

Afterthought — culture, nationality and religion

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I TOOK MY OWN ADVICE AND ITERATED the debate on culture, nationality and religion (*Daily Times*, July 4, 11 and 18, 2004) through another few rounds in my mind. It was a surprise to begin to see the issues in a quite different perspective compared to the position from where I had started.

It seems now that the original proposition ('Economic interest has a major influence on what we do. Culture, nationality and religion are often impediments in the way') was subconsciously biased. But I can also see how the debate had begun to move the argument in the right direction.

The bias resulted from two pre-judgments: that actions to advance one's economic interests are somehow unworthy; and that movements away from one's culture, nationality and religion are somehow tantamount to disloyalty. Both these pre-judgments are unwarranted. In fact, these constitute two further propositions whose truth or falsehood needs to be established independently.

If one starts from a position stripped of bias, one could interpret the original proposition quite differently. One could plausibly argue that too rigid a commitment to culture, nationality and religion can be an impediment to the advancement of individual economic interest.

Our collective economic progress rests on the efforts of individuals to improve their lives and that of their children. Therefore, such efforts should be lauded. Problems arise only when individuals resort, in the pursuit of economic gain, to means that violate commonly agreed principles or hurt others' interests.

From this vantage point it should follow that the emotive issues of culture, nationality and religion are nothing more than irrelevant distractions in the debate. Culture has little to do

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Any action to advance one's chances by violating a principle that one professes to uphold can be adduced as evidence in support of the proposition that the desire for personal advancement trumps principles. If one accepts the observation that the degree of corruption has been increasing in society one would have to agree that the proposition is a fair characterisation of the truth

with principles; I don't violate any when I reject a certain aspect of it. Indeed, culture itself is changing around me. There are always some bold types who are pushing the frontiers and

meek ones who follow in their wake. Whether I choose to lead or to follow or to even retreat is a matter of personal choice.

Nationality and religion fall into much the same category. I take them as givens when I am born but I don't sign on to anything in full knowledge of what I am committing myself to. Therefore, I remain perfectly within my rights to change if I feel the change is justified. My decision might cause unhappiness to some and disappointment to others but these do not qualify as violations of socially binding principles.

From the standpoint of logic these are legitimate choices and it is unwarranted to view every change as a betrayal. To imply that to remain true one would have to remain shackled to the attributes one inherited at birth is a patently false conclusion. In this sense, wearing a trilby or becoming a New Zealander or converting to Shintoism is, logically speaking, in the same category as deciding to go to college or not.

Thus, the debate was moving in the right direction when it identified culture, nationality and religion as accidents of birth that were given more importance than was warranted. Equally justified was the sense of the debate that not all changes needed to be viewed in a negative light.

The debate was also headed in the right direction when it discarded the argument built around religious conversions and focused on the increase in bribery and corruption as a better line of attack.

This was much firmer ground. While there are some who delight in being completely unprincipled, most individuals subscribe to a moral framework based on their choice of religion or ideology. By affirming that I am a Muslim, a Christian, a Zen Buddhist or an adherent of some personal belief, I simultaneously sign on to a set of fundamental ethics and an

accepted code of behaviour. And there isn't a moral framework that sanctions the taking of bribes or recourse to cheating and falsehood.

The scope of the argument can be broadened beyond economics to include any form of personal gain. For example, cheating in examinations or the stuffing of ballot boxes falls within the same category of actions — they advance personal goals at the cost of ethical, moral or social principles. Thus the proposition whose truth or falsehood needs to be established is whether the desire for personal advancement trumps principles.

Any action to enrich oneself by taking bribes or to advance one's chances by lying, cheating, or by violating a principle that one professes to uphold can be adduced as evidence in support of the proposition that the desire for personal advancement trumps principles. And if one accepts as accurate the observation that the degree of corruption has been increasing in society one would have to agree that the reformulated proposition is a fair characterisation of the truth.

If we restart the debate from this point, stripped of the irrelevant and emotive aspects, it would be a much sharper and more interesting contest. It would seem much harder to refute the proposition. The discussion might also point us in the direction of what could be done to improve the situation. Two choices suggest themselves. We could focus our efforts on trying to make individuals more devout believers in some given moral code. Or we could try to make it more costly for individuals to violate socially agreed rules and principles.

I leave it to the reader to decide which one of the two is the better choice.

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