

THE MESS WE ARE IN:

A Challenge to Parliaments

By John W. Burton

From an evolutionary perspective, humanity is in a dangerous mess. The more societies have developed in GDP terms, the more there have been failures in relationships at all social levels, from the family to the international. There are daily reports of occurrences of anti-social behaviours. We hear of robberies and sexual assaults, of conflict and violence in families, in schools, and at the workplace; we hear of murders and suicides, of ethnic and religious conflicts; and we hear of wars within and between nations.

All of this is happening in a world in which, despite millions of deaths from starvation and disease, population is increasing, needed resources are being depleted, and activities damaging to the climate are uncontrolled.

We must ask:

- How has this crisis evolved?
- Why is so little being done about this mess?
- What needs to be done?
- Are relevant changes politically possible?

The short answers to these questions are that:

- (i) Social evolution has led humanity to adversarial institutions, including parliaments, court processes, industrial relations, international relations, and relationships generally.
- (ii) Humans have developed intellectually in ways that have led them to make amazing discoveries and inventions, but not to an extent that enables them to control emotions connected with their valued social roles and benefits.
- (iii) The change required is an altered direction of social evolution from adversarial to collaborative relationships and institutions, thus avoiding conflict at all social levels.
- (iv) To be practical politically, such change requires first a shift to harmonious relationships at what we consider the more advanced societies' centres – the parliament. There are conditions developing now that make this possible.

HOW HAS THIS CRISIS EVOLVED?

The Problem Area

Amazing scientific discoveries and creative inventions have led to greatly increased physical comfort for people in economically developed societies. But within these societies quality of life (QOL), as measured by harmonious relationships, happiness and security, is now declining.

At the present stage of human evolution material gains, frequently obtained by adversarial means, and security and defence measures to protect such gains, are pursued at the expense of quality of life.

And now, humanity has entered a critical phase at which it is capable of self-destruction. Technological advances have given some powers the means to exterminate their opponents. Other advances have led to resource depletion and climate threats, without an equal effort to offset the damage these cause.

Evolution of Adversarial Behaviour

The emergence of human relationship problems was a stage in the evolutionary process. In living species we can observe, for example in animals in the wild, that while relationships are clearly valued, satisfaction of physical needs and defence against others seeking to satisfy their existence needs, are the major concerns.

Defence requires the initiative of those who dominate and who can command the necessary actions. Hence leaderships and power-elites emerge.

In due course the human species became able to take advantage of and adjust to changing environmental conditions and innovations. In many parts of the world one-time hunters and gatherers made discoveries which led to agriculture. This required seasonal work and living on suitable and available agricultural land. Not everyone could be a land-owner. In agricultural cultural communities, land-owners and their serfs emerged as separate classes.

Similar discovery processes led to industrial production, and to its classes of owners and slaves. And so the process went on: increasing populations, more complex societies, and administrations to provide defence and other services, leading to societies organized by, and very much in the interests of those responsible for the production of goods and services. Societies continued to be comprised of mainly two classes: owners/managers and workers.

Inevitably, in time, organizations emerged to improve the rewards and working conditions of those who considered they were being exploited. Organized adversarial relationships, especially in industry, developed.

Adversarial relationships increasingly became a feature of administrations. Governments reflected this feature of societies. Political parties were identified either with those aiming to preserve the we-they society and its institutions, or those seeking, at least to some degree, to close the gap between the well-to-do and others.

Social Consequences

In economically developed nations, one now sees a fundamental shift in these we-they relationships. There are increasing income inequalities leading to a smaller, but richer, well-to-do class, a growing middle class, and an increasing number of impoverished citizens.

The traditional adversarial two political parties represent the first two of these three classes. They still continue their adversarial political party parliamentary tactics, despite the fact that they no longer have major differences in philosophies and policies.

These developments leave impoverished citizens without representation. Lacking opportunities for technical education, frequently deprived of housing, employment and an adequate income, they sometimes have no option but to pursue some anti-social activities.

WHY IS SO LITTLE BEING DONE ABOUT THIS MESS?

All of this is well known, but in seeking an answer to our four questions about the mess we are in, it is important to have in mind these early evolutionary sources of our problems, and their long-term emergence. The evolutionary process shows that the origin of the mess we are in is not the fault of those who benefited, nor is it due to neglect by those who suffered: it is the consequence of early evolution.

Recent Evolution

Now we must recognize that human social evolution has reached a stage at which humanity is intellectually capable of changing its direction from adversarial to collaborative, problem-solving relationships, and has the capability, not only of sharing QOL, but also of sacrificing some contemporary benefits for the sake of future generations.

Why, then, is so little being done about the mess we are in?

In England four centuries ago, after a civil war in which the power of the Crown was challenged, Parliament increased its powers, and after 1832, the franchise was extended. There has been a continuing, but very slow recognition of the need to involve larger groups of people in government decision-making processes. Comparable changes have occurred in the U.S.A., France and other countries.

As a consequence, there is now a widely declared ideal social structure termed “democracy”- government for the people, by the people. But this is, at this point in time, no more than deceptive rhetoric.

Contemporary “democracies” are certainly not governed for the people. Electoral processes ensure government is greatly influenced by organized interest groups. Legislatures in such so-called “democracies” comprise “government” and “opposition”, which reflect government for some people by some people, but at the expense of others.

Where there are such so-called “democracies,” legislatures are structurally adversarial to an extreme. For example, “Question Time” in the Australian Parliament, which takes place for an hour each sitting day, has become an exhibition of uncontrolled party-political conflict. Questions to Ministers are planned in advance to enable members of each side to smear members of the other. When legislation is being considered, there is very little discussion of policies or willingness to amend drafts. Debate eliminates thoughtful discussion. The whole process is an embarrassment to witness.

Furthermore, the democratic concept is not usually applied in the family, in schools or in industry. In all these places power dominates at the expense of individual identity, leading to more faulty relationships, and consequential protest and crime in one form or another.

It seems to be quite clear from failed attempts to reach international agreements of specific problems, for example, global warming, that human beings have chosen to pursue their immediate interests rather than make some sacrifices in the interests of those in need of support, and of future generations. This is in spite of widespread warnings by many who are in a position to stand aside from group interests and to conduct objective research.

In short, the evolution of humanity is at a stage at which it has achieved technologically, but is apparently not yet emotionally capable of changing its direction away from adversarial relationships towards socially collaborative relationships, despite the predictable conflictual consequences. Hence, little is done to deal with the serious mess we are in.

Influencing Human Behaviour

However, social changes and innovative thinking are now taking place which in due course could influence human behaviour.

Developed economies are experiencing fundamental changes in human relationships in the family and at the workplace as more and more women, including mothers, are attracted to employment to increase income to meet the costs of living, and also probably to satisfy their need to exercise their talents and training and for role recognition as individual identities, something denied to women in earlier industrial societies.

The required shift from early primitive adversarial behaviours to human responsibility is now recognized. An increasing, but still small, number of people are now less willing to regard GDP as the measure of progress, or to support the traditional adversarial “haves” versus “have-nots” political party system, now leaving those in need without representation. Small groups are coming together to provide alternatives.

Perhaps even more important, there is a growing number who seek to tackle contemporary problems of humanity by political means, as individuals and as groups free to make their own assessments and decisions. If these trends were to continue, future political systems could emerge which would pursue government “for the people, by the people,” reflecting changing values.

There is also an increasing interest in exploring intellectual and psychological explanations of human adherence to adversarial behaviour.

In recent years there have been, among other relevant publications, two valuable contributions to an understanding of the problem. It is from such thinking that the structure of a genuine democratic and problem-solving system could be deduced. It is useful to glance at the contributions of these worried authors.

Vamik Volkan's Blind Trust (Pitchstone Publishing 2004) is an in-depth analysis of human needs and behaviour. In it, Volkan explains the human need for personal identity, but also the ways in which this need leads in some cases to narcissistic, self-serving behaviour, so characteristic of many political leaders who, at a national level, are prepared to sacrifice their people in wars to enhance their own personal status. He deals at length with the attraction of belonging to recognized social groups, and in this context deals with religious rivalries. Understandably, in the past, psychology has been more concerned with helping people to adjust to existing societal requirements than with suggesting ways in which structures could be adjusted to satisfy human needs. Blind Trust provides a human-needs frame for considering the future.

Jared Diamond's Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive (Penguin Books, Ltd. 2005) fits well within the Volkan analysis. He traces the way in which a system may collapse through failure to meet human needs. For example, communism was introduced to take the place of a power-elite system which did not cater for the needs of the people; but communism collapsed once it became a party dictatorship with narcissistic leaders denying individual identity to the people.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Problem-Solving

Although there is general awareness of the mess we are in at both a personal and a governmental level, practice demonstrates an unwillingness to pursue necessary changes in structures and policies. Is there any approach which could push humanity toward positive changes?

The human brain and social organization tend to lead to specializations within areas of interest. For example, medical research and practice tend to be separate occupations. This leads to innovations and skills not otherwise possible. When, however, it is human behaviour that is the problem, specialization is likely to lead to misleading and superficial observations.

Science is extremely specialized. Reading science journals leaves one amazed at the discoveries being made in particular fields, and the necessary cooperation between those involved in different countries and different disciplines. But aspects of the mess we are in, such as family violence, suicides, ethnic and international conflicts, are still usually researched as separate issues.

To solve human behavioural problems, it is necessary to bring together all behavioural disciplines, including among them psychology, economics and sociology. To solve

relationship problems at any social level, from the family to the international, analysis must get to sources, which inevitably relate to social environments, experiences and early learning.

A holistic approach to human behaviour reveals that some characteristics which are treated by societies as normal, even laudable, may be abnormal. For example, many popularly acclaimed leaders, when analysed, are revealed to have a serious narcissistic problem probably going back to early childhood. Indeed one of the worst problems humanity presently faces is that of leadership, inclined towards dictatorial behaviour.

Even leaders who do not have such psychological problems are inclined to pursue conflicts once they have emerged, fearing that reaching agreement would be interpreted as weak leadership.

By bringing parties in conflict together, including authorities and those charged with anti-social behaviour, with a professional mediator, and by applying processes which enable the parties to delve into the needs which led to the problem, each party can perceive the other's human needs, and the drive that led each to pursue their own needs regardless of costs and consequences. The analysis can then move to seek a practical solution which will be lasting, regardless of differences in coercive power.

When the conflict involves narcissistic leaders, or those who fear the consequences of reaching agreement with the former enemy, as is frequently the case, informal discussions need to be arranged between respected public servants and/or recognized social leaders. Agreements reached can be made public, in some cases, by leaders, who can claim success.

This form of holistic problem-solving has acquired the label of Conflict Analysis and Resolution". There is an extensive literature which describes the application of human needs theory to the practice of conflict analysis and resolution. David Dunn's The First Fifty Years of Conflict Resolution (Ashgate 2005) describes publications and practices relating to conflict resolution. He shows that it is a tool which can be applied to all aspects of human behaviour.

Putting these insights together, one deduces that the institutions required to deal with the mess we are in must in practice be genuine government for the people, by the people, and, importantly, be perceived as such by the peoples affected.

How Do We Change?

We are considering human behaviours at all social levels, from the family to the international. In nation states which claim to be from the family to the democratic, behaviours by parliaments are particularly important, both for setting an example and for establishing the institutions which mould the behaviours of all citizens. If there are adversarial processes at the level of government, this will be a feature of law courts, at schools and within families.

The sensible and practical level at which to start examining the processes and possibilities of structural change is, therefore, at the level of government. If the national parliament shifted from adversarial to collaborative behaviours, it would

present a challenge to industry and to all other social relationship units, down to the family. Furthermore, parliaments could legislate to ensure that non-adversarial institutions and behaviours were encouraged.

Compulsory Voting

Below are listed some of the requirements of a genuine problem-solving democracy. Before considering them, it is important to recognize that most so-called democracies do not include a significant proportion of the population. In the U.S.A. for example, in 2000 only 51% of those eligible voted, and in 2004 60% voted only as a result of millions being spent in getting people to the polls or to vote by mail. Postal voting is widespread with no means of checking who responded.

It is important for societies to recognize that young people have the human need for identity and a social role. Parents and school teachers frequently ignore this reality in their exercise of discipline. Societies have an obligation to incorporate teenagers by inviting them to participate in electoral processes as members of society by giving them the right to vote.

Social changes, including among many others the increasing proportion of working mothers and the communication revolution, have changed the interests and relationships of young people. In the absence of close and continuing family relationships, personal identity and a recognized role in their society have become important at an earlier age. Present leadership and parliamentary practices seem to be decreasing young people's interest in politics.

Indigenous people in many countries are seeking means by which their rights and needs can be met. It is important to ensure that they are included in the voting process. Some special arrangements might be required in some countries.

(Some years ago in Australia, Aborigines established a "Tent Embassy" across the road from the former Parliament House building in Canberra. It has been maintained as a form of protest against past and present treatments even though it is little more than a sight for visitors to see. The Senate half of the Old Parliament House could be handed over to Aboriginal peoples as a meeting place for the regional tribes, as an exhibition centre, and as a centre for their recognition endeavours. By financing a small staff, the Commonwealth Government could help the Aborigines to become integrated into Australian society, while maintaining their pride in their own identity, and to help solve the many problems in living conditions that Aborigines are experiencing.)

Principles of a Genuine Democracy

Many features of a constructive governmental structure which is designed to meet "personal needs" follow from observing society on a daily basis.

1. Every member of a family (including, importantly, all children), a community, or a society, must have their need met for recognition as an identity, with a recognized social role.

2. Authorities in the family, the school, the work place, in regional and international relations, must ensure relationships are based on respect for cultural and personal identities, and must never use an authoritarian or coercive process.
3. Citizens must feel that they have the opportunity to communicate to decision-makers their needs and values as individuals. This would require representatives in parliament and their assistants to spend more time in electorates and to respond to the views of their constituents, and to be seen to reject pressures and bribes from interest groups.
4. Elected representatives to decision-making institutions must be free to vote and act in ways designed to achieve the legitimate needs and values of their electorates.
5. Narcissistic leaders have to be avoided. The way to do this is formally to limit the role of leadership to promoting discussion and coordinating viewpoints.
6. Conflict analysis and resolution processes have to be adopted at all relationship levels in place of threats and punishments.

A Reform Scenario

The conclusion suggested by the above analysis is that without fundamental change, humanity is doomed to live in a sea of conflict. At an earlier time responsibility and blame for problems in relationships were irrelevant. That is not the case today. The intellectual capacity, though not the will, exists to control emotional and value systems.

Probably it is unrealistic to consider how development could be redirected from adversarial towards collaborative behaviour; but attempts must be made in the hope that there are useful discoveries to be made.

Let us now consider how fundamental structural change might come about.

Let us start with the traditional lower and upper house parliamentary system.

Let us consider the following scenario: At a future election there is an increase in support for the new small parties, and an increased number of independent members.

After the election, members of the new parties and the independents come together to discuss possibilities. They recognize that they may not agree on policies, but do agree that the traditional adversarial system of Government and Opposition has to be changed.

After discussion they agree that:

1. Constitutional changes should ensure that Crowns and their representatives, and Presidents, should have no more than ceremonial roles. (For Australia, about to consider becoming a republic, this is an important consideration.)
2. Each House of Parliament should be chaired by a member selected by the House, and her/his function would be to ensure discussion rather than debate.

3. All members should be free to act and to vote in accordance with their values and the interests of the electorate – a “conscience vote”.
4. Members should no longer sit grouped as government, opposition and others, but in alphabetical order of electorates.
5. Ministries and their functions should be determined by a joint meeting of both Houses.
6. A joint meeting of both Houses would also vote to choose Ministers. Ministers could be changed at any time by a vote in both Houses.
7. Public servants should be selected by an independent commission, and no political influence should be tolerated.
8. There should not be a Cabinet or Front Bench. Ministers would take their electorate seats. They would report intentions and decisions to the Parliament or to a parliamentary committee. Ministers with overlapping functions, as for example, Foreign Affairs and Defence, would meet as and when required.
9. A Minister should rely on advice from his/her Department. Ministers would have available a staff member of the Department to ensure communication, but no appointed advisers.
10. There should not be a Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition.
11. Senior public servants should be present during parliamentary discussions on matter relevant to their departmental concerns in order to sense the atmosphere of the discussions and the policies to be followed.
12. Staff of parliamentary members should be limited to two. Each member should be given funds for an electoral office and three electoral staff to keep in touch with members
13. All decisions taken should be the result of discussion to resolve differences in viewpoints, and would be made by a two-thirds majority vote.
14. All parliamentary sittings and committee meetings should be open to the public by media and TV reporting.

ARE THE REQUIRED CHANGES POLITICALLY POSSIBLE?

Is this all too far from political reality to be worth considering?

As suggested above, there is already increasing popular and professional disrespect for the contemporary adversarial party political system, and for the way in which presidents and prime ministers are being dictatorial and acting without legislative discussion, even when going to war.

In many countries, as in Australia, the traditional parties must contend, or learn to work with other elected members who belong to newly established parties or are independents. In the Australian Senate, comprising 76 members (twelve from each of the six states and two from each of the two territories), there are four Greens, four Democrats, one Family First and one Country Liberal Party. These, on occasion, hold the balance of power in the Senate. In the House of Representatives, comprising 150 members, there are three Independents and one Country Liberal.

In the traditional “democratic” system, there are two major parties, representing the haves and the have-nots. With economic development, there has evolved a middle class, and both right and left traditional parties require and seek this middle class support. As a consequence, party policies overlap to an increasing extent. The debates now focus on ministerial decisions and leadership problems rather than on political philosophies and policies.

At present, there is frequently conflict within political parties. Religious factions, left and right ideologies and such sources of conflict result in leadership rivalries. Policy issues are no longer the main areas for discussion.

Future elections are likely to add to this de facto rejection of the traditional two-party system.

It would not be surprising if a party which went to the people at election time with a core policy of collaboration, not adversarialism, attracted strong support. This could perhaps be made more likely if the media, journals, NGOs and other non-governmental bodies were now to discuss these issues.

To repeat, civilizations are in a mess. Maybe there is nothing we can do about it. But we must at least explore.

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