

The Australian

Danger in toxic discourse

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- **ASK THE PHILOSOPHER**

DO we take our democracy for granted?

TWO weeks ago I noticed a billboard advertisement not far from where I live. It resembled a public notice and ostensibly was issued under the auspices of the "Australian Interior Authority" and the "2021 Stronger Australia Act".

In big, emboldened black the billboard contained the message: "Holders of expired ID cards will be prosecuted." Under the headline, there was a more sinister sentence: "Report all suspicious citizens. It's the law."

Other Orwellian-looking posters had been erected across the country, all bearing the futuristic logo of the "Australian Interior Authority".

One declared: "Any citizens apprehended after curfew will be arrested." Another stated: "All pregnancies must be approved."

Some observers suspected a viral marketing campaign but, as it turns out, the somewhat mysterious campaign is part of the Loss of Freedom initiative by the Museum of Australian Democracy in Canberra. The museum is hoping to start a national conversation about democracy and freedom.

Whether the campaign can be considered a success remains to be seen. Many may dismiss it as a faux-dystopian stunt and yet another intrusion of marketing into our civic life.

But we should give the museum the benefit of the doubt. It can only be a good thing if the exercise prompts citizens to reflect on our liberties and democracy.

There is some evidence Australian democracy isn't as healthy as it should be. A report by the Civics Expert Group in 1994, for example, found that fewer than half of Australians surveyed were able to name both houses of federal parliament. More recently, last year's Australian Election Study revealed that two-thirds of Australians surveyed wrongly believed that the Constitution could be changed only by the High Court.

Such civic ignorance is by no means isolated. Citizens in many Western democracies exhibit a poor level of knowledge relating to current affairs, political institutions and their national histories. One survey in 2004 revealed that in Britain close to one-fifth of those aged 16 to 24 believed Horatio Hornblower or Gandalf were responsible for vanquishing the Spanish Armada.

Of course, not everyone will agree that this is a problem for democracy. Austrian economist and democratic theorist

Joseph Schumpeter argued that democracy is merely a procedure. "The democratic method," as he explained, "is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."

In a Schumpeterian democracy, the citizen's role is to act as an elector of representative elites to political institutions. Democratic politics is about electoral conflict.

There are obvious problems with this version of democracy, which can encourage politicians and parties to believe that winning is all that must matter. As former West Australian premier Geoff Gallop has observed, a new adversarialism -- characterised by aggressive disagreement -- defines our politics. The result has been a crude simplification and trivialisation of political discourse.

This doesn't deny the importance of disagreement and the inevitability of conflict. However, public debates must be disciplined by reciprocity, good faith and a shared commitment to the community. How we disagree matters.

Democracy shouldn't be stripped of its ethical content. Properly understood, democracy embodies an aspiration to collective self-government. And, at its best, a democracy is populated by reasonably well-informed citizens and representatives who deliberate about the common good.

It is only right that we be concerned when we fall short of this mark. For then we are reminded that, regardless of our civic pedigree, we ultimately get the democracy we deserve.

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