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**Kendall, G. and Wickham, G. (1992) *Governing passions II*.
Australian Left Review (141). pp. 20-23.**

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Governing PASSIONS

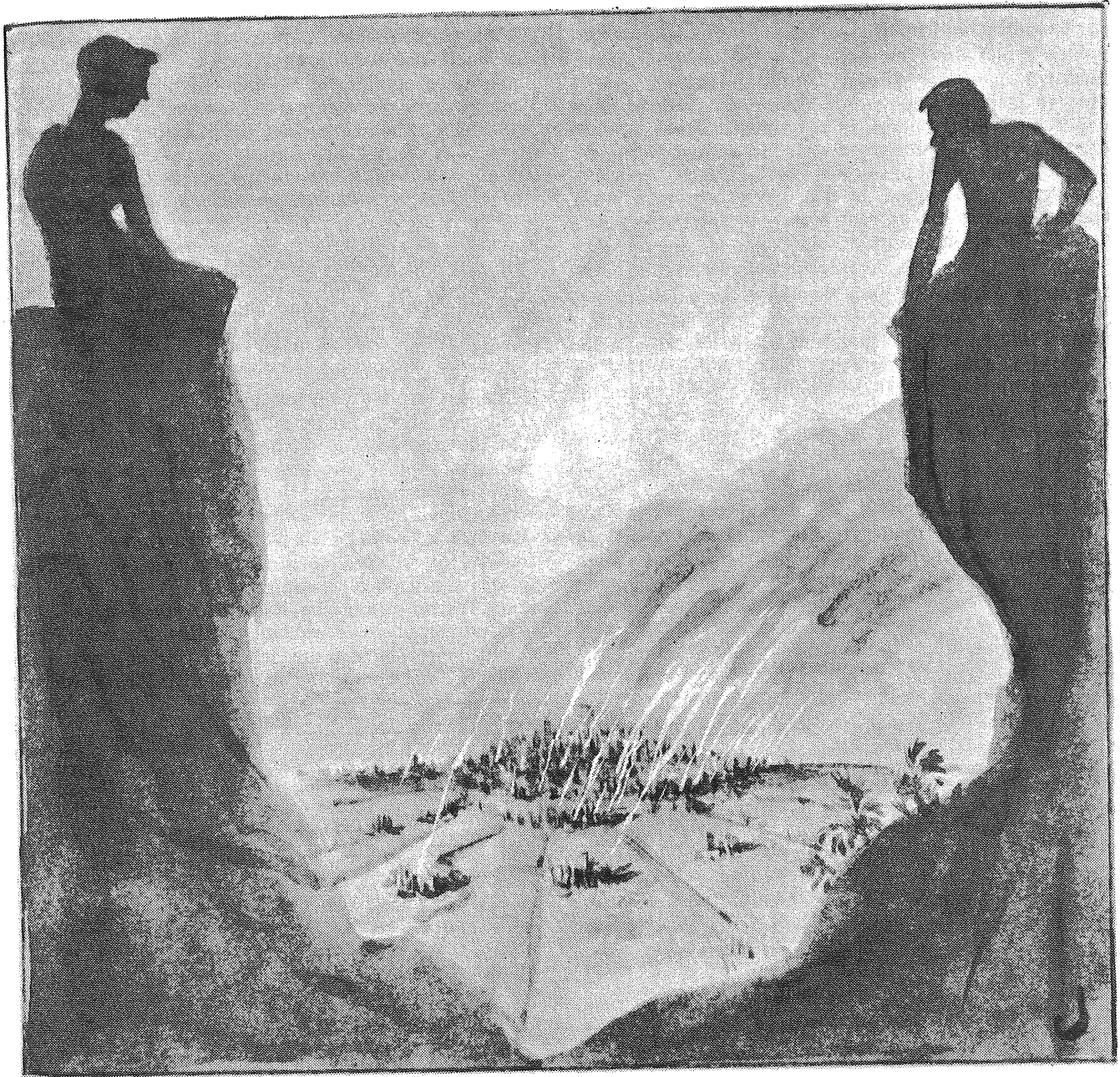
Big government versus small government was the argument of the 80s. Gavin Kendall and Gary Wickham argue that the argument is stale. More interesting is the question of how to govern, and what governing is.

In the last ten years or so, much has been written and spoken in Anglo-Saxon countries about the size and extent of government. Much effort has been spent arguing, or at least gesturing, over how small government needs to be to allow these English-speaking nations to stay ahead of, or just keep up with (depending on how realistic you are) Japanese and continental European economic performance. Most of this effort has been wasted because far too little of it has focused on answering the deceptive question: what is government?

Australian governments at state and federal level (of both major parties) seem obsessed with demonstrating (over and over) how lean they've become. The recent British

election was won by a Conservative government which convinced enough of the electorate that a commitment to small government—one might even say, a commitment to minimal levels of government—is crucial to Britain's future prosperity. In this case, the small government theme won the day in the face of evidence that the policies associated with it have pushed Britain further and further behind its European and Japanese economic competitors. Clearly, we must acknowledge that the small government idea is resilient. But so what? Silly ideas are often resilient.

Our contention is that more careful thinking about the nature of government can push the 'big versus small' debate off the stage and open the way for more sensible consideration of the *effectiveness* of government. This is the situation in parts of continental Europe, at least. Debate there concentrates on the effectiveness of government, rather than on its ideal size (with the assumption that its effectiveness somehow magically follows from this); possibly this is one of the reasons for European economic



Graphic: Jock Alexander

success. We would contrast this with the situation in Anglo-Saxon countries, where battle-lines are often simply drawn up *for* and *against* government.

Let's go back to basics, then. A dictionary is of limited help; 'government' is one of those words with such a wide array of definitions lexicographers cannot pin it down. But at least it's a place to start. From among dictionary definitions three meanings of government demand attention: (i) the business of directing and controlling the actions, affairs, policies and functions of organisations, localities, cities, regions, nation-states; (ii) the process of exercising restraint over something or somebody; (iii) the process of regulating the flow of energy to a particular mechanism (a meaning which comes directly from 19th century mechanics, which knew a governor as a device to regulate the speed of a machine).

Now we're talking. Government is deliberate restraint, but not restraint for its own sake. Government is about directed restraint: restraint directed towards certain desired policy outcomes and away from certain perceived dangers, especially the ever-present danger of unrestrained energy. In line with this we can talk about a complex of government in which people govern themselves and are at the same time governed by others: by organisations, localities, cities and so on. Government in modern western countries, including Australia, is concerned with directed restraint, by citizens and over citizens.

All this captures the flavour of some writing on government by the great Italian theorist of government, Niccolò Machiavelli. For Machiavelli, as we read him, government is about managing *fortuna* and managing the consequences

of managing *fortuna*. The beauty of this formulation lies in its recognition of the perpetual character of government.

Life produces many, many situations which require directed restraint: food production, personal conduct or regional unemployment are just some examples. In addressing these situations by directed restraint, government produces new situations which require directed restraint. And so on *ad infinitum*. In this way government never totally succeeds and, as such, always produces the conditions for its own necessity.

You do not need to be a great theorist to work this one out; just ask Paul Keating about governing the Richardson fiasco, or Nick Greiner about governing the Metherell affair, or John Major about governing the poll tax issue. They will all tell you government produces problems in producing solutions, which need more solutions, which produce more problems, and so on.

Before we make the picture more complex, consider the sad state of Australian and British manufacturing industry. Any decent factory manager knows that the business of manufacturing produces many, many problems which must be addressed if even a modicum of success is to be achieved. These problems mean the factory must be perpetually governed. Shifts in demand, changes in plant technology, the whims of the trading policies of other nations, the vagaries of suppliers, the necessity of skilled workers, all need solutions—and the solutions inevitably

produce new problems. There is no substitute for careful, detailed government. Many Australian and British factory managers and their employees are providing just such government at this level. Yet much of the energy of government at municipal, regional and national levels above them is being directed not to supporting them with careful, detailed industry policies, but to poppycock policies about the angle of playing fields in line with a blinkered commitment to small government.

This example illustrates the need for clear thinking about the nature of government. There is just too much evidence that municipal, regional and national Anglo-Saxon governments have lost sight of what government is about.

Perhaps, you may well say, we are being unfair. Surely these governments are trying to govern, even if they're not doing it very well? No, we don't think we're being unfair. We recognise that governments are trying to govern. Part of our argument is that it is their compulsion to govern which is getting in the way of their clear thinking about how they govern. The last two centuries have seen a massive rise in scope of the will to govern. Of course, governments have displayed a strong will to govern since ancient times. We are arguing that it is the *scope* of this will which has dramatically increased, and that this dramatic increase is a further obstacle to the clear thinking of governments which are not committed enough to the need for clear thinking in the first place.

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The French thinker Michel Foucault refers to this dramatic increase in the scope of the will to govern by the neologism 'governmentality'. By 'governmentality' Foucault is referring not only to the increase in the number of things that governments above the level of municipal management have concerned themselves with since the middle of the 18th century and the accompanying increase in the size and sophistication of public bureaucracies (something many important thinkers, especially Max Weber, have pointed to and tried to describe). Rather, he is mainly referring to a unique configuration of events and inventions behind these increases. It is the uniqueness of this configuration of events and inventions which is important. Any one of them, taken separately, can be traced back well beyond the 18th century, but they only came together as the package Foucault calls governmentality at around this time.

We think five events and inventions are central to Foucault's account. The first is the consolidation of a series of doctrines around 'reason of state'. These doctrines (which began to emerge in the 16th century) understood the operation of the state in terms of principles which were internal to the state itself. These doctrines meant the workings of government could be considered in terms of the internal organisation of the state, rather than, say, in terms of the will of God.

Second, the development of the notion of *population* as part of the art of government. The reason of state development meant that the art of government had something to tackle; there was a lot more to be artful about. Government came to be a means to an end in regard to population. This notion quickly came to be the focus of concerns about health, wealth, happiness, longevity and so on. What or who is it that should be healthy, wealthy, happy, long-lived, or whatever? A general answer was needed for the general government which was emerging (to avoid it fracturing into very specific governmental units, like families, with no government beyond these units)—and population was that answer. The question to be addressed was how to guarantee the good condition of the population.

Third, the rise of the new science of political economy. The new regularity of population could no longer be understood, as we hinted above, solely through the economy of the family (the traditional model of economic life of the early modern period); the new political economy replaced this old economy. The family was still an important instrument of government, but it was now secondary to the master concept of population. The new political economy sought to promote the flow of government between individuals, family and state. Part and parcel of this development was the development of the science of *police*—better understood in 20th century English as 'policy' or 'welfare'—which dealt with the flow of government between state and individual, taking the family as its instrument rather than its model.

Fourth, the emergence of the practical political doctrine of liberalism, especially as it allowed the transformation from disciplinary societies to societies where liberty is potential-

ly guaranteed through security. In line with this, government was reorganised around new modes of managing risks—sometimes called insurantal technologies (which now of course include the welfare state). Liberalism enabled the conception and formulation of welfare policies. Its aim was to amplify the capacities of the citizen body, to replace the more overtly 'disciplinary' techniques of the earlier era of absolutist rule.

Finally, the birth of the human sciences as formal governmental knowledges. Over the course of a hundred years or so economics, sociology, and psychology began to make their contributions to government, providing accounts of what the increasingly various elements of population look like and how they behave and are likely to behave. Parallel to these sciences, and perhaps more important than them all, the science of statistics expanded rapidly. Sets of facts about the state were reformulated as very specific understandings (increasingly numerically expressed understandings) of populations, allowing more and more precise calculations about birth, mortality, morbidity, longevity, health, illness, suicide and so on, almost *ad infinitum*.

'An idealistic belief in cutting down government is not good enough.'

Government in the modern world is complex; there is no way round this fact. What we are urging on those directly involved in government at municipal level and above is that the complexities can be unravelled, described and sensibly addressed. Government requires careful, painstaking work. No amount of blustering about small government or large government, private enterprise or socialist government is going to obviate this need. Dogma needs to be replaced by an analysis which starts from the conviction that the art and activity of government are complex: we are arguing that an idealistic belief in the possibility of cutting down on government is just not good enough.

European and Japanese governments are much more aware of this than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, as we noted above. They waste a lot less of their personnel's time and energy on ideological bluster. If we in the English-speaking world want to catch up to their economic performance, we must start thinking about the importance of government in new ways. We cannot luxuriate in the will to govern without thinking through what government means.

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