

Hold a cover-up in the open

WHEN a government is exposed to public outrage over a sudden injustice, its first instinct is to set up an inquiry. In 1991 Los Angeles police beat a man named Rodney King in an arrest that would have passed unremarked except that a witness videotaped the encounter.

After the video was broadcast on television, the public outcry was so great that both the Los Angeles Police Department and the city government set up inquiries.

Another event was captured on video in 1991: Indonesian troops shooting and killing hundreds of East Timorese attending a funeral in Dili. Previous massacres had caused little impact, but the revealing video led to such international pressure that both the Indonesian government and military set up inquiries.

Why inquiries? They serve to dampen outrage because people think authorities are treating the matter seriously. The trouble is that in many cases inquiries are just tokens, giving the appearance – but not the substance – of justice. The Indonesian inquiries into the Dili massacre gave derisively mild sentences to a few soldiers.

In all sorts of areas, when public pressure for action gets too great,

When controversy strikes government, an inquiry is often used to avoid responsibility, writes **Brian Martin**.

governments launch internal investigations, set up inquiries, pass laws or institute regulations. But all too often these responses are mostly symbolic.

Decades ago, the US political scientist Murray Edelman wrote a book called *Politics as Symbolic Action*. He argued that governments acted to arouse or defuse anxieties by using symbolic actions rather than dealing with substantive demands. The most obvious example of arousing anxiety today is terrorism. As for defusing concern, the list is long: refugees, corruption, climate change, poverty, Aboriginal health and many others.

There are several methods for dampening outrage. One is cover-up, such as when asylum seekers are put in detention camps far from population centres and journalists are barred from visiting. Another is devaluation of the target, such as when asylum seekers are labelled illegals, queue-jumpers or even terrorists. Another is intimidation, not only of asylum seekers, but also supporters.

One of the most potent methods of dampening outrage is using official channels to give the appearance of

justice. A parliamentary inquiry shows the issue is being taken seriously, so activists often decide to wait for official wheels to turn. But they turn very slowly so that by the time the inquiry is over and the government ponders its response, much of the original public fury is dissipated.

The same thing happens with legislation. There are whistleblower laws in every state and territory, so many people believe whistleblowers are being protected. But talk to whistleblowers and you will be hard pressed to find anyone who has ever benefited. There is not a single case of an employer who has been prosecuted for reprisals against a whistleblower, though such reprisals happen all the time. The laws are so restrictive in application, technical in execution and dependent on government initiative that they are paper tigers.

If governments are serious about protecting whistleblowers, they would scrap laws preventing public servants from speaking out and change draconian defamation laws. Instead, they pass whistleblower

laws that give only the illusion of protection.

We should not assume that politicians coldly calculate how to dupe the public. Most of them genuinely believe in the policies they espouse. But the culture of symbolic politics has become so pervasive that it becomes second nature to take actions that diminish public anger but don't offend groups with a vested interest in the policy – including government.

Governments may try to manage the public agenda but they don't always anticipate what will happen. Sometimes their cover-up techniques fail, as with the videos of the King beating and the Dili massacre. Sometimes their attempts to devalue victims and critics do not succeed, as when people in country towns find that refugees can become valued members of the community.

Though official channels are often window-dressing, they remain attractive to justice-seekers. An inquiry may sound like the prelude to action; it is an ideal way to dampen outrage. Sometimes it is better to avoid the inquiry and maintain the rage.

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