

Where Is Australia's John Galt?

By Merv Bendle, Quadrant Online, 15 April 2016

If you like platitudes, government by press release and the cossetting of rent-seekers, Malcolm Turnbull is a fine Prime Minister. The leader we need, however, is the man or woman prepared to unshackle the dynamism of an economy long hobbled by the likes of the one we have now

Who is John Galt?

That's the question Malcolm Turnbull should be asking himself as the scale of his inertia, ineffectiveness, lack of vision and a constructive strategy becomes increasingly obvious, even to a lethargic and complacent public.

John Galt is, of course, the mysterious hero of Ayn Rand's massive novel, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), an incredibly complex and relentless exploration of what would happen if the small but essential cohort of creative, entrepreneurial and productive people was to rebel against a suffocating state and corporate corruption, shrug off their responsibilities, progressively withdraw from the economy, and go on strike. Rand saw Galt as the idealization of the core human strengths that have raised the human species to its position of pre-eminence over the planet. Invisible for most of the novel, Galt is less a person than a world-shaping force, the titanic epitome of the immense power that a liberal democratic capitalist society can and must mobilize if the masses of humanity are to be elevated out of the misery, servitude and oppression that has characterized the vast span of history.

PM Turnbull's recent mutterings and thought bubbles

Atlas Shrugged has been in print ever since its publication and remains an inspiration for those people appalled and repelled as the dead hand of the state successfully suffocates independent thought and action. It has suddenly become even more relevant given Turnbull's recent mutterings and thought bubbles about state-sponsored innovation, the 'new economy' and **very fast trains**, and the imperative he now faces to rid the country of the Road Safety Remuneration Tribunal, an Orwellian organization that exemplifies the type of union-corporate-government racketeering that Rand raged against.

Atlas Shrugged operates at many levels. At the simplest level it focuses on a transcontinental railroad company and the efforts of its chief operating officer to overcome fierce union, corporate, and government resistance to build a new line using advanced technology to service a promising new industrial centre. At another level it carefully details how an advanced industrial society will slide into chaos and devastation as the essential freedoms that underpin liberal democracy and capitalism are destroyed and the economy is plundered by unproductive collectivist rent seekers and looters, as Rand aptly describes them. At yet another level it describes how key personnel are brought to realize that in such circumstances the only hope

for their own survival and that of society is to surreptitiously opt-out and join Galt in a strike that will mobilize the citizenry in a fight for liberty. Finally, *Atlas Shrugged* offers what one scholar has called a manifesto of the mind (Mimi Reisel Gladstein, *Atlas Shrugged: Manifesto of the Mind*, 2000), a hymn to the power of the creative mind and the never-ending need to defend it against those who would exploit and destroy it.

Platitudinous speeches, declarations, and media releases

In his many platitudinous speeches, declarations, and media releases, Turnbull has spoken as if he had a commitment to the type of economic, social and cultural dynamism that Australia so desperately needs if it is to pull itself out of a slump that has seen living standards **flat-line for the past five years**. Unfortunately, it seems he really just talks a good game, and there is no evidence that he genuinely understands what is required to free up that dynamism — or would do what is required, even if he did understand. Instead, he appears increasingly to be no better than a show pony. He most closely resembles the Head of State in *Atlas Shrugged*, a purely pragmatic politician, driven only by a desire to stay in power and utterly incapable of comprehending what John Galt represents and what drives him and his allies.

Indeed, much of the novel concerned with the corrupt and ultimately destructive deal-making that drives the country into depression. Rand carefully describes how furtive unions and stodgy corporations conspire with politicians and governments to hide their inadequacies and failures behind **noble-sounding declarations of cooperation, safety and social responsibility**. Together they introduce the ‘Equalization of Opportunity Bill’, and the ‘Anti-Dog-Eat-Dog Rule’, ostensibly to protect participants in the market and society as a whole. In truth, however, these measures are really designed to eliminate competition and stifle disruptive innovation. They are progressively extended beyond industry and across society to ensure, for example, that popular novelists are allowed to sell only a small number of copies of their books, so that readers are forced to purchase the works of other less interesting writers.

The catastrophic results

As the catastrophic results of such soviet-style diktats become obvious and the economy disintegrates, the state imposes ‘Directive 10-289’, which attempts to arrest the decline by ‘freezing’ the economy at the status quo. It requires that all businesses stay open; all workers remain in their jobs; no changes to production methods be made; no new products be introduced; production, wages, and profits be fixed at the previous year’s level; all research and development be terminated; and all patents and inventions be turned over to the state. The directive is enforced by another Orwellian named agency, the ‘Unification Board’, which is given dictatorial powers against which no appeal is allowed.

Such a nightmarish outcome doesn’t occur suddenly however, and the power of *Atlas Shrugged* lies in its careful delineation of the myriad small steps that are taken by the corporate looters

and union racketeers and their government cronies as they seek to entrench their power and run the country into the ground. Tyranny is the death of a thousand cuts. Consequently, anyone familiar with the plot will be immediately struck by the similarities between Rand's fictional government agencies of repression and the **Road Safety remuneration Tribunal** (RSRT), an apparently innocuous and small-scale body. Indeed, it is uncanny how closely the Transport Workers Union, Bill Shorten, and the Gillard Labor government stuck to the script in carefully constructing a low-profile agency that appears to be concerned with safety, but is really designed to drive some 35,000 small and independent operators out of business while entrenching the power of a few inefficient mega-corporations and self-serving union bosses.

Under the new laws administered by the RSRT anyone hiring an independent transport operator to, for example, shift farm produce or move house, is liable to heavy fines if they are found in breach of a wide range of provisions carefully designed to force up costs to the point where the operators become uncompetitive with a cartel of the large transport firms. The latter are therefore granted a monopoly over all road transportation and can set whatever prices they like. Having recently completed two interstate moves, the present writer calculates that the new arrangements would have cost an additional \$7000-\$8000 and involved many hours dealing with paperwork and red tape.

Whereas home owners could once ring around various removalists, select the best quote, and have their furniture shifted by a few strong lads in a truck, now they must ensure that the operator is paying the rate set by the RSRT and is otherwise conforming to a vast array of regulations covering the size of the truck and the load, the distance involved, the status of the workers, etc. Home owners could be raided by inspectors from the Fair Work Ombudsmen, who can enter premises without a warrant or permission, seize documents, demand names and addresses and other evidence that can be used in a prosecution. Failure to comply attracts fines of up to \$10,800. (see "**Welcome to hell, Australian citizen**", *The Australian*, 13/4)

The scandalous RSRT affair

Present indications are that the RSRT affair is so scandalous even Turnbull may have to do something about it, especially as a sufficient number of feral crossbenchers may cooperate in repealing the legislation. His initial and characteristic ploy, of delaying action and promising to do something about the tribunal after the election, is unworkable, as it is transparently opportunistic and will be too late for the majority of the small operators, who will have been driven out of business by then.

Ultimately, the RSRT is merely a symptom of the decay of the institutional underpinnings of liberal democracy that have historically enabled Australians to enjoy the economic, political and social liberties that are essential for a thriving society. Its depredations in the economic sphere are paralleled in the cultural sphere by the similar oppressive and monopolistic activities of such carefully cultivated Turnbull allies as the Australian Broadcasting Commission and the

Human Rights Commission. Indeed, there are state-empowered agencies throughout our society, concerned with industry, communications, transport, education, health, welfare, and the law. These are invariably committed to promoting the causes of various lobbyists, special-interest groups, and other looters, and it is these that will ultimately lead to the type of economic and social paralysis that so concerned Ayn Rand and compelled her to spend twelve years exploring what happens if the looters triumph, the engine of economic and social dynamism seizes up, and Atlas shrugs.

A great conflagration looming

Turnbull and his government act as if they are confronted only with little spot-fires that need but a bit of spin and some massaging. In truth there is a great conflagration looming and it has deep economic, demographic, political, cultural and ideological roots. Somewhere, there may be a John Galt prepared to show the leadership required to drag Australia out of the mire or else walk away altogether. Lord Waffle of Wentworth may want to think about that as he wallows in the trappings of the office he so desperately pursued and to which he was prematurely escalated.

*Merv Bendle wrote “**Did Atlas Shrug**” for Quadrant, May 2011*