



A sunny nature is our best defence against rotten luck

The *Lucky Country*, by Donald Horne, is among my treasured Australian books. As an undergraduate student of politics, long-haired and lined up for conscription to Vietnam, I found myself attracted to the unsettling question posed by its deft description of contemporary Australia: what if things turned out badly?

What if bad luck suddenly laid its hexing hand on the shoulder of the suntanned bloke in an open-necked shirt, the natural-born democrat solemnly enjoying an ice-cream, his kiddie strolling beside him?

Horne's pinching conclusion was the barbed thought that the young and confident Australian democracy, especially its leaders, had such a poor sense of the power of bad luck in human affairs they had failed to grasp dilemmas and problems for which they had no ready solutions.

What if nothing much has changed during the past half-century? It has, of course. Australia's sense of history, its sensitivity to past sufferings and future uncertainties, and to different possible futures, has grown exponentially. So, too, has the quality of its leadership and its sense of interdependence with the wider world.

But let us suppose for a moment Horne was on to something. Given that democracies such as Australia are already struggling to



JOHN KEANE

come to terms with life-and-death matters such as the control of nuclear and biochemical weapons, climate change and sabotage of the biosphere, might it be they are also courting not-yet-known disasters for which they are unprepared?

And when compared with alternative political systems, such as those of China, Singapore or Vietnam, is it just possible democracies are ill-equipped to handle bad luck?

Bad luck, misfortune, actual or potential disasters: democracies everywhere are today shadowed by them, or so it seems. A mood swing has been under way for some time. Peppered by bad news and short-term panic, and spiced with anxiety and mild melancholia, the atmospheric change is palpable and unprecedented.

Whether the mood swing endures, or whether its effects continue to be distributed unevenly across the existing democracies (compare melancholy Germany, Ireland and Britain with the strong sense of promise still alive in India, South Korea and Australia) remains unclear.

Disaster-watching has become a literary industry with an impressive public following. Viral pandemics and terrorist attacks with hijacked

nuclear-tipped missiles, forecasts of tsunamis triggered by massive volcanic eruptions and earthquakes or catastrophic collisions between the earth and giant extraterrestrial bodies, are favourites on the list. So are the dangerous risks generated by rising military spending, disruptions of supply chains, climate change and the shameful suffering caused by chronic hunger.

Disasters can strike suddenly or they may be slow-fuse dramas; sometimes, as the citizens of Haiti know from decades of state violence and an afternoon earthquake, people are forced simultaneously to suffer both. Disasters can be triggered by natural changes in our biosphere, such as bushfires in Victoria or hurricanes in Florida, or by famine and genocide and other events for which humans are primarily responsible; in practice, as the calamitous effects of the British bomb testing at Maralinga during the 1950s should remind us, the distinction between "natural" and "human" is rarely clear-cut and is becoming ever less meaningful. Whatever their type or form, disasters are always high-impact events. They result in large numbers of victims in the biosphere, and by definition they inflict world-shattering consequences upon the lives and landscapes they touch.

So how do democracies measure up when coping with sudden disasters?

There is no simple answer, although it is easy to show two things. One is that contemporary monitory democracies, defined not just by peri-

26-Apr-2010

Page: 9

General News

By: John Keane

Region: Sydney

Circulation: 211066

Type: Capital City Daily

Size: 927.10 sq.cms

Frequency: MTWTFSS-



odic elections but also by their multiple watch-dog, guide-dog and barking-dog institutions, are in principle much better equipped than other political systems to scrutinise claims about the actuality or probability of sudden disasters.

In the age of monitory democracy, disasters are, or should be, controversial. Thanks to public monitoring of power we know, for example, that many more people die on our roads or from smoking tobacco than from terrorist attacks. The openness of democracies ensures that their experts, leaders, journalists and citizens can make intelligent judgments that warn of dangers. Such public warnings mark off the unusual ability of democracies to guard themselves against bad luck and bad outcomes, and possible collapse.

The other thing easily shown is that vibrant democracies, because they contain means of public monitoring and opposition to power, enable individuals and groups to criticise the behaviour of their governments, busi-

nesses and NGOs when faced with out-of-the-blue disasters at home. The outcries against the Bush administration's incompetent handling of the devastation caused by hurricane Katrina are a poignant example.

In China, smart-power advocates insist that democracy threatens the proven ability of the state to raise standards of well-being and to improve the quality of people's lives. They insist social harmony requires forceful leadership and intelligent government unconstrained by the vices of party competition and querulous civil organisations.

These claims are designed to distract attention from the fact that power which is unaccountable can have crippling disaster-prone effects, especially in circumstances in which the powerful fall in love with their own judgments.

Hubris based on groupthink is the curse of publicly unaccountable power. When devil's advocates go missing, saints commit sins. Robust public scrutiny of

power is the best means of coping with uncertainty and anticipating, recognising and avoiding mistakes, or of acting to prevent the Big Mistake.

Horne listed the virtues that would be needed to ensure the survival and flourishing of a country that had so far enjoyed, against all odds, gamblers' good luck. Given that bad luck cannot be wished or legislated away, and that sudden and slow-fuse disasters are coming, as surely as night follows day, might it be that no-nonsense scepticism, commitment to fair play and resilience in the face of bad luck are exactly the kinds of public virtues that give democracies like Australia a definite edge on their authoritarian opponents?

This is an edited extract from an essay by John Keane, professor of politics at the University of Westminster, published in the *Griffith Review*.

