

Fair go Aussie ethos hit for six

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Illustration: Simon Letch

I can't see why people are so shocked to discover our cricketers have been cheating. Surely that's only to be expected in a nation that's drifted so far from our earlier commitment to decency, mateship and the fair go.

Such behaviour is unAustralian? We do, or condone, many things that used to be thought of as unAustralian.

There was a time when it would have been unthinkable for Australians to stand by while an elected government physically and psychologically mistreated people whose only crime was to arrive by boat without an invite.

Many of them are fleeing persecution in their own country, but that makes no difference. We even mistreat their children, causing them to have mental illnesses and then refusing them medical treatment.

Last week a government led by Mr Harbourside Mansion dished out another round of punishment to fellow Australians whose crime was to be unemployed or to have split with their partner while having dependent children, making it hard for them to do paid work.

The money to be saved will go just the tiniest way towards paying for tax cuts for big business. Did the rest of us care? Not really.

But let's not kid ourselves. If governments thought mistreating asylum seekers and being unreasonable to welfare recipients would lose them votes, they wouldn't do it. They do it because they believe most voters *want* them to punish boat people and supposed dole bludgers. Which also explains why both sides of politics are guilty of it.

Lovely people, Australians. (And don't imagine the rest of the world isn't realising how unlovely we are.)



Asylum seekers stand and sit behind the wire of the Manus Island detention centre in Papua New Guinea. Photo: Kate Geraghty

But stoop to tampering with a cricket ball? We'd never do something so utterly despicable. A player could have been injured. Don't forget that cricketers have money at stake when they decide whether to ease the path to victory with the help of a little sticky tape.

Nor should we imagine they're the only Aussies yielding to the temptation to bend the rules in pursuit of a bigger bonus. What do you think the royal commission into banking misconduct is about?

I fear we hear about only a fraction of the national franchises that screw their franchisees, who then screw the kids working for them; the many employers paying less than award wages, including those ripping off people on temporary work visas who're afraid to complain.

They do so because they've lost any sense of fairness towards their workers – and because they're (rightly) confident their chances of being caught are low.

Governments – Coalition and Labor - have been cutting the number of inspectors and auditors in the name of greater public service efficiency.

We've become less Godfearing, more individualistic, more materialistic and more self-centred. We've become less community-minded, less committed to "solidarity" –

where the strong go easy so as to help the poor do better – and less sympathetic to the battling of the battlers (except when we kid ourselves that we are battlers).

We've changed the meaning of "professional" to being highly competent in your occupation, whereas it used to mean putting your clients' interests ahead of your own.

Politics has degenerated into an unending battle between interest groups, in which each seeks advantage at the expense of the rest. Much of the fighting is conducted by a thriving industry of lobbyists.

Even the churches fight like Kilkenny cats for a bigger share of the government handouts to private schools – just so they can afford to teach their children Christian values, of course.

But don't imagine the greed is limited to businesses and institutions. Almost all of us have a mercenary attitude towards the government, paying as little tax as possible while demanding free public hospitals, subsidised pharmaceuticals, bulk-billed GP visits and much else.

How does all that add up? Not my problem. My problem is paying an investment adviser to tell me the somersaults I have to turn to get the pension *and* avoid paying tax on my investments.

What I've found most surprising in recent days is not money-hungry cricketers but the views of a leading businessman, Harold Mitchell, expressed in this very organ: "I'm an Australian and I pay tax for the good of the country."

Mitchell tells of being visited by representatives of the Singapore government, who invited him to move his head office there. Their advertised company tax rate was 15 per cent, but he'd get a special offer of 7 per cent.

He declined. "I believe in the Australian system that creates the sort of society that enabled me to build a successful business. Avoiding tax, even if it seems legal, is a very shortsighted ambition," he wrote.

What's wrong with the man? What a corporate dinosaur. He claims to have found at least one other rich person who thinks similarly – the Scottish children's author, JK Rowling.

"I pay a lot of tax, and I feel one of the reasons I stay and pay and why I'm not based in Monaco ... is I think my country helped me," she's said.

Mitchell even quoted the American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes' dictum that "taxes are what we pay for a civilised society".

Perhaps the problem is it also works the other way: more money-grubbing, rule-bending and tax avoiding are part of a society that's becoming less civilised.

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