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The art of government

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THE ART OF GOVERNMENT

P.F. JENSEN

"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

'The art of government' according to Friedrich Theodor Vischer, 'consists of laying responsibility into clean hands.' This is not a perspective which seems to have been of great importance in the current election campaign, even though recent events in State and municipal politics may be thought to have raised the question. It is worth thinking for a moment why we have little interest in the subject of the integrity of our politicians. I can think of several reasons.

In the first place, federal politics seem very remote. Few of us know a politician; few of us are able to offer any assessment of their honesty from personal experience. In our system of government this is inevitable; but the isolation of our politicians is increased by our apathy and unwillingness to take politics seriously. This is not good for them or for us.

Secondly, there is a tendency to take the integrity of our leaders for granted. It is assumed that Australia has a uniform set of morals, and that, on the whole, men are decent. Neither of these assumptions is valid. Australia has chosen to be a so-called 'pluralist society'; there are now different moral standards, or none at all, and the evidence for this is plain on every side. Men do not obey God's standards, and they now have less and less conscience about their failures to do

so. It would be foolish to suppose that politicians are different from the majority of the citizens they represent.

The third reason for neglect of the question of integrity in politics, is the reverse of the last. There is a pervading cynicism about politicians; a determination to believe the worst; a conviction that politicians are all greedy and self-seeking, all willing to bend the rules in their own favour. In a famous statement Lord Acton said 'Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Belief in such a view means that we refuse to care about standards.

On this score it seems to me that Lord Acton's statement that 'power corrupts' needs to be challenged. Excessive cynicism is unhealthy; it paralyses action, and is a cloak for immorality and lack of compassion. We must insist on high standards in public life; we must insist that bribery and corruption continue to be reprehensible; we must utter the strongest protest about rough-house tactics. The standards of public life are deplorable; but they can be better. If we abandon this position we will ultimately find ourselves ruled by criminals. Then, indeed, may God save Australia!

There is a strong connection between effective government and morality. Leadership requires trust; we cannot be led by men whose word we have every reason to doubt. Those with clean hands may not be the cleverest politicians; but a man without integrity can never have true wisdom.

'The art of government consists of laying responsibility into clean hands.' A last word on this subject: in Australia, we pride ourselves on being self-governing. Ultimately, despite the cynics, this is true; from the ranks of ordinary Australians come the politicians and public servants who rule us. But they will not have clean hands and pure hearts,

unless we do; for they are part of us; and we govern ourselves. How effective are we at the 'art of government'? Not very - we cannot take this responsibility with clean hands ourselves.

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