

## Chapter 10 Kelvin Thomson: A Parliamentary look at Cultural Transformation

### Synopsis

For Thomson, *“making the world safe for civilians is core business for anyone like me who is involved in public policy, and core business for people like yourselves who are interested in good public policy and promoting human health around the globe”* is the purpose of governments. In the context of inter- and intra-national violence and the fact that the major powers condone this when it applies to their ‘friends’, and so stymie effective action by international agencies such as the UN to stop such violence, and the poverty, inequity, environmental destruction and reduction in the quality of people’s lives, Thomson asks what transformation in our culture is required to address this.

Since the 1980s the ‘progressive left’ (left politics, trade unions and the environment movement) has been losing the war: *“We sometimes win battles, but overall we are not winning. I repeat, we are losing the war. We sometimes win elections, but usually on the terms of our opposition. We are in office, but not in power. And at all times we are fighting defensive, rearguard actions to protect the things we have achieved and built up”*. The regulation of corporations occasioned by the Great Depression has been progressively undone as corporate wealth, power and influence has grown and big corporations have become transnational and so outside effective government control.

The neoliberal political philosophy espousing market fundamentalism, ‘free’ trade and a globalised economy has come to dominate our culture and shape how we operate as a society. Even the left accepts this framing. The role of the media in promoting this philosophy is

To counter this Thomson proposes that we learn from nations where this world view is less is ascendant. Scandinavia provides such a model. He advocates we *“campaign in favour of independence and self-reliance and against rapid population growth.”* So the transformation of Australian political culture required is to adopt this pragmatically successful model. *“For Australia to progress, we need to look less at tired orthodoxies from either the Left or the Right and study the Scandinavian models instead.”*

The model includes: to have a diverse economy, free tertiary education, an industrial relations system favouring high workforce participation and strong support for workers, a large public sector and balanced books. This cultural paradigm permits strong public support for the political institutions.

Our success then needs to be measured not in relation to financial through-put but by achievement of social values outcomes in terms of *“employment, inflation, interest rates, and balancing the books. We need low unemployment, low inflation, low interest rates, and a strong budget.”* Focus on the welfare of the population creates the social capital that helps these nations remain economically strong and competitive.

The final cultural transformation proposed is to recognise the role of ecosystem services to improve habitability of cities, and to facilitate active participation in the green and blue outdoors to build physical and mental health.

### Discussion

At a parliamentary level, cultural transformation would include de-concentration of the news media and expansion of internet and social media.

Specific parliamentary related reforms:

- Campaign financing reform to limit donations to political parties and prevent people and corporations with commercial interests from buying influence over parliamentarians.
- In parallel open, continuous open disclosure of donations with various limitations such as ceiling on amounts for individual, limits of donations to individual people (not corporations).
- Limits to political advertising during elections with the funding for the advertisement publically disclosed.
- Transparency of all government reports and public money decisions, all related documents available on a website. Only limited 'commercial-in-confidence' applicable during an actual tender process, but not subsequently.

These openness and accountability rules would apply to all organisations and individuals involved in the political process: corporations, think tanks, NGOs, Unions, etc..

Process issues (input from Jim Donaldson, Kelvin Thomson, Franzi Poldy):

- Identify and work with those not benefiting from the current system; explain the cause of current problems and expose the reasons why the current system is creating this situation.
- Build mechanisms for collective action focused around a specific issue. Link these spatially across geographic and nations scales.
- Develop mechanisms to overcoming resistance to change from vested interests – use the tactics of the resisters.

## **Commentary**

The role of government is to make society safe for citizens. The system is currently failing because of less than ideal behaviour by major nation states and because of the unconstrained influence of corporations operating within a 'free-market' neoliberal cultural paradigm. There are examples in the Scandinavian countries where pragmatic alternative politico-economic models operate that have very positive social and economic outcomes that reinforce prosperity, health and wellbeing of the citizens. Because of this they have strong public support.

The model includes: a diverse economy, free tertiary education, an industrial relations system favouring high workforce participation and strong support for workers, a large public sector and balanced books. Success needs to be measured in relation to achievement of social values outcomes in these domains not financial through-put.

Specific foci for parliamentary process reform were identified: campaign financing, continuous open disclosure of donations, limits to political advertising and transparency of all government reports and public money decisions.