

Freedom From Conformism.

We all must conform, to a certain extent, to make a civilization. I put the "ism" in the title because I mean more than that. I mean the doctrine of conforming for the sake of ingratiating oneself to society. I mean following a pattern of behaviour which has been established by others, with or without good reasons that you know of. I mean conforming above and beyond the needs of an amiable civilized community. This I believe is an internal threat to freedom of the individual in Australia which is quite as real as, if much less physically alarming than, any external totalitarian threat.

You don't have to be an Anglo-Saxon, Australian-born, R.S.L.-member in Australia. You don't have to be a Protestant, sports-loving, garden-pottering, Adult-Western-watching, family man to get on well in this country - but it helps if you are. You don't even have to be male - but that helps too. You don't have to believe in the White Australia Policy, tennis, the infallibility of Washington, beer, the inevitability of censorship, the monarchy, tea, the importance of appointed Governors, football, and silver birches - but life is smoother if you do.

Of course I am in the happy position of believing in the rightness of all these things and many more of the staple, decent qualities in our life, and I'm sure you believe in them too (otherwise we wouldn't really have the temerity to be discussing them openly like this, would we?). But I sometimes wonder why nobody seems to question or discuss certain subjects - like basic religion: the existence of God, for instance - the way they used to. I sometimes wonder what would happen if a magazine today were to say things, or draw pictures, about our present royal family like

The Bulletin, late last century, used to say and draw about Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Of course you will say that there is no call for anyone to be critical of any members of our present royal family and that's very true, because after all royalty nowadays has to conform too, and stay close to the *approved* pattern of doing and thinking. But suppose you - in some mad, rash moment of dissatisfaction - discovered some other rather basic aspect of the establishment which you felt really was due for criticism: would you voice it? I mean publicly? From the housetops, as they used to say? I wonder. I sometimes wonder where the colony of Australia would be now if our early advocates of democracy had held the establishment to be so infallible as we today know it to be.

What seems to have happened in the last 60 years or so of solid suburban expansion is this: we started by wearing similar clothes. Then we all built houses to look alike. Then we started to act alike, and to like and dislike in unison. It was something helped by advertising and the other industries that fill the vacuums of our minds.

No-one has a favourite tune any more. We all have 40 favourite tunes: the top 40: your democratically-elected favourite tunes. Gradually the most precious of all rights - the right to think for yourself - tends to waste away through lack of exercise.

I'm not suggesting that Australians live today in a state of conformity comparable to the much-publicised "Organisation Man" of the U.S.A., who sells not only his own soul to a mammoth business organisation but his family's life and soul as well, to live in unquestioning security. There are probably some large firms in

Australia who extract that kind of devotion, or mental slavery, from their employees; but one feels that anyone who accepts those conditions here would be something of a no-hoper wherever they worked. We are still a little backward in some aspects of our earnest imitation of America. Nevertheless I wonder how carefully we are protecting the most important, vital factor in our civilization.

I think you'll agree, won't you, that freedom of the individual to be and to think what he likes is the most important factor? I mean, this was the thing we fought two wars for this century, wasn't it? This is the thing in the back of our minds when we observe the tensions and flare-ups and rising pressures of the cold war today - isn't it? When one talks of the possibility of a 3rd World War, against Communism, we'd be fighting it not to defend just the B.H.P. and General Motors, but to defend freedom, wouldn't we? This is what I understand, and I think most Australians understand it like that too. But we don't talk about it.

There are two significant things about freedom in Australia that make it rather different from freedoms in some other countries. One is that Australians take it for granted. No-one prates about it. America - well, Hollywood, I should say - talks about it, of course, at great length, with a torn flag fluttering above blazing, breathless words: Freedom, freedom, freedom ... This sort of thing rather embarrasses us. You shouldn't have to talk about something that one takes for granted along with football matches and Sunday dinners. "This is a free country ..."

And it is. Australians are free to read any book not on the censor's blacklist. We are free to read, oh, more than half the

magazines published abroad. We are free to see many quite controversial films, even if the censor's scissors sometimes make the continuity almost as jerky as an evening of slides taken last holidays.

I didn't mean to bring up the subject of censorship and I don't intend to pursue it; this is not the place. Like you, and every other clean-living, right-thinking Australian, I stand for censorship all along the line. It isn't that you or I might be affected adversely by these Continental films, but we have to think of more impressionable people. You know what sort of morals these Continental film-makers have.

But if our freedom is restricted a little in reading and film-going, at least in more important things like business we are free; aren't we. Australia is one of the havens of Free Enterprise; and that is surely important in this divided world. We are free to set up any business, provided of course that we have a licence, and provided we don't intend to bake and sell fresh bread on Sunday, or open our shop on Friday evening, or sell petrol out of hours, or allow wine on the table after ten, and so on ...

Are all these little restrictions too trivial to call attacks on freedom? Maybe. Yet the fact remains that in some countries, like the U.S.A., businessmen are protected by law from most of the 'Don'ts' that plague our more energetic entrepreneurs. In the U.S.A. they talk about "Restrictive Trade Practices" and take the attitude that if the public wants fresh bread on Sunday and someone wants to work on Sunday to bake it, then there is something fundamentally wrong with a rule that restricts him. Of course you and I wouldn't take such an extreme view. After all, if you allow someone to bake bread on a Melbourne Sunday, next thing someone

else is going to want to publish a newspaper on Sunday, or open a picture theatre. Mayhem!

I said there were two distinctive things about Australian freedom, the first one being that it is taken for granted. The other is that it is given up, inch by inch, quite voluntarily, complacently, without apparent regrets or misgivings. If freedom is being slowly undermined here (and I imagine you'll have gained the impression that I think this is so), this undermining is not being done subtly or viciously from above. One by one, facets of our freedom are voluntarily and almost joyously relinquished by us, ourselves, at the drop of a hat. There's hardly a complaint raised about any activity but someone says, "it should be banned." And to revert to censorship for an example, a kind that is more common here than even our energetic book and film banning activity is self-censorship. Newspapers, for example, are not censored by any Government department, but each has some policy of its own that fits it into a certain niche in society. Reporters and special writers for newspapers are not often told in so many words what they are permitted to write about or not to write about. But they don't have to be told. They know as well as everyone else the pattern of the paper's thinking and they would not have accepted the job in the first place if they were not prepared to conform to this pattern as to their own, and to filter their own opinions and their own observations of daily life through it. After a time they don't even have to filter their own thinking consciously: their thoughts and observations just run naturally in the approved direction.

And this doesn't apply simply to newspaper employees. It applies to newspaper readers too, or at least those who write to the editors. There have been some fierce arguments in the Melbourne

papers' letter columns lately - on controversial subjects like modern-versus-representational art, tree-cutting, hand signals and so on. Good, lively subjects, if not exactly fundamental to our way of life and our future existence, but well worth arguing. But have you noticed that even in discussions of these non-fundamental, safe subjects, some of the letters which sound most heated and deeply-felt suddenly at the end disintegrate into anonymity: "Yours etc., 'Wondering', North Balwyn."

And have you noticed that the really major issues of the day: the explosions of super-bombs, testing in Central Australia, the recognition of non-conforming nations, and so on, are discussed in the letters to the editor columns, if at all, almost exclusively in a cloud of anonymity? Is there no-one in this community brave enough to disagree openly with you and me on these subjects?

Well, there are one or two men who do occasionally sign their name to an opinion - and you know what happens to them. The newspapers have a word for them: 'Controversial'. First step to a 'Trouble-Maker'.

I am suggesting that this country is getting what has been called, somewhere - although I don't think they meant quite the same thing - a dictatorship of the proletariat ... a dictatorship condition, a self-inflicted restriction of liberty. We are in some sort of voluntary mental chain gang.

Only one word, admittedly over-worked, describes it: conformity. Compulsion is not the word. This is democratic restriction of your liberty. Never forget, ten million Big Brothers are watching you. If this was a tangible, official condition, it

might be less frightening, in a way. Any sort of threat of militaristic compulsion is something which, one still feels confident, every good Australian would fight. That's one thing we won't stand for ... I think. But our special home-grown brand of non-liberty is accepted without a voice raised in as much anger as a bent mudguard will create in a traffic jam. Funnily enough our public manners don't seem to be getting any better when it comes to things like traffic tangles; yet otherwise we have become such a non-complaining nation. We have accepted an unwritten pattern of right-thinking, and it is getting so that anyone who wants to enjoy the rewards of our porcelain-enamel society finds it expedient to keep closer and closer to the pattern. He is not compelled to do it, of course; and as a matter of fact he (in many cases) intends one day, when he is established better, to speak up and right a few of the wrongs that worry him. But that won't be for some years yet, and then there mightn't be so many things that worry him.

Being rather lazy thinkers, we are inclined to the belief that there are only the two alternative ways of living: in freedom, or in slavery; and we know we aren't in the latter category. In fact of course there is an infinite number of shades between the two, and not all of them entirely undesirable. No-one would suggest that Australians would tolerate any hint of real physical or mental subjection. But that doesn't automatically assure us of freedom. Historically, civilization has offered man one other major, tempting alternative to freedom or slavery: a sort of house-dog security. We aren't slaves. But we aren't the wild dogs we sometimes like to think we are. Let's say we are just shaggy, uncomplaining Australian terriers.

16th July, 1962.