Diatribe 190

Marching Backwards with a firm step.

Nowadays few people dare to question the *March of Scientific and Technological Progress*, as it is generally referred to. The exception to this are Luddites like myself, whose concept of progress is vastly different to that of the general run of the populations in so-called advanced countries.

This is not to say that there have not been advances in many areas, particularly medicine, although these are largely limited to rich countries, and are often inaccessible in even those countries to those who are not rich

What concerns me here is the way in which technology is going backwards rapidly even in places where it used to have some progressive features. In recent weeks, we have had some horrible examples of this. When Air France's Airbus flight 447 crashed into the ocean a few weeks ago, killing 220 men, women and children, it was, to my knowledge, the first instance of a commercial airliner failing due to problems with its electronic navigational system. Nor did this failure come out of the blue; for some time we have had numerous accidents on planes fitted with the ADIRU system. At least two of these happened in Australian skies. Nor were these failures detected and fixed as they would have been previously. Instead, there were attempts at overcoming them by duplicating and even triplicating the faulty components. Yet every engineer knows that this tends to exacerbate the situation, because the hand-over from one device to another similar one in an emergency situation is an additional hazard, not a solution.

As I mentioned at the time, the ADIRU problem had no solution, because the faulty system is integral to the plane's control system. This means that planes relying on this system, which means the majority of large passenger planes now in the air, are currently carrying thousands of human beings enormous distances every day, all subject to the admittedly infrequent rough weather conditions which appear to affect ADIRU.

As I write this, the bodies of the last dead passengers from the small plane which crashed recently in New Guinea are being unloaded in Port Moresby. This plane was piloted - we assume competently – by two experienced pilots. As yet, the cause of the crash has not been disclosed, but it seems significant that it is tacitly assumed that this disaster was also due to a technical failure. This assumption arises from the frequent reports of poor maintenance affecting small planes. Dick Smith, at one stage administrator of air safety, referred to "affordable" maintenance, and thereby clearly suggested that known safety precautions can be considered unaffordable. He was not talking about failure of the odd cabin light; he referred to cases where vital navigation instruments like the artificial horizon had failed, been removed from the instrument panel and never replaced. This is precisely the type of instrument which may have failed in the Twin Otter which killed nine people in New Guinea.

But why stick with planes? For years Melbourne tram passengers and tax payers have had to cope with the so-called myki system (goodness knows what myki stands for) which is meant to perform the simple task of passenger fare collection. As I understand it, the problem lies in the allocation of fare income to the variety of contract companies which may or may not be engaged in running Melbourne's public transport from time to time. Would you believe it, this "problem" has already taken years to play with and cost us a billion dollars, an amount which could have given us Melbourne commuters free transport for a fair length of time.

Myki , however, is the least of our transport problems. We have trains that can't run because the rails buckle or because the air conditioning fails and we can't open the windows. We have a minister for transport who says she cannot be bothered with public transport and another who prides himself on spending millions on a train which takes 3 minutes off a train journey but forces you to wait half an hour for the next train in a peak period, and provides no trains at all at other times.

Earlier this year I mentioned the case of the "Pacific Adventurer", a container ship which lost its deck cargo of containerised ammonia fertiliser as well as some of its fuel oil on a sensitive part of the Queensland coast. The Queensland government has now made a gift of taxpayers' money to the ship-owners by covering part of the repair costs, a repair which was most likely a cross between a patch-up and a stuff-up, given the sensitivity of the location. The chance of polluting the ocean with hydrocarbons without causing some form of permanent damage is remote. Even if there appears to be no surface damage, fuel oil sinking to the bottom as it does after a while kills flora and fauna there. Besides, we have not yet been told whether all the nitrate fertiliser cargo was retrieved. If not, the pollution of the sea itself causes damage to the marine environment.

What is the point of my diatribe? After all, there have been technological disasters ever since the dawn of humanity. Entire civilisations have destroyed themselves through ignorance and greed. My point is that these earlier problems were caused by lack of understanding and attempts were made to avoid them, once the problems were discovered or realised. What I have mentioned so far are the sort of stuff-ups which have been recognised decades if not centuries ago, were remedied in time, but have now reappeared. Looking at public transport as an example, we used to run our trains on time, the rails did not buckle. Trains did not stand idly in sidings for lack of maintenance too anything like the extent that we see this happening now.

So, what has happened? As they used to say, it's the economy, stupid. Or better still, it's the stupid economy. Going back to the trains, it is perfectly true that way back there were horrific accidents, there was stupidity with lines being duplicated and repairs being skimped as privately owned public transport put profit before sense. There were, however, two mitigating factors. Firstly, there was competition which, as was promised us by the prophets of capitalism, tended to set one entrepreneur against the other. Secondly, there was increasing regulation with the ultimate realisation that roads, rivers and canals could not be privately owned if the system was to prosper or even survive because private ownership was no way to provide ever more costly infrastructure. Nor can you talk about competition when there is only one supplier, in other words when there is what is called a natural monopoly such as the gas supply or sewerage.

On this understanding western capitalism succeeded in a more or less erratic fashion for almost a century from the 1840s, give and take the odd financial crisis. But no longer. In the late 20th century some of the ideologues of capitalism realised that the values that people had generated over centuries could be sold off and the resulting cash turned to their private use. As a result, states and municipalities which had previously kept ahead of population growth and technology in providing necessary infrastructure and had been carefully maintained became cash cows, just as they had been before they been nationalised. However, this time round, because the capitalists also had complete control of the mass media, they managed to make the population believe that private extortion by capitalists was good for them also If you look at the shortcomings and catastrophes which I mentioned earlier, they can all be traced back to private ownership, as they could be in the 19th century before nationalisation. The answer is, of course, to revert to nationalisation, only this time to put the people in charge.