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Title:

Article for Australian Book Review (re 'Party Games' by Christopher Mayhew)

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Although the editors have kindly invited me to do so, I don't think I will take issue at length with Mr A. J. Poise's article on 'Party Games' which appeared in the February ABR. For one thing, while he is perfectly entitled to his opinion that a high degree of party gamesmanship occurs in Australian parliaments and party politics and while he may to a certain extent be right, the specific issues he mentions are hardly intelligent examples of the process. I must also say that I think he's a bit rough in attributing the Christmas-New Year road toll to the South Australian Opposition because it voted against a bill on which insufficient work had been done. He should try reading Hansard.

The real points at issue are those raised by Christopher Mayhew in his book. He's a somewhat disillusioned man, one of the many middle-class English socialists who were, as he admits himself, most happy when it was possible to believe in grand deterministic solutions to human and social problems. It's not so simple these days and not so romantic. If in some cases the traditional divisions - that is, the ^{LATE} nineteenth century divisions - between progressive and conservative parties have become blurred, it is because ^{NEW} political issues themselves are blurred and can reflect on the one hand not class but educational groupings, and on the other that, to a given techno-political problem, say building a dam, a freeway, or implementing a specific mode of development, there may be a dozen relatively correct solutions.

But all the same in 'Party Games' Mayhew has made a number of points which one can applaud and hope to hear often, and which obviously apply ~~to~~ to Australian Parliaments as they do to Westminster. Any observer of Australian Parliaments would be aware of the prevalence of one-up-man-ship, the dismal spectacle of MPs struggling to win an argument for the sake of scoring points, be it on a point-of-order, an interjection, or their opponent's interpretation of the legislative matter in hand. We often find the houses becoming empty and useless talking shops in which members feel impelled to make speeches which no one listens to and no one reads, and which do

nothing whatever to get an effective job done in legislation or administration. It is also true that at times parties and people take public stances designed to bedevil the opposing side, or to appear in contrast to it, rather than as a result of judging issues on their merits. I won't point fingers here, but I will say that the process is an awful waste of time.

But Mr Mayhew is clearly most worried about the lack of significant differences between the major parties in his country, and the effect this has on the idea of parliamentary and cabinet government. The implication is that the Labour movement in Britain has somehow lost its sense of historic purpose. He points to minority communist control of local English constituent parties where unreal table-thumping has sent old Labour members scurrying back to their moderately comfortable post-war council flats. He writes of intransigent and regressive militancy in trades unions when, say, a factory employing several thousands in one run-down area needs to be closed so that employment opportunities can be given to tens of thousands in another area. He notes a rise of conservative attitudes among working-class people. And he describes how political ^{CAPITAL} is made out of economic problems that are beyond the control of any party; — he organized Harold Wilson's successful attack on the Conservative's "stop-go" economic policies for the 1964 election, and now finds that identical charges could be brought against the present Wilson Government. Official Labour and Official Tory in Britain, he says, are rapidly moving to the center and so party games are played in the absence of ^{OR IDEOLOGICAL} political purpose.

Well that may or may not be an ideal way of seeing the present state of the two party system in England. Personally I think it's a bit simple. Britain still has its problems, and will find more, and only political action by representative party governments will be able to solve them. For Australia, on the other hand, there are still and will remain quite clear divisions between the major parties, and ^{UNDERSTANDING} ~~them~~ ^{THEM IS} of vital importance to the future of good Australian government. Our Parliaments may often appear to suffer from the logorrhoea of legislators, for which there is a cure in the amendment of Standing

Orders, but ^{IT SHOULD ALSO BE UNDERSTOOD THAT OPEN WHAT MIGHT TO THE ILLINFORMED} ~~_____~~ ~~_____~~ ~~_____~~ ~~_____~~
 APPEAR A SIMPLE GAME IS INFACT A TOURNAMENT IN WHICH THE STAKES ARE
 much more than an egocentric ^{DESIRE FOR} ~~_____~~ office. The problems that are now
 arising from a galloping technology, together with the train of social
 and economic problems on which there has been no action in Australia -
 and one can mention quickly health, prices and incomes, education,
 environmental control, housing and town planning - can only be solved
 by parties not tied down to vague and irrational ideas of laissez-faire
 business practices, ^{AND} unreal divisions between public and private sectors,
 and ~~_____~~ ^{WHICH} are capable of implementing general reforms rather than imposing
 stop-gap measures.

If one is to draw a line between the two major parties in Australia
 as they are now shaping up in the final third of the century, it is
 a line that cuts between the broad concepts of conservatism and
 progression, between those who see that distinct changes need to be
 made to the present rules which govern our society and those who
 support a maintenance of the status quo or would even return to a status
quo ante. Unfortunately, of course, there are conservatives in both
 major parties, and because of this the Labour Party at times has found
 it difficult to pursue radical and effective programmes of reform to
 the extent which from the reformers' point of view would have been
 desirable. But while I don't wish here (to) brashly thump out a party
 line, the inescapable fact in Australia is that over the last thirty
 years ^{MOST OF} the major reforms that have taken place in the community have
 been achieved by Labour Governments or under pressure from Labour
 Oppositions. And for Australia, the Labour Party is the ~~_____~~ party
 of reform ~~_____~~ capable of running the country responsibly and which
 is capable of being accepted by voters as an alternative government.
 What other party in the country is lined up on the side of planning,
 civil liberties, ~~_____~~ increased spending in the public sector, ^{and} ~~_____~~ a
 rational and realistic foreign policy?

To deal with, say, two specific issues in which the division
 between the major parties in Australia becomes pointed, one has only to
 turn to the Treasury when Mr. McMahon ran it. Under his control it

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pursued an open-door investment policy despite the fact that this allowed the control of much of the country's natural resources to pass into the hands of overseas investment combines. They are now able to control what we produce and to limit future fields of manufacturing and development. There obviously has to be greater control exercised over the forms of overseas investment we are getting. We obviously need to import development capital, but we also obviously have to have a say in where it goes or what it does. Under the McMahon policy, unfortunately, we have commenced running very quickly towards the position that Canada now occupies, that is being subjected to effective foreign control of our economy. It is a clear case of how, structurally and ideologically, the Liberal-Country Party Government finds itself incapable of applying controls, no matter how reasonable, on certain commercial and capital situations.

The other example concerns civil rights and freedoms, about which a great deal is known and obvious. Here clearly we have a situation of conservatism that is almost clinically retentive in effect. Whether it be Mr. McMahon, to use the same example, emulating Senator McCarthy, in attacking Dr. Everingham during the Capricornian by-election, or the absurdities of book and film censorship, the case is clear. On the other hand/
Labor's policy now is that people should be free from attacks on their private views and actions, and free to read what they want to read, and the only limitation placed on publications or performances is that people should not have material offensive to them forced upon them, whether on street corners, door-to-door or through the mails. Sir Henry Bolte, on behalf of the illiberal philosophy has said that what Australia needs is not less censorship but more.

The fact is that in Australia, major issues of policy do tend to get polarised between the two parties, though there are issues occasionally on which a free vote is taken in our Parliaments. Generally Mr. Mayhew argues for a far more loose system of party government, but the danger there is that we could drift

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back to the situation which existed before Party activity in Australia - constant and debilitating changes of government.

As a cure for the position England finds itself in, Mr. Mayhew proposes that there should be a much less rigid pattern of voting on party lines in Parliament, a much less rigid division of parties on class lines, a clarification of the real issues which should be concerning government, and with these an ending of gamesmanship. He proposes a far greater degree of committee work, as occurs in the United States Congress, where bi-partisan committees with considerable powers investigate expenditures or aspects of legislation and report back to the house, and indeed there is a good case for more committee work being done in Westminster-type Parliaments. But the difference between a Parliament and Congress should be noted. The Executive and the Legislature in America is separate; heads of Departments do not sit on the floor of the House and answer questions. Without a radical restructuring of legislative and administrative methods, Australian governments would find it hard to implement committees of the precise American model, though they certainly could do more than is at present being done. As for the other matters, I don't think it is any longer possible to say that the Labor Party in Australia reflects a hide-bound class situation. Rather it attracts a quite significant white-collar vote and is reflecting a changing social-educational situation. Its internal problems are those of adjusting to the kind of new support it can command, and clearly the Party vote will have to be maintained if it is to achieve the reforms these supporters are expecting.

Among the new issues which Mr. Mayhew considers should be concerning our governments are 'human factors in technological development', the 'stress caused in society by stimulating artificial consumer needs', the 'over-stimulation of grievances' observed when the social ideal projected by mass media is a style of life that comes with a \$15,000 annual income, the 'climate of delinquency' our society encourages, and the neglect of mental health. These are all admirably important matters and should

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concern us all, not only governments but also editors, television magnates, justices and voters. They are not matters about which party games should be played by anybody. And so what he is really arguing for is moral parliaments, not the morality of a fundamentalist revival but the morality required in the intelligent exercise of powers that can make sense of and bring change to the more distressing social and political anomalies that crowd in upon us.
