

A SUBTLE NEW STATE AID TO CULTURE

The Premier of Victoria, Sir Henry Bolte, slammed an enormous 10% tax on hotel and motel accommodation and then, leaving the screams of pain from the tourist industry echoing behind him, flew off 12,000 miles to civilization.

There, in the Northern Hemisphere, where he is seeking more money for Victoria, he is bound to sleep every night in some hotel that makes Melbourne's best seem like the Glenrowen pub in its heyday.

Before leaving, Sir Henry promised to talk things over with the hoteliers on his return, so it would be wrong to comment on the assumption that the 10% tax will remain intact in its present form.

Nevertheless, it is worthy of examination, for on the face of it the tax appears to run contrary to everything Sir Henry has done for Victoria in the course of his long career, the search for new revenue avenues excluded. The very last thing Victoria seemed to need was official discouragement of new hotels. Does anyone remember how badly off Melbourne was about twenty years ago, with only three or four good hotels? Well, now there are only two or three.

The term firstclass cannot be used lightly in connection with hotels. An establishment achieves such status only by complying with a certain set of international standards. No city in Australia has more than one -- the Wentworth in Sydney, the Parmelia in Perth -- and some have more.

In Melbourne the one and only is the Southern Cross. Why not the Windsor, which charges almost as much and whose carpets, though floral, seem just as thick? The reason is that firstclasship demands, as well as all the other expected luxuries, a choice of restaurants, and a shopping arcade. The rules, however, do not define such things as agreeableness of service.

Imagine the plight of the poor guests of the Windsor. Never mind all those lackies standing around wanting to help: they can't shop for you. You have to go out in the rain to buy your kangaroo-paw bottle-opener souvenirs.

The main reason for Australia's having so few firstclass hotels is that Australians don't want them. Most of us don't want to be excessively pampered at excessive rates. We would prefer just a clean, well-run motel, or that halfway house, the motor inn. The word 'motel' automatically debars a public house from firstclass status, yet it is almost essential to success here. Multi-storey accommodation buildings, complete with bars and good restaurants, and with hardly room for a Honda Z in the basement, firmly call themselves 'motels'. The Grosvenor hotel in Adelaide advertises nationally: "Discover how 'motel' an hotel can be."

But all that is not just another example of the old Diggerism. Very few people in the world have any use for firstclass hotels in their own cities. They may sometimes use the restaurants and convention facilities, but not the accommodation. The bedroom suites are for visitors. And this means in Australia not even visitors from interstate, most of whom are content with Motel Style. The rooms are for overseas tourists, who are rather disappointed if they aren't charged through the nose. That's what the rooms live on, and we just don't have enough overseas tourists.

The reason we don't is that Australia is not interesting enough to attract the intrepid and not comfortable enough to attract the self-indulgent -- not in sufficient numbers, anyway. We can't make the country more interesting in less than a century or so, but we can make it more comfortable. And only a few months ago, before the Bad News, it seemed that we were indeed going to make it more comfortable. Indeed, it had seemed so for three or four years.

During that period almost a score of new major hotels -- not motels -- first-class hotels, complete with American design, a choice of restaurants, and silver-mounted kangaroo portions, were proposed for Melbourne alone. A similar number was projected in Sydney, and proportionately fewer in other state capitals. Hardly a week passed without the announcement of a new super first-class hotel somewhere. But not a single one was built (though many motels, bad and good were). Somehow none of the hotels, not one since the Parmelia, came to pass from architects' perspective into reality. If any schemes were still trembling on the brink of being actually constructed in Melbourne, Sir Henry's tax finally toppled them into the wastepaper basket.

Since a bell-boy could have foretold that, the explanation of the brutal tax must be that Sir Henry was fed up with so many proposals for new hotels that never came to fruition, and so many proposals for bad motels that did. He must have lost confidence in the industry. He must have come to believe that it was not in fact capable of building the sort of firstclass hotels that we need (like an Australian one, to make an outrageous suggestion).

One of the busiest builders of motels, Mr. George Frew, managing director of Commodore Motels, made a spirited statement after the tax was announced, referring to one of his motels that previously has received attention in these columns: the, New Orleans Style "Old Melbourne". He said, "we had planned to build another building like the Old Melbourne Motor Inn. But we don't have to build here and to hell with it."

This may be precisely the kind of fresh new approach which Sir Henry hoped his tax would encourage in his culturally underprivileged state.