Family Voice AUSTRALIA
MAIN POINT
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The international battle for freedom

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The first decade of the Twenty-First Century concluded with severe unrest in Hong Kong. Protest can easily get out of hand and even be subverted by hired provocateurs however, the underlying message is clear: the people value their freedom and will put their personal safety at risk to protect it. Hong Kong is a weathervane of the contrary winds against freedom.

It seems governments across the world believe global prosperity is inextricably connected to China's ascension as a world power and therefore some nations turn a blind eye to its serious human rights violations. According the Beijing Correspondent for ***The Times*** of London, Ms Didi Tang, State control in China has increased in recent years, typified by the detention of more than a million Uighur Muslims in "re-education camps". Since 2012, China has experimented with a high-tech social credit system that has echoes of the Communist Party's dossier system, which kept a file on every citizen, and surveillance is pervasive, Didi Tang stated recently in ***The Times***. She continued as follows:

> *Using big data, artificial intelligence and high-resolution surveillance, this social credit scoring assesses all aspects of a person's life: whether they support the ruling party, conserve energy, sign up as an organ donor, pay bills on time and follow traffic rules.*
>
> *Anyone on the blacklist will have restrictions placed on their travel, access to loans, jobs and their children's education. Some could end up in prison – Chinese courts boast a nearly 100 per cent conviction rate. In the economic domain, though, China's achievements are undeniable.*[1]

China is successfully exporting their Smart City management technology. More than 60 nations have imported that system from China. But many in the West are deeply concerned about China's record of espionage, expansionism and human rights abuse..[2] The Hong Kong protesters evidently regard facial recognition surveillance as a threat to freedom and democracy. Whether such technology will benefit or harm legitimate dissent in Western nations should be a matter of serious concern.



Hong Kong is a weathervane of the contrary winds against freedom

The use of 24/7 surveillance is a way of ensuring that a person is never free. [3] And yet in liberal democracies we seem to welcome technological advances that track our every step and purchase. But what of the loss of privacy and ultimately of liberty?

As noted by a Victorian Law Reform report into surveillance, many people may be shocked to discover that their movements or conversations in public places have been recorded by unseen CCTV cameras or listening devices. The commission was told of numerous instances of surveillance occurring without clear notice to the public.[4] Hong Kong is telling us that surveillance can turn nasty.

Australians are becoming increasingly aware of the influence exerted by the Chinese government on our universities, including stifling criticism of Beijing and using our educational resources to advance China's agenda of dominion[5]. Its strategy is working here and in many other parts of the world. Apparently, China can deny its citizens basic freedoms even in Western nations such as Australia, as the economic benefits of the relationship seem so compelling. No wonder our campuses are soft on free speech.

Recently elected federal MP Dave Sharma (representing the NSW seat of Wentworth) strongly denounced what he calls "political warfare — hostile acts directed at undermining the sovereignty or compromising the freedom of action of an adversary".

> *The weapons of this new form of warfare, as practised by authoritarian states, includes misinformation and propaganda, cyber operations, the exploitation (witting or otherwise) of local political actors, political influence and interference in electoral processes, discrediting of a nation's institutions, the active establishment and acquisition of key strategic assets, and the exacerbation of fault lines and divisions within a society.*[6]

Sharma observes that the tempo has increased so much that taking defensive measures alone ***can*** *threaten to undermine the very freedoms and openness our enemies seek to exploit.* He recommends a shift from our defensive posture in international affairs to a more offensive capability:

> *The usual practitioners of political warfare, authoritarian regimes, are themselves highly vulnerable to political warfare. We should develop the*

capabilities to take the fight to them in this domain, even if only to create effective deterrence.

Their populations know from experience that economic rewards for compliance do not compare with the pricelessness of freedom and justice. We may have to learn the hard way too.

Sharma also underlines the value of a free media for shining its spotlight on the corruption and human rights abuses of various governments. Letting the world know about these abuses destabilizes the legitimacy of such regimes, which is crucial when so many young people are being taught that the Left is right and the Right is wrong.

We are fortunate that there are mainstream journalists like Greg Sheridan who in a seminal article[7] summarised the many voices warning us about the magnitude of the challenge to national freedom and sovereignty from foreign interference. [8] This is a difficult time for freedom globally and the political war against it is here too.



Freedom in the Western tradition

It is common to think of Greece as the starting point of the Western tradition's liberal and democratic values. But the Greek tradition of male citizens voting upon the civic and political issues of their city state was blind to human rights more broadly.

The Roman Empire prized the status of Roman citizenship and even proclaimed its sense of democracy and love of freedom but citizenship was a rarity in the Empire. Interestingly, both Athens and Rome deified freedom[9], and "during Augustus' long history Rome proudly manifested its democratic institutions and love (of) freedom as opposed to the traditions in the East."[10]

However, the Western tradition of freedom began with a very narrow political privilege. Things have come a long way, by the radical influence of Christianity, to recognise the dignity and value of everyone, regardless of gender, race or social status. Christian concepts of human dignity greatly appealed to the masses and they are a key reason for the spread of Christianity among the poor and slave classes of the empire. Of course, it did not occur without significant clashes between Jews and Christians, especially before AD 60.[11]

The historian Luke recorded that in about AD 48 a riot occurred in Thessalonica in response to the Apostle Paul's teaching. The charge was that "those who have turned the world upside down have come here also and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus."[12]

This riot was a stitch up and began the practice of portraying early Christianity as a political threat to the Emperor. Early Christianity was never about political systems per se, but about the fundamental wellbeing of humanity and the common good. When social and political systems were corrupt, unjust and oppressive the very nature of Christian life and service was regarded as dissent. Christians believed then as now that human beings have a special place in the Divine Will and rescuing people from oppression and injustice was and is part of their obedience to God, no matter what man might demand.[13] This perspective is increasingly important as we see the political war against freedom gathering momentum.

The Apostle Paul, writing as early as AD 48 declared: "It is for freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1)

Paul used the analogy of the common slave market, which for his first readers spoke volumes about the loss of legal rights and identity. It was widely understood and experienced, since perhaps 20 per cent of people in the ancient Roman Empire were slaves.[14] The application then is that Christ had come in order to restore a person's legal standing with the Creator God and restore honourable identity through relationship with Him.

Like a wealthy benefactor, God was 'redeeming' sinners and 'adopting' them into His family, thus restoring legal standing and identity. This message has remained central because it resonates with all who feel hopeless and without honourable identity.

Both Jesus and Paul used the language of emancipation to graphically describe the Christian release from hopelessness and worthlessness. In Christ we throw off fear, hatred, guilt, shame and false love. This freedom was personal and internal, but it changed how people related in society.

The message of emancipation found a special resonance again in the Eighteenth Century when William Wilberforce and his associates called for the end of slavery. It remains a standout modern example of Christians serving to secure the good of others which emerged from the preaching of the gospel of Christ and the widespread acceptance of that message. The reform movement gave a civic application to Paul's words: "For you were called to freedom. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for indulging natural desires, but through love serve one another."[15]

Eventually legal emancipation reached the slaves of North America (not without massive cost during the Civil War). The legal emancipation gave political expression to their inward and personal experience of emancipation from sin, as expressed even in their condition of slavery by songs of faith that continued to inspire the call for freedom. The motif of the Exodus was especially resonant in their songs – of Moses leading the people out of bondage.[16]

Another consequence of the Christian influence on the West was prison reform. The appalling conditions of people in gaol in Britain and its territories received a sharp challenge from social reformers whose Christian faith impelled them to expose the wrongdoing and focus more on rehabilitation.

In his Prison research Michel Foucault concluded that much of prison life was not intended to teach skills that would be of value after sentence was served. Meaningless labour and wasted time was intended to compound prisoners into a manageable delinquent class. This was a deeply troubling analysis too easily dismissed. [17]

In 1976, more than 200 years after all slaves in the British Empire received emancipation, and long after significant (though incomplete) reforms of the penal system, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was adopted by the United Nations. The Preamble to that document gave … *recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world …*

It stated that *the ideal of free human*

beings enjoying civil and political freedom and freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his civil and political rights, as well as his economic, social and cultural rights … [18]

The purpose of those rights – so eloquently proclaimed after World War Two – was that *everyone may enjoy freedom, justice and peace.* That must include a fair share of the earth's plenty.

The Christian understanding of freedom acknowledges that rights are inherent but also that the freedom intended is generally unfulfilled. Christians present Christ as the one through whom the inherent potential is released by his redemptive work.

Christians see the inherent dignity and freedom of humanity as firstly spiritual - being reconciled to God and then to others through God's forgiveness. When this happens, people come to peace and with peace comes freedom. In Paul's words to the Christians at Corinth: *Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom* (2 Corinthians 3:17).

The Christian influence on the Western tradition eventually became known as 'the Judaeo-Christian ethic'. It brings together the moral law of the Old Testament to restrain criminality, and the higher aspiration to do good that is above and beyond the law, as described in the New Testament. In this way, while a free society will always need law, its vision is above law, emphasising the responsible and creative potential of freedom in Christ.

The mainstream Christian view of freedom is not as a license to do whatever we want. It is wide but limited by the understanding that not everything people may want to do as an individual is in the common good. The limits are there because people are not consistently reliable in handling freedom responsibly.

The rights and freedoms must balance the needs of the individual without compromising the common good. For example, the freedom to smoke and trade in marijuana must be restricted because of the evidence of harm not just to the user[19], but also to the wider community, including children ***in utero***. [20] The decision of governments to go soft on marijuana defies the clear evidence of harm to families and communities, as well as to individuals.

Freedom is certainly not a licence to incite hatred or violence toward someone else, but it must allow for public debate, difference of opinion and the power of evidence. Any government that does not prize both the inner and the social freedom of its citizens cannot expect to gain and retain their trust and support.

Threats disguised as freedom

We are certainly surrounded by powerful and subtle external forms of persuasive messaging - advertising, media and ideology and their impact on the ability to discern and retain control of our thinking and feeling is a field that warrants urgent analysis. State education seems blind to the importance of teaching genuine, objective critical thinking. A free society recognises the dangers and does what it can to foster truth and freedom in advertising, research and reporting.



Gender identity

This is a current prize in the contest for self-expression, especially as family breakdown has produced a multitude of children who are confused about their identity. In the public debate, the new orthodoxy is to say gender identity is not decided by science or moral tradition but by what a person feels and wants. Others, including conservative Christians, ask for a fair hearing of the evidence and the reasoning but increasingly experience push back from ideologically-driven thought police.

Governments and their bureaucracies increasingly seem to take the view that gender (independent of birth sex) is a personal choice, as they believe that science and reason do not matter as much as how a person feels. Such governments are then persuaded to legislate to prevent anyone assisting a person who wishes to return to their biological gender despite the evidence that many people wish to revert[21]. Ordinary people and social commentators alike risk legal action if they challenge the new orthodoxy. A battle against freedom to speak truthfully is now occurring within Australia's mainstream political culture.

What are people offered in exchange for their inner freedom, peace of mind, the right to express a viewpoint and to enjoy self-determination? It appears our culture is offering temporary, addictive and disempowering pleasure and most of it online.

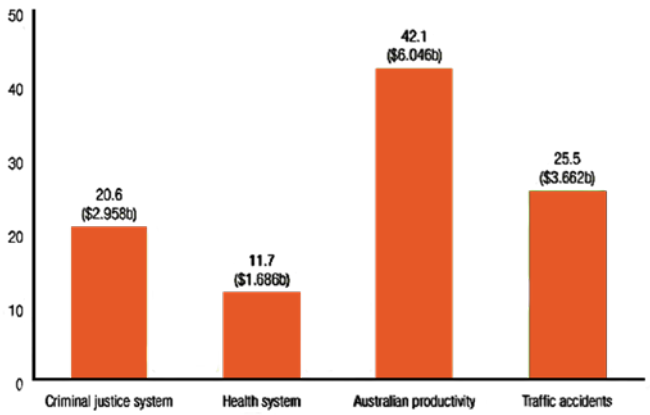
Body image

The effect of photo-shop technology is creating unrealistic expectations of body image in the viewers/readers. This is particularly true of children and young people who have not yet developed the discernment required to recognise reality from fantasy. As noted by social commentator Anup Shah: "To live in a society where you have to constantly be told everything you see may not be real is surely more damaging than to live in a society where most things are real but the hopefully few unreal things can be identified. That would hint to a truer form of freedom." [22]

Anup Shah is critical of the impact of advertising on the media – how stories are changed or removed because of their negative impact on the buying mood of readers, how so much of the media has become lightly disguised advertising, how whole generations are being shaped by global media bias and commercial interest.

Alcohol advertising and consumption

According to a study produced in 2013 by the Australian Institute of Criminology, "despite taking a conservative estimate, the aggregate of a range of societal costs substantially outweighs the tax revenue for



The costs of alcohol to Australian society, from a 2013 paper published by the Australian Institute of Criminology



Australian gamblers lose up to $24b in one year

the Commonwealth generated from the sale of alcohol.[23]

The authors noted that the "social costs of alcohol abuse in Australia (2004–05) were estimated to be in excess of $15b (Collins & Lapsley 2008), with $10.8 billion attributed to tangible costs (eg. labour and health costs) and $4.5 billion to intangible costs such as loss of life through violence (Collins & Lapsley 2008). [24] The total non-GST income from tax and revenue by comparison was about $7 billion.

The study by the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation found that more than a third of child abuse cases are linked to alcohol. And the report's authors say the findings should prompt governments to re-think alcohol policy.[25] Yet what prevails in the public media and mind is not the damage that alcohol wreaks on society but the myth that it is all good times.

Gambling

In the financial year of 2015-2016 Australians lost approximately $24 billion to gambling — more per capita than any other nation — with pokies by far the biggest contributor to those losses.[26] The people who play the pokies can least afford to lose that money.

The increase in advertising online sports gambling during primetime viewing when adolescent children are likely to be present is not accidental. Are we consciously trying to turn the next generation of young men into habitual gamblers? One might think so. Who will train young men to say no to such madness?

Illicit drugs

The Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission reports that in 2017–18, there were 112,827 drug seizures and 148,373 illicit drug arrests. Some 30.6 tonnes of illicit drugs were seized nationally with methyl amphetamine remaining one of the most consumed and seized illicit drugs in Australia. Domestic drug production of laboratories producing MDMA and GHB/GBL both more than doubled in 2017–18.[27] Just over 30 tonnes of death and destruction and yet governments have gone soft on drugs at musical festivals that are obviously marketing expos for drugs.

Pornography and sexual exploitation

These are arguably the most terrible examples of how communications technology spreading death to the world. AFP assistant commissioner Debbie Platz said recently that reports involving Australian victims and offenders of child exploitation "nearly double in 2018 with each offence potentially relating to hundreds of images, videos and live streams." The crime is so great they cannot hope to police it. [28] Imagine the impact on the mental health and morality of the victims and users of such horrors? This is a deep freedom issue.

Addiction is a mental health issue so often underlying other problems, but it is also a freedom of society issue. Genuine faith plays a vital part in keeping the conscience alive and in buttressing the value of human life and dignity. It is not foolproof because these vices and their marketing are terrifyingly powerful, but some defence is better than allowing people to wander naïvely into their web. We must see that these common addictions are the product of sophisticated industries with highly specialised systems of entrapment. Many people are simply not sufficiently fortified against them.

Freedom as an elevating principle

True freedom is a moral principle – something we value because it makes it possible to freely do the good and right and not because the law requires it of us. Freedom cannot be legislated. It is what we have seen recently in the army of volunteer fire fighters, doing things courageously at their own expense. The reward is in their own souls.

If freely doing the good and right thing is the essence of moral action, then it is what makes people better people not only in the mind of the public but in themselves. And we need more people having real reasons to feel good about themselves.

Faith must consciously cultivate freedom and its proper use in service. Not enough religion passes the test of whether beliefs primarily benefits the individual, or whether this is a benefit to marriage, parenting, family, neighbourhood and community.[29]

This global threat to freedom is broader than a person's right to hold and declare religious belief even though that's a good place to start for politicians and for those who profess faith. But since true faith nurtures true freedom that is both interior and social, faith must be valued in nurturing the instinct and the commitment to freedom for doing good, while reducing the appetite for licence. And we need that, when as we have seen what is being cultivated so powerfully are dark deeds and appetites.

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