

Address by

**Dame Leonie Kramer**

on the occasion of

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**“Who Wants Power?”**

Stephen Kensey's foreword to *Thinking About Australia* refers to Sir Earle Page's "determination to seek solutions to ... peculiarly Australian problems". I am fortunate enough to be able to confirm that statement from experience because we spent 1954 and 1955 in Canberra, where the second of our daughters was born. This event proved to be a challenge that the Canberra medical services of that time were unable to meet. Earle Page was Minister for Health and a close and long-standing friend of neighbours. His knowledge of the series of incompetent processes that caused our problems led him to take immediate steps to enquire into their causes, and the promptness with which he took responsibility for the near-disaster is something I shall always remember.

It's interesting to reflect on that now, because politics has changed so much that nobody would expect a Federal Minister to attend to their personal problems, and in all likelihood they would be unable to do so, thanks to the army of departmental advisers and media hounds which attend their every movement and wail hungrily for every statement no matter how trivial. If people have lost faith in politicians (and therefore in the political process) it is not just because the standards of behaviour they expect from them are not met, but because they seem to be swallowed up by a system and hedged around by minders whose duty it is to keep people away.

It is because I believe that direct, honest and sensitive relationships between our politicians and the public are essential to the political health of the community, and to a recognition of the legitimacy of government (even when you disagree with its decisions) that I have chosen to speak about power, authority and responsibility. These large matters are reference points in a number of the memorial orations – such as those by John Fairfax and Justice Michael Kirby – but I shall reflect on some of the misconceptions that seem to have gained acceptance in many sections of society, but which threaten its cohesion, balance and well-being.

Let me then begin with power. It is no accident that so many of Shakespeare's plays deal with the nature of power and its effects upon those who desire or acquire it. I have long thought that one of his most profound dramatisations of this subject is to be found in one of his most enchanting fantasies – *The Tempest*. How does it come about that a ship-load of noblemen and their attendants are wrecked on an island where Prospero, who has taught himself the powerful arts of magic, rules as a benign despot? It happens because Prospero stage-manages the wreck of the ship which is carrying the man (his brother) who usurped his throne as Ruler of Milan.

Prospero's magic allows the passengers and crew to be saved so that, by a series of manoeuvres and with the help of the spirit (Ariel) he has tamed, he can punish his brother for his abuse of power. When he has accomplished this task Prospero destroys his book of magic and breaks his magical staff. The message is clear. Power is legitimate only if it is used for good purposes, and when he has used it to restore legitimacy to his kingdom, it must be set aside.

It is a far cry from this compelling expression of the use and abuse of power to the notion of empowerment which is now part of the deceptive ideological vocabulary of contemporary Australia. There are general opinions to the effect that many people in our community are powerless and need to be helped to acquire power. Particular expressions of this view are to be found in feminist thinking and in references to members of various ethnic groups. Empowerment is a word which gives me a good deal of trouble, because it suggests that someone or some force, other than the person who is supposed to be powerless, is needed to give that person power. This gives rise to an admittedly ludicrous image of someone being connected up to the power supply and thereby enabled to do things previously impossible.

Such a notion runs counter to the impulses and qualities of character that led to the exploration and development of Australia – namely the spirit of curiosity and enterprise, and the determination to endure 'hardship' in the interests of creating a better life for the next generation. These are the qualities which have brought migrants to this country from all over the world. Do those who believe in empowerment suppose that such qualities do not exist in today's people? There is, of course, an unanswered question – power to do what? To be a usurper or a leader, a recipient of favours conferred by others, or an achiever?

If we ask ourselves where, in contemporary Australia power resides, we would have to say increasingly in executive government (not parliament), in the media and the unions, despite, as we have seen over recent years, the decline in their membership. That latter fact points to the widening gap between union leaders and their members, which parallels the widening gap between the people and the political process. If there is a need for people to be empowered, it is to restore to them their confidence in their individual capacity to make a difference to the course of events in Australia.

One of the impediments to this necessary achievement is abuse of political and media power, and, not infrequently the combination of both 'forces' against the dissenting voice. Recently that fine Australian poet Les Murray launched Tony Abbott's book on the republican debate, *The*

*Minimal Monarchy*. Murray began by remarking that he became a republican in 1954 (the year of the royal visit), and that he disagreed with Abbott's view, but that he had readily agreed to launch the book in order to assert Abbott's right to write it and to draw attention to the threats to freedom of speech in Australia today. This was no poet's fantasy, any more that *The Tempest* is a fantasy about magic and an enchanted island. It was a serious warning about the abuse of power.

[As an aside here I am struck by an ironical contrast between the republican and anti-republican positions. The republican position is about empowering a politically-elected president, the extent of whose power is yet to be determined. The anti-republican position is about retaining an abstract source of power (The Crown) which has no power at all in Australia except to appoint a Head of State with delegated authority.]

Evidence to support Murray's claim is not difficult to find. The attempts to silence Geoffrey Blainey are, I hope, remembered. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Demidenko/Darville affair, there is no doubt about the attempts to bully and intimidate her. Under parliamentary privilege private individuals are attacked and have no way of replying. In his essay *Of Great Place* Francis Bacon writes: "It is a strange desire to seek power and to lose liberty".

These dangerous precedents are given considerable credibility by the media, ever anxious to substitute the pursuit of sensation and scandal for the pursuit of truth. But even more important is the indifference to accuracy, and the promotion of opinion over the gathering of information.

Many people recall that the media once used to produce the news of the day as accurately as possible and remark that now information is confused with opinion. This is not senile nostalgia, but simply an observation that many interviewers and commentators lack the knowledge and experience to distinguish the one from the other. They have been influenced by an educational philosophy that stresses the subjectivity of all knowledge, and scorns the possibility of detachment and impartial reporting.

Yet it is only through a free flow of ideas that good policy can be formulated, and the lust for power constrained. The give and take of rational argument and discussion is the foundation of democratic freedom and it is only a totalitarian society that attempts to suppress freedom of speech so that power can be concentrated in a small group. John Milton published a spirited defence of a free press in his

Areopagatica of 1634. He would be astonished that the freedom he defended has expanded into license on the one hand and shrivelled into political correctness on the other.

The desire for power is, in the end, a desire to dominate, but the mark of leadership is not domination but persuasion. In order to persuade, a leader must have the authority which comes from learning, experience, the willingness to take risks, and the integrity to keep the welfare of others in the forefront of all policies and decisions. Attacks on authority have been a feature of the second half of the century, especially since the liberation movements of the 1960s. The raucous demand for liberation – from conventions, traditions, discipline and institutional structures – was essentially a rebellion against the authority of the past, and the notion of traditional values as a powerful support for young people. Its effect was to weaken institutions, and to make them yield to the whims of individual demands. Participatory democracy seemed fine in principle, but led to great difficulties - and indeed injustices – in practice, some of which still linger on. It seems to me that the challenge we face is to reassert the values of freedom with responsibility at a time when other values have been either consciously discarded or are no longer recognised. It is no accident that organisations like the St James Ethics Centre are flourishing. Their growth is a direct response to a decline in standards of public behaviour.

If leadership is about authority and responsibility, it is also about attending to the needs and listening to the ideas (as distinct from the opinions) of young people. It is a truism to say that they are Australia's future, but we seem to be forgetting how vulnerable youth is. A recent survey purported to show that by far the greater proportion of young people fear the future of the planet, and therefore have low expectations of their own futures. Yet we live in a period of unprecedented scientific advancement, and both science and technology have shown that they can solve many of the problems we have created.

To rob young people of their natural curiosity and optimism is a crime, and we should be making quite sure that our educational systems both meet their needs, and seek out the means of balancing the problems with which we must deal, with our capacity to solve them through the application of science and technology.

Our pool of talented young people is our greatest asset. The example we set them will make or break their futures. Lust for power, neglect of ethical principles, undermining of institutional integrity, apathy and irresponsibility are not the examples we should parade before them. They need as good an education as we can give them but they also need to be able to look up to their leaders for guidance and inspiration.

There is no place in our country, poised as it is on the threshold of new opportunities to enhance our reputation as good neighbours with high standards in education and business, and expertise in science, technology and the arts, to be engaged in political power games which both make us look foolish in the eyes of countries with histories and experience going back thousands of years, and draw energy away into essentially unproductive debates.

Two comments by Edmund Burke are a convenient summary of what I have been arguing:

“Those who have been once intoxicated with power, and have derived any kind of emolument from it, even though but for one year, can never willingly abandon it” and “In all forms of Government the people is the true legislator”.

The second can be true only if we do not permit the first to come true. To rob the people by whatever means of their ability to express their views, and to undermine their belief in the institutions – the church, family and government itself – which give us all a sense of stability in a changing world - is to betray the trust each one of us owes to every other.

Leonie Kramer