about ourselves. It also raises some important and even painful questions.

We shall comment firstly on the current situation, noting some qualities of Australia's moral climate and reflecting on the control of information.

Secondly, the topic public morality will highlight issues, key values and imperatives, explore some shared values and current forces at work, examine morality and law and consider the demands and expectations we should have of people in public life.

Under the third heading actions and attitudes, there are suggestions about the media, the business sector, each of us as a person and a citizen and about the children of today.

Finally, vision and christian values touch on views of life in society and on the insights coming from the Christian Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching.

The Current Situation

Some qualities of Australia's moral climate

In a recent article, Governor-General Bill Hayden remarks that, in his view, Australia is "a country of essentially fair-minded people, where a 'fair go' is the rough rule of justice" and that there is a "more fundamental respect for basic rights for people here, than I have witnessed in most other countries in the world."

These comments highlight a basic moral standard that pervades, even characterises, our culture. It is summed up in the expressions "fair go" and "doing the right thing." These cover a range of situations from the duty of being loyal towards a mate to a sense of treating others fairly, especially life's battlers and losers. In recent times, appeal to this basic morality has been used astutely and effectively as the motivation behind anti-litter advertising.

Maxims such as "a fair go" can make inconsistent, even conflicting, claims on us.

What we seem to have here is a basic expression of natural justice, the equivalent of the Golden Rule — "Do not do to your fellow human being what you would hate to have done to you."

Yet maxims such as "a fair go" and "doing the right thing" can make inconsistent, even conflicting, claims on us. When we "dob in" someone, we are seen to be betraying a friend and contravening an ethical norm by not doing the right thing. We can sometimes be morally misguided by seeing loyalty as the ultimate guide of our moral decisions, even when we know that the other person may be involved in actions that are unjust, e.g., taking some of an employer's property. Do I say something or keep quiet?

"Doing the right thing" can underlie a healthy solidarity in action for justice, for example, in the workplace. Yet it can also lead those who hold dissenting views to be labelled "scabs." Even in public debate, one prevailing rule seems to be "play the man and not the ball." Forget the arguments: discredit the woman or man as a person. In such instances, injustice can be condoned and group pressure can be validated on the principle that the majority is always right. But is this really giving people a fair go?

In this country abilities and talents are developed not so much in response to being praised but as an aggressive reaction to being put down.

"Doing the right thing" can also focus on the individual and be motivated by self-concern, even when people form common cause against injustice or against authority. This can be a strength but it can be flawed. The tax man is seen as fair game for our guile but we can deny and evade a real responsibility to the disadvantaged and poor in our community. Individualism can lead to a me first attitude in many situations where it is predominantly self-interest that prevails.

How we treat people who are gifted is also ambivalent. Tall poppies are cut down to size. One Australian sportsman recently commented that in this country abilities and talents are developed not so much in response to being praised but as an aggressive reaction to being put down.

Individualism can lead to a me *first* attitude in many situations where it is predominantly self-interest that prevails.

With such pressures, a person's moral sense of what is true and just can be eroded and one's integrity compromised. Standing up for who one is and for values and standards can require courage and inner strength. Competition and the urge to have more material possessions, power or status can also be difficult to resist. The contemporary idolising of the latest and the best transforms desire into a need for more and at a higher technical standard. Greed can deceive and blind people. How easily can all of us, especially those in positions of public trust, be sucked in by corruption? Just one step, one compromise is too many and one cannot get out.

Control of information

The press and the electronic media can play a significant role in our lives. They can assist in ensuring that the public interest, debate and accountability are preserved — in other words, they can help to keep people honest. Laurie Oakes makes the comment that the Australian media does a better job of scrutinising political activity than the media in most countries. Whether one agrees or not, there is some truth in his comment that Australian journalists are not caught by excessive reverence or deference towards leaders.

Taking politicians to task is regarded here as part of the job. Taking them down a peg is also fun.²

We enjoy the unprecedented advantage of rapid communication and instant information. These are accompanied, nevertheless, by the emphasis on appearances, especially on television. It's not what the entrepreneur says that matters but the sincerity with which it is said. Image comes before substance: the impression of being truthful rather than the truth itself.

There is also what is known as **reductionism** where complex issues are broken down into isolated components. If I understand one part, I have completely grasped the whole thing. Knowledge is fragmented and with it can come an inability or an unwillingness to comprehend all aspects of an issue. We get a sliver of the truth — a 3 line paragraph or a 2 sentence bite present-

ing a brief picture which can easily distort and mislead. Barry Jones sums this up by using the Indian fable of the 4 blind men and the elephant.

The first man hugs one of its legs and says 'An elephant is like a tree,'; another grasps its tail and says 'No, it's like a rope'; a third holds an ear and says 'It is like a sail,' and a fourth grips the trunk and says 'It is like a hosepipe.' All have expert knowledge, none will defer to the other and yet the whole is somewhat more than the sum of the parts. ³

The use of language is another consideration. Official jargon seems to pervade legal, financial and professional forms of communication. When this is combined with the style of many people in the public eye there is the overall impression that language is used as a tool of power.

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We often find ourselves exposed to a way of talking which says nothing at all. Words conceal the truth rather than reveal it. When an interview with a public figure comes on screen, what is my reaction? Do I find myself tending to suspend my belief in whatever they may say? It sometimes seems to be a joust between the journalist and the person interviewed. The point of the game is not to get pinned down, to avoid a direct answer or to make a telling retort rather than debate the truth.

At times, the utterances of public leaders resemble puffs of verbal mist. At other times, they use a specialised or complex vocabulary that needs decoding. Why use a 5 letter word when you can use one with 12 letters?

At times, the utterances of public leaders resemble puffs of verbal mist. At other times, they use a specialised or complex vocabulary that needs decoding. Why use a 5 letter word when you can use one with 12 letters? Or why one word when two or more will do? This is the world where a "lie" becomes a "mendacious inversion," and where there is a widespread allergy to plain, direct, English.

Fuzziness and haze around the truth can be a dangerous weapon in the hands of those with political and economic clout. The exercise of power needs constant vigilance. Lord Acton remarked that "power tends to corrupt." People in the media, in political or business life who encourage deception, encourage corruption.

Public Morality

The Inquiries and Commissions already mentioned revolve around a range of concerns within the community about acceptable standards of moral activity in the public arena.

Highlighted issues

- the abuse of one's office and of community resources in order to feather one's nest.
- the favouring of persons or groups to the disadvantage of others more needy — often to a person's or party's financial benefit or electoral standing.
- the betrayal of professional trust and the misuse of confidential information for financial benefit as in what is known as "insider trading."
- aspects of corruption amongst certain members of the police force.
- threats to the integrity of judges and magistrates in their method of appointment, in the administration of justice in the courts and in the probity of some activities while holding such a position.
- the growing incidence of deceit and lying by public officials, even to the point of perjuring themselves to protect their interests and conceal the true nature of their activities.

Key values and moral imperatives

- the importance of telling the truth and avoiding the eroding, even corrupting, effects of lies and deception on an individual, on relationships with others and on the fabric of our society.
- the sacred quality of promises and confidences and their central place as guarantees of reliability and trust in social life.
- the need for a consistent and integrated personal moral code that pervades all one's attitudes and actions, in both one's private life and in the public arena.
- we are inextricably bound to other people and what we think, say and do have some, even minimal, effect on others.

We need to consider that there are no such things as moral activity and choices that are purely private.

- there is the need to clarify our moral standards and our vision of what it means to be truthful, just, good and virtuous. We must also appreciate that knowledge alone does not make a person morally upright. Motivation and habits are imperative.
- we should appreciate that people have moral integrity because of upbringing, personal choices and influences that shape character. A particular emphasis must also be given to people who are seen to be worthy and inspiring models to imitate.
- public office means that one is accountable and responsible to those whom one serves. This presupposes honesty and adherence to a basic moral code in one's activities and in answering for them.
- there is also the underlying issue of a person's set of values. Avarice — the urge to acquire more and more — seems to be a persistent and even an increasing motive.

Shared values

Ours is a pluralistic society where there is a range of convictions about life and society. There are positions that have their roots in a religious belief while others are grounded in reason alone. One persistent question arises here. **How do people with different persuasions about life and morality find a common language of discourse?** What values are shared and agreed upon? Which ones are debatable or seen differently? There is a range of views but those pertinent to our society come under two general headings.

One perspective in approaching this issue is grounded in Anglo-American Liberal Individualism coming from the philosophers of the Enlightenment of the 18th century. The individual person's rights are paramount. This means that state/government interference in one's personal life by constraints and laws should be minimal. Personal autonomy is crucial. It can be summed up by saying, "My moral code and actions are my business provided they do not infringe on or hurt other persons' rights to have and live their moral convictions." Underlying this position, there appears to be a cleavage between the individual and society where obligation to society has a secondary place.

The Greek and Christian views see the human person as, at heart, a social being.

Another tradition is grounded in the Greek and Christian view of the human person as, at heart, a social being. My life with others entails mutual obligations and rights. One's duties to oneself and others are the starting point: one's rights exist in order to fulfil these obligations. The state/government's role is to ensure that the common good is fostered and it may sometimes involve the limitations of personal freedom for the public good.

In this view, the role of government in a community is to facilitate and create the most favourable climate for personal flourishing. Personal autonomy is inseparable from our need and capacity to form relationships. My attitudes and actions, even the most private, have a social dimension. They will affect my dealings with others in some way or another. Sometimes, they can have a broader public aspect in that they may involve accountability to the wider community because of their effects. One example would be with the AIDS phenomenon where there has been the growing need to be aware of the public implications of a person's sexual activity. Another would be in the use of private property and resources where one must take account of effects on the environment.

My attitudes and actions, even the most private, have a social dimension.

In both these philosophical positions, the key issues can be summed up in the aphorism: As much freedom as possible, as much interference as is necessary. The problem is: where does one draw the lines? which gets the greater emphasis?

Current forces at work

In considering influences that shape our moral climate, one should note that consensus in Australia rests on a moral not a religious consent, on shared values based on reason and argument. How far this is true may be a major issue underlying this discussion of truth and integrity. There may be some areas where there is significant disagreement about values, right and wrong, what is honest or dishonest, e.g. aspects of the minimising of tax.

There is also the role and growing influence of the opinion poll and of surveys. These may give us a picture of what is happening, but can they provide us with what SHOULD be the case? On the basis of opinion polls one could have, at one time, justified slavery or discrimination (sexual or racial). In other words, that a majority are in favour of something is not a necessary guarantee that it is right or true. Our moral awareness can be tainted, our moral vision can be blurred. For precisely this reason we often need our consciousness raised and sharpened.

That a majority are in favour of something is not a necessary guarantee that it is right or true.

Nevertheless, surveys and properly conducted research can be helpful instruments in exploring facts and their significance. A recent item in a national newspaper is a pertinent example. In a report based on continuing research at Macquarie University in Sydney, Dr. Kay Bussey made some disturbing findings. She found that most adults thought nothing of telling lies, including some surprisingly dramatic ones. Most considered them to be "excuses" and more often lies for their own gain or to avoid punishment than to protect others. She went on to say,

Our society doesn't place great emphasis on honesty. If honesty was more of a talking point, people would realise it is worth telling the truth. Expediency might not always be the best course.⁴

Law and morality

George F. Will remarks on a timeless and awkward truth about communities whether political or religious.

That truth is that any community must have a core of settled convictions, and any community determined to endure must charge some authority with the task of nurturing, defending and transmitting those convictions.⁵

One aspect of this is the question — is statecraft meant to be soulcraft? To what extent is it the task of government and public policy to preserve and inculcate moral standards and values? Do they have a role in instructing and instilling noble and uplifting attitudes? And if it is not their task, whose is it? To what extent, then, should public leaders be examples, even exemplars, embodying such values?

Positions vary on this topic. Some stress personal rights, others give priority to community vision and obligations. It certainly is not the role of the government and of the law to be a moral police officer and to forbid and punish every kind of immoral behaviour. Yet it remains true that there are certain basic standards that the state must protect and defend. These will involve legislation concerning moral wrongs that are a public threat to sound education, to marriage and the family, to public decency in community life and to the reliability of truth-telling, of keeping promises and one's word.

It can be difficult for those with power, particularly if they are ignorant or greedy, to distinguish between what is right and what suits personal or party interests.

The second aspect of this issue of morality and law flows from our concerns about corruption and cronyism in public life. The facts indicate that it can be difficult for those with power, particularly if they are ignorant or greedy, to distinguish between what is right and what suits personal or party interests. The political process should depend on the integrity of people who have power. It is all the more vulnerable since it is both impossible and undesirable to use the law and sanctions to cover every conceivable abuse. One is then thrown back on the quality and depth of society's moral code. As Tony Fitzgerald notes,

It seems that, increasingly, professional fouls are becoming tolerated as part of the process and there is less stigma attached to breaches of the code of honour which a truly civilised society needs to supplement its formal rules and laws.⁶

Another aspect of morality and law is the precise relationship between the two. It must be remembered that not everything that comes under the heading of morality — even morality as the object of public discussion — is a proper object of legislation or formal and enforced social policy.

Firstly, we should note a legitimate distinction between private and public moral conduct. Law is concerned with protecting public order and the common good. Not all private behaviour, even if immoral (or considered to be by some) need be prohibited by law. Adultery or a lie to a friend may be wrong but they are not crimes.

Secondly, how far, then, should the law extend for the public good? Sometimes it is difficult to design a law that is precise enough to protect all the complex values at stake. The proposed law may do more harm than good. Archbishop William Foley of Perth wrote recently that,

It is not the role of law to be a moral policeman, and add legal veto and penalty to every kind of immoral behaviour.⁷

Nevertheless, public moral conduct that is socially destructive can justly be prohibited and punished. Naturally, such measures appropriately embrace the activities and behaviour of those in public positions.

Certainly, there are forms of behaviour of public officials that demand legal sanctions and moral judgements by society if we are to maintain our most basic, non-negotiable values. Our present concerns are to ensure that there is adequate machinery of accountability.

But society must recognise that there are unreasonable measures even in such serious matters as truth and honesty. A government has the obligation to encompass the full range of human and social needs. So, it could be imprudent, or even irresponsible, to give a disproportionate share of governmental resources and concern to supervise the truth and honesty of those in public office.

Righteous indignation can become an addiction that saps society's reasonableness.

More broadly, in the name of ensuring justice, honesty and truthfulness in our public leaders, we could become what has been referred to as "unprincipled idealists," — fanatics in the cause of virtue. We could push for legislation requiring the highest ethical standards and try to cover every possible contingency. This can have three possible consequences.

The cost of liberty is the existence of some crime.

Firstly, it could gradually dilute any incentive to enter public life or to hold positions of leadership in the community. Secondly, it can be symptomatic of a trend in which "righteous indignation can become an addiction that saps society's reasonableness."⁸ Thirdly, in trying to eliminate all possibility of dishonesty in political and business life, one designs structures and restrictions tantamount to those of a police state. This is the tenor of a paper by Mr. Mark Weinberg QC, Director of Public Prosecutions, given at the international Anti-Corruption Conference held in Sydney in November 1989. His purpose was not to condone criminal activities but to point out that the cost of liberty is the existence of some crime.

Crime is a normal part of society. It might be possible in theory to eradicate most crime. However, the stringent and ruthless control this would require would make society so intolerable as to vastly outweigh any putative benefits.⁹

Fourthly, even if one avoids such an excess, law can lose all credibility if it is too detailed, too complicated, too particularised, too all-embracing or absolute.

Demands and expectations of people in public life.

The first and absolute requirement is that they uphold in their behaviour the standards that are the prerequisites for social existence. This would demand that such behaviour is part of a continuing pattern linking the public and the private dimensions of a person's moral code and actions. People holding positions of trust in community, government or corporate life do so with the mandate that they will uphold the foundational ethical standards of the society which has given them its confidence. As one author has noted

Societies in which individuals cannot be expected to act truthfully, honour their contracts, accept responsibility for their own actions, and respect the rights (including the property rights) of other individuals, do not have the basic requirements of their own continuing existence.¹⁰

Such demands are not limited to what is legally acceptable. They are the dictates of humanity, reason and justice that tell all of us and those acting on our behalf how they ought to act in all situations.

Policies of political parties may threaten, even contravene, the integrity of an individual politician's moral convictions about what is right and true.

Secondly, it can mean that policies of political parties may threaten, even contravene, the integrity of an individual politician's moral convictions about what is right and true. He or she can be under pressure to compromise these. Perhaps more place should be given to the free conscience vote in the formulation of party policy.

Is this threat to personal integrity one reason for the growing disenchantment with major political parties and the growth of Independents? — a growth which does not necessarily guarantee effective government or political stability?

Thirdly, these demands mean that it is not sufficient for public and corporate officials merely to act within the law. They can conduct their affairs in ways that, though not illegal or criminal, may offend the moral sense of the general populace as to what is appropriate, reasonable, fair or in accord with professional standards. A policeman, for example, can be held accountable, even with punitive measures, over activities that are not subject to criminal prosecution.

Is this threat to personal integrity one reason for the growing disenchantment with major political parties and the growth of Independents?

Fourthly, we must also note shifts in emphasis in different moral attitudes. Are we seeing a change such that what one does in private does count as an issue in the public arena? Should marital fidelity be demanded of a politician, for example? Answers to this will reflect particular cultures and changing mores. Such a question may get a "yes" answer in Japan (in the light of recent events) but one could be more hesitant here in Australia. It may be used to embarrass public leaders for political purposes, but this is not a necessary indicator that the general public would make such a demand.

What our discussion does highlight is that each of us has a certain continuity in our life. Our personal moral behaviour at the private level must spill over in some degree into our public moral attitudes and actions. If it doesn't, then there is a split in our moral makeup and we have a character that is fragmented.

Should every lapse, impropriety or indiscretion be grounds for dismissal?

Having said all this, does it mean that we expect and demand people in public life to be saints? When and how do failures disqualify and when and how can they be tolerated?

Certainly, there can be habits that can and should disqualify a person from public office because they reveal a trait e.g. dishonesty, disloyalty, cowardice that is morally and, in practical terms, disabling. There are also actions big and serious enough that warrant the same treatment.

We do have the right to expect that those holding public office have a strong moral core as the necessary condition for withstanding compromising influences.

But should every lapse, impropriety or indiscretion (sometimes unrelated to public office) be grounds for dismissal? Some will argue that dismissal provides an example to others or that the failure to do so could be seen as condoning the activity. Should candidates for public positions be screened? Should they be subject to rigorous "purity" tests? One commentator notes:

If we want saints, we must still concede that not even saints always **start out** as saints, so defects from the past should at least be understood in terms of the possibility of growth."

On the one hand, we do not want to become like a police state from ethical righteousness. On the other hand, moral integrity is more than being a tough negotiator, amongst those who are

not likely to lose their wallet and watch and gold fillings when they go into negotiation on our behalf.¹²

We do have the right to expect that those holding public office have a strong moral core as the necessary condition for withstanding compromising influences.

Actions and Attitudes

The Media and the truth

Two suggestions seem to stand out. One is credibility. As one journalist notes,

There is an increasing feeling that the media are out of control and arrogant, prone to scandal mongering, exaggeration, bias and propaganda, and exploitative of the privacy and grief of private persons.¹³

One cannot overlook that these "excesses" may exist because the public wants them and that they may be the work of a minority. But the general perception is that there is an alarming use of "public interest" to justify sneer, smear, innuendo, sensationalism, distortion and deception even to the point of journalists seeing themselves above the law. Ratings rather than truth and fairness are seen as the ultimate arbiter of public taste and standards.

This leads to the second concern — accountability. Should it be just to employers? What about one's employees or co-workers? What about the public and one's peers? Serious thought should be given to ensuring truth and fairness through certain procedures that will help curb abuses of freedom that have significant public impact. Suggestions along these lines have been made:

- that every media organisation introduce and enforce its own detailed code of ethics;
- that there be a review of defamation laws with the possibility of increased penalties for inaccuracy;
- that there be in each media organisation an internal process whereby complaints about reporting and stories be investigated;
- that a Press Council with punitive powers be established by the government.¹⁴

These may seem to some to be severe, particularly when governmental intervention is involved. One journalist put the issue succinctly when he said,

The medical, banking and legal professions are all realising that if they don't put their house in order, it will be fixed for them. The last thing the media needs is more restriction. But if we don't face up to these complaints, whether they are legitimate or not, we risk the awful alternative of having accountability forced on us.¹⁵

The business and commercial sector

The National Crime Authority, the Independent Commission against Corruption, the Fitzgerald Report, the Australian Securities Commission are important consequences of the concern for public ethics.

Organisational honesty can be complex and involves many dilemmas. It requires not only telling the truth when asked but taking the responsibility to find out what is happening and conveying it correctly.

There can also be a conflict between honesty and self-protection. As one writer notes:

It is not uncommon for executives to make life difficult for honest subordinates. Promotions can be slowed down, choice assignments can become harder to obtain and important information can be rerouted past the desks of the bringers of ill news. In many organisations not telling the truth, especially if it confronts or embarrasses, is necessary for survival.¹⁶

Commercially, consumer protection is an important aspect of truth in advertising and in retail activities. The Trade Practices Act prohibits corporations engaging in conduct which is "misleading or deceptive" or "unconscionable", and outlaws questionable trading practices.

From experience and legal measures, it is easier now to uncover "insider trading" — using confidential information about the stock market for personal profit. One commentator, discussing the film *Wall Street*, points out that it

... patently leaves out ... that large middle ground of what can be called soft insider information — the hints over the telephone as to the direction of a deal, the trail of trades that suggests how someone in the know was betting: "such inducements inevitably lead to producing deals for their own sake, in funnelling much needed capital to the wrong places. That brand of cynicism, in turn, reduced moral influence on Wall Street to a minimum." ¹⁷

This same film also etches for us the grubby amorality of the takeover craze. Mergers and acquisitions can be helpful business tools to increase profits by diversifying into new markets and stimulating increased productivity. But they can be used by slick operators and speculators who bid on companies and then blackmail or gut them to profit from the deal.¹⁸ This type of growth in corporate debt is costly for the community.

A remedy suggested concerns the current practice in Australia of tax deductions for the interest paid on a company's debt. There should be a limit to these deductions for interest payments. All that is really happening is that taxpayers are subsidising takeovers. It has also been suggested that

... huge benefit packages given to existing management in companies being taken over — the so-called golden parachutes — are unethical and should be prohibited.¹⁹

What can I do as a person and a citizen?

Firstly, I can speak from my convictions. In a recent interview in Australia, Timothy Leary referred to the electronic screen as "narcotised slavery." Information and knowledge are today industries of power: control them and you control thought and attitudes of people. The impressionistic character of television together with the trend towards monopolies in the media field highlight a danger justifiably noted by Leary.

Big Brother does not want people to think clearly, ²⁰ to learn clearly and to communicate clearly.

You and I must be convinced of the need to protect and use our right to form and air our views, to contribute to public debate and policy, to avoid being overwhelmed by the rule of experts, to use plain and direct language and to have confidence in the common sense and wisdom of ordinary people.

Secondly, I can check out my real standards. Am I someone who can be relied on whenever I speak or give my word? Do I have an easy conscience about white lies, social lies, lies to gain advantage or enhance prestige? Would I or my children cheat on another or in exams? Yet, am I morally bound always and everywhere to tell the truth or the whole truth?

Am I someone who can be relied on whenever I speak or give my word?

What about the belongings of others? Stealing — no, but does that count when it is "adjusting" the expense account, or perks, or goods from work? Would I be prepared to defend that on television? And then there are books — many people seem to have a blind spot about taking or keeping them — from other people or from libraries.

What are the consistent trends in my life? Do I, in fact, accept the law of dog eat dog, the survival of the fittest in business?

If we all think about these and our consciences niggle, even smart, then can we (self-righteously?) reassure ourselves that we wouldn't be like them (or we wouldn't get caught)? If we actually held a public position, could we be absolutely sure, from present behaviour, that we could resist bribes, enticements, rorts and the deception needed to protect ourselves?

If we consider ourselves immune from temptation, we should think again. Power, possessions and opting out of responsibility for one's life were the very things Jesus Christ had to struggle with in the desert. These had to be confronted and overcome by him, as by us, in recognising and following values that are enduring and ultimately transcendent — truth, justice, love and compassion.

If I held a public position, could I be sure, that I would resist bribes, enticements, rorts and the deceptions needed to protect myself?

Thirdly, I can listen to my conscience and the needs of others. Becoming fully human involves the on-going process of forming and developing one's conscience. The quality of moral awareness is crucial. The power of conscience to stimulate us to right action and to arouse remorse with wrong action is uniquely human and accompanies freedom and autonomy. One of the frightening aspects of some of the people recently involved in corruption in public office is that they did not seem to be aware of the immorality and injustice of their actions. This was a constant trend that Frank Costigan QC found in witnesses in the Commission he conducted.

Each one of us can have a divided conscience. We can ignore parts of it. Slowly areas of our awareness of right and wrong can be eroded and deadened by repetition.

This can involve a gradual dehumanising of myself and my responses and responsibilities to others. There will be a growing inability to grasp others' needs and the effects of my behaviour on myself, on others and before God.²¹

The capacity for forming relationships is bound up with the capacity for moral living. Moral decisions cannot be based solely on being sensible, logical and rational. There is the underlying desire for wholeness, sensitivity to others as persons, compassion, wisdom, love and service of others. Integration, knowledge and goodness of life mean a serious concern for interpersonal relationships and social responsibilities.

These qualities cannot be adequately inculcated by law and sanctions. We each need a vision, convictions and values that touch the heart, that inspire and motivate us in the deepest recesses of the self. This inevitably raises issues of meaning and the place of the spiritual and religious in our lives. Personal truth and integrity demand that we face these questions.

The children of today, tomorrow's adults

Actions speak louder than words is perhaps as good a comment as any. In being truthful and honest a parent's example is paramount. The TV host, Tony Barber, made the remark recently along the lines that children take little notice of what a parent says but every bit of notice of what a parent does.

Nina Darnton, discussing a recent book "Why Kids Lie" by Paul Ekman, makes the point that the rules of honesty are subtle and that small children need help sorting them out. A child should be helped to understand the consequences of the lie and the ways in which it destroys trust.

Just because parents learn why lies occur doesn't mean they should accept them. Psychologists encourage mothers and fathers to expect their children to be truthful. Ekman counsels parents to set a good example, avoiding even white lies as much as possible, and to stress the family's bond of trust. He also reminds parents that they must remain compassionate. 'A terrible act, a desperate lie to conceal it, needs to be punished,' he writes. "But it also needs to be forgiven."²²

More generally, in considering the role of parents and educators, we must remember that children learn and assimilate values through imitation and identification. Who, then, are our society's heroes? Who are the people who embody our vision of what is good, inspiring and worth striving for? The young look to models who are important for them within and beyond the family. Honest, truthful and good-living people are the most effective carriers of virtue. And so we need to keep in mind the comments of David Holbrook,

If we are to help individuals to develop morally, or to become more effective in their whole complex of living, then no amount of communications done, however 'clear' will suffice.²³

A person's ability to communicate itself depends on how much the individual has developed the ability to find meaning in his or her world.

We should consider courses in truth, integrity and other moral standards as an integral part of the secondary school curriculum. We need to give a greater emphasis

to the formation of character, to personal development rather than the place given to achievement in exams, careers, business and in sport. Dale Spender argues that we are not teaching our children to think. We need the skills of Philosophy or of equivalent processes to develop the

. . . art of asking questions, of separating truth from falsehood, right from wrong.²⁴

The economic rationalism underlying the Dawkins Report also raises crucial questions of values in education. Are we meant to live by bread alone? If our education system is predominantly concerned with productivity, usefulness, negotiating skills or business acumen, then what place do friendship, justice, truth, peace, beauty, love and compassion have on that scale of values? Only these can inspire us to transcend self-interest. They alone enable and inspire us to see the good, virtuous and socially concerned life as worthwhile in itself.

Vision and Christian Values

How do dishonesty and corruption in the public arena affect our vision of social life?

Conferences on ethics in business, scrutiny of the behaviour of public leaders, inquiries and soul-searching have all come in the wake of recent events. Continuing discussion of moral issues and remedial action at all levels are all positive, even essential.

Is our system of values adequate? How much are decisions in government and business (public or private) based predominantly, if not solely, on financial indicators, viz., the budget, deficit, or net profit?

If we survey our moral landscape, we can also detect an apparent lack of capacity for consistent ethical thinking. While there have been significant points of growth in moral awareness in recent years (particularly in the field of human rights), there are still blind spots and hesitations. Some examples would be nuclear waste, national and international poverty, starvation, responsibility to future generations, misuse of the environment, ambivalence about the worth of life in unborn human beings.

Continuing discussion of moral issues and remedial action at all levels are all positive, even essential.

What is the significance of this? What is said by Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of the United States may be relevant for us in Australia. Perhaps our moral sense brings to fail

. . . precisely at that point when we leave the sphere of private life and enter the social realm. We can grasp the implication of lying about one's private life or violating an intimate relationship. But the grand lies of state or the violation of entire nations escape us.²⁵

Can the Gospel and the social teaching of the Catholic Church throw any light on all this?

We certainly need to question the adequacy of a view of society with its roots in liberal individualism and economic rationalism, i.e. materialism, and in a division between the private and public spheres. At the extreme, society and government are seen as nothing more than a necessary check on excess and aberration in the individual's pursuit of happiness. There is no positive view of society helping all through a common endeavour, common ground and a common vision.

We need to question the adequacy of a view of society with its roots in liberal individualism and economic rationalism.

The vision of social life found in the Christian tradition forms a contrasting view. We are and become human through interaction with others, through the recognition of mutual rights and obligations and by working for the public good. The need for other people in relationships and community has its roots in the book of Genesis in the call to humans to be images of **God**. It reaches its apex in Jesus Christ, in his revelation of the inner life of God as Divine community which is symbolised and created in the Eucharist. The setting is shared life and responsibility. Jesus' prayer given to us is not "my" but Our Father. The mark of discipleship is compassionate love and reaching out to those in need.

- Far from viewing social life as a convenience and a tool to smooth the rough edges of our individual existence, the Scriptures contemplate a social life that is at the very centre of human existence, and the institutions of that life as a positive force in human relationships.²⁶

From many angles, we are being confronted with the hollowness of the myth of the isolated individual. Our lives are more obviously connected physically, socially, economically and environmentally. We have developed a private morality, but can personal integrity, loyalty and honesty be sufficient for a social morality in an interconnected, interdependent world? In particular, can this private moral code prevail against the combative, competitive pressures of success and self-interest in the political or business sector?

From many angles, we are being confronted with the hollowness of the myth of the isolated individual. Our lives are more obviously connected physically, socially, economically and environmentally.

We seem to be approaching a time when specifically social values need to be stressed, developed, absorbed and integrated with values in the private sphere. In a recent statement "On Social Concerns", Pope John Paul II addressed the need for such a new way of thinking in the face of growing crises in international relations and in the development of the Third World peoples. He sees a movement to a new social ethic revolving around three elements.

**Interdependence is
measured by the norms of
justice and human rights.**

Firstly, there is a recognition of interdependence as a critical fact of life in today's world. Secondly, this interdependence is measured by the norms of justice and human rights — a particularly moral perspective. Thirdly, there is the need then to cultivate the virtue of solidarity — "the firm and persevering determination to

commit oneself to the common good . . . because we are all really responsible for all."²⁷

**Solidarity leads us to see
the *other* whether person,
society, people or nation as
a neighbour, an equal.**

Such an ethical vision of social life involves a diametrically opposed attitude to the thrust of me first, the thirst for power and profit. Solidarity leads us to see the other whether person, society, people or nation as a neighbour, an equal. It means a willingness, even the need (with legislative backing) to moderate one's self-interest for the sake of others in greater need. It entails a wider and deeper sense of social concern that will ease and control the pressures of acquisitiveness and greed. These seem to be the roots of dishonesty and corruption.



Frank Costigan QC

photograph: Australian Consolidated Press

Central, then, to this view is the understanding of **human rights**. All human beings share in the resources of the created world and hence have a claim to what is necessary to fulfil our unique potential as persons. Every human has basic rights. Each has obligations to acknowledge the rights of others. Thus, human development requires that the social order ensure that mutuality and equality are organised and secured. This will involve, in Catholic social teaching, a positive role for government and for the public person. As Hunthausen notes

It is the primary responsibility of any public officer, from ordinary citizen to the highest executive, to foster human rights.²⁸

This requires in public leaders a sense of solidarity with other people and their needs, especially those they serve. It also means that every citizen is called to

fully participate in public life in order to hold those who govern to account and to constantly renew our social possibilities.²⁹

All human beings share in the resources of the created world and hence have a claim to what is necessary to fulfil our unique potential as persons.

The Church itself highlights human rights, as is evident in its Social Teaching and the New Code of Canon Law. However, the Church needs to be aware of the challenge this presents to its own life. Truth and integrity require that justice not only be done but appears to be done. In questions of accountability and due process, for example, there is the danger that the Church's internal structures do not reflect this principle at work. An editorial comment on Paul Sieghart's Cardinal Heenan Memorial Lecture of 1988 makes an important point.

The danger Paul Sieghart saw was that public scandal would be caused if the standards of the Church were lower than those of the world. It was another observation of the 1971 synod of bishops that the Church could not credibly preach the demands of justice without being seen to be trying at least to be just itself.³⁰

Conclusion

Australia, as any society, functions because the vast majority of people here are honest. A sense of decency and fairness is a protection against our worst excesses. Yet, an awareness of the limitations, flaws, and moral failings in ourselves is a wholesome part of mature living. Corruption in public officials has provided an opportunity for honest self-examination about our standards and values.

Honesty facilitates good decision-making, enhances self-esteem and trust and is at the heart of healthy personal and corporate life. It is ultimately a matter of personal choice and attitude of mind — a question of character. In essence, it is about who I am as a person, who we are as a community and how we are to relate to each other if truth and integrity are to be fostered in our society.

POSTSCRIPT

The ability to laugh at oneself is a crucial part of a balanced life and is a characteristic of integrated adults and groups. Australia, at present, has an abundant crop of talented people who make us laugh — comedians, political cartoonists, satirists and mimics. These give the disarming shouts from the crowd telling us that the emperor has no clothes. They are the court jesters who ensure that those with power don't let it go to their head or forget why they have it. Satire, banter, farce and a sense of the ridiculous are the lubricants of social criticism and of healthy existence for all communities, whether in politics, business or the church.

Laughter clarifies motives, deflates the pompous, unmasking pretence, exposes deceit and dissolves illusion. It keeps us aware of our common humanity and our feet firmly on the ground.

However, for many Australians humour can be an escape route, a way of not facing hard issues and the consequences of people's behaviour. It is used to create a safe, ironic distance — the wry "she'll be right" of apathy and non-involvement. Perhaps our country needs a stronger dose of laughter as therapy, more satire and social criticism with their accompanying confrontation and anger.

In Christian terms, humour and self-criticism go hand in hand with humility. This is the virtue by which I know who I am, am true to myself, can respect and love others and find a basic contentment in that. Which is another way of saying that one is a person of truth and integrity.

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