

Australia Could Use a Machiavelli

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Niccolò Machiavelli's name is mud. Any scribbler vilifying a dodgy politician or lying lobbyist will reach for the poisoned descriptor *Machiavellian*. It suggests everything devious and cynical.

When I bought a copy of *The Prince*—Machiavelli's most famous work—I braced myself, anticipating counsels of devilish sophistry on every page. But *The Prince* is far better than I imagined. Perhaps I was fortunate to read the Penguin Classics translation by Tim Parks with his illuminating introduction. Parks explores *The Prince* and Machiavelli's scandalous reputation. Published in Italy in 1532 after Machiavelli's death, it was placed on Pope Paul IV's Index of Prohibited Books in 1559. Then time and chance intervened; they, Machiavelli had understood, multiplied the unpredictable. The Protestant Reformation and Catholicism's Counter-Reformation were splintering Europe. Religious propaganda abounded, helped by that useful invention, the printing press. And Machiavelli garnered headlines: *The Prince* was lambasted by Protestants as a prime example of Catholic degeneracy, Italian trickery. This polemic—lasting for centuries—cemented Machiavelli's wretched reputation and secured his fame.

And *The Prince* does counsel—when there's no other option—cruel expedient action, including driving out the entire population from conquered territory if they're rebellious. Other passages advise a ruler lacking qualities to at least *appear* to possess them. Machiavelli admired wise and august rulers, but most rulers are mediocre people. They need to sham virtues they lack. Machiavelli didn't delight in these charades, but he acknowledged their usefulness at times. In his judgment, honesty is best—but politics is a shoddy business and it's better to deceive occasionally than to lose power.

The Prince refers to God's judgment, which rulers should fear. Machiavelli seems sincere, but he didn't share his mother's piety or his brother's priestly vocation. Their father preferred the Roman Stoics. Unfortunately Niccolò's habits compounded his bad reputation: he was a womaniser and whoremonger; he wrote tales of improbable seductions; he craved status and power.

He established prominence as a Florentine diplomat and soldier, but lost his position with a change of regime. Imprisoned and tortured, he later regained favour, only to be again dismissed. He turned to reading and writing during these turbulent years, studying history to learn how previous rulers came to power, kept and used it—or lost it. He had an insider's knowledge of Florence's unstable republic, its wars and intrigues with other Italian and foreign states. He travelled to European courts on diplomatic missions. He fought wars. His wide experience guided his writing. He hoped *The Prince* would commend him to Florence's new rulers: the Medici clan. He wanted his political acumen seen and rewarded with high position. Instead, unsummoned to serve, he died at his rural estate in 1527 aged fifty-eight.

We might discount *The Prince* because of Machiavelli's awful reputation. But he wrote amid unstable governments, “barbarous occupation”, frequent wars, political conspiracies and civil

strife. Further, his purpose was not to theorise about an ideal realm but to detail what he saw, what he knew, what really happened. He considered different states and their different conditions. His approach was empirical, almost proto-existentialist: this is how people who want power—or have power—act, and by studying their actions and the consequences we can extract guiding principles.

We may note the widespread success of Western democracies—delivering prosperity and basic freedoms—and consider Machiavelli's advice relevant only to a darker, undemocratic time. But the lessons of *The Prince* are many and valuable. If Australia finds itself in a real crisis—not a Covid crisis or climate change crisis—when our freedom, our homes and lives are threatened by aggressors, then we'll wish we had read and absorbed the best of Machiavelli's advice. In a sense, he wrote a book during violent times for violent times.

As a political player, Machiavelli had two immense advantages over the current crop of Australian politicians. First, he had fought wars and seen the terrible consequences of military and foreign policy blunders: people were slaughtered, the countryside and towns were devastated and occupying forces were callous. Machiavelli had skin in the game. Most state and federal politicians—and their bureaucrats—don't have skin in the game. They don't risk their lives; they don't suffer painful consequences for destructive policy mistakes. They still get generous pensions and cosy appointments. There's no compelling inducement to realism. If they err, they're not imprisoned and their joints wrenched apart, as Machiavelli endured. We would get far more prudent policies if our leaders faced severe punishments for their dreadful decisions.

A second advantage Machiavelli had over most Australian politicians and bureaucrats—and this is related to Machiavelli's realism—was his Augustinian rather than Pelagian anthropology. Machiavelli knew that human sinfulness had better be taken into account. Everywhere people were self-seeking, proud, anxious, impulsive, short-sighted, fearful, opportunistic, ambitious, envious and inconstant. No one person—even the most evil—displayed all of these characteristics all the time, but they were lurking in every human heart and no one wise dared to overlook them. Pelagian anthropology acknowledges human sin but discounts its constant distorting power. Pelagians imagine that people and society are perfectible—able to be their best if given the right incentives by shrewd leaders. This is unrealistic. For example, our welfare and health systems are broadly Pelagian and consequently have inadequate protections against clients' roting, laziness, entitlement and self-destructive folly. Machiavelli would not have made this mistake.

Machiavelli condemns rulers seeking popularity through extravagant spending. It's a short cut to sure ruin. The strategy appeals to rulers, but it's a calamity for the nation and harms the lavish leadership. They'll either have to raise taxes or withdraw their generosity or both. None of these actions will be popular; they risk being overthrown. Machiavelli observes:

If you're determined to have people think of you as generous, you'll have to be lavish in every possible way; naturally, a ruler who follows this policy will soon use up all his wealth to the point that, if he wants to keep his reputation, he'll have to impose special taxes and do everything a ruler can to raise cash. His people will start to hate him and no one will respect him now he has no money. Since his generosity will have damaged the majority and benefited only a few, he'll be vulnerable to the first bad news, and the first real danger may well topple

him. When he realises this and tries to change his ways, he'll immediately be accused of meanness.

Since a ruler can't be generous and show it without putting himself at risk, if he's sensible he won't mind getting a reputation for meanness. With time, when people see that his penny-pinching means he doesn't need to raise taxes and can defend the country against attack and embark on campaigns without putting a burden on his people, he'll increasingly be seen as generous—generous to those he takes nothing from, which is to say almost everybody, and mean to those who get nothing from him, which is to say very few.

This is germane to Australia, where every election features a cash-splash from aspiring rulers. They rarely address debt, the urgent need for frugality with public money or the government's responsibility to allocate funds prudently. Parsimony is unmentionable. Every newsletter from my federal and state MPs highlights increased entitlements, a multitude of funding commitments and grants. There's no mention of government debt or cost-cutting measures. Recently, my state MP proudly announced spending for companion dogs to console people stressed in court.

The ruler's parsimony has the great benefit of saving money for adequate defence forces, since defending the country is any government's first priority. Constant penny-pinching in other areas provides funds for a well-equipped and trained military—without impoverishing the nation. A country burdened by reckless spending—and mounting debt—has already surrendered its capacity for self-reliance and independent action. It's vulnerable, without ready cash to build defences and deter enemies. Alas, like Australia, they need alliances.

Florence was a small state surrounded by unstable or ambitious neighbours. France and Spain were the closest large powers; sometimes their policies were friendly, at other times hostile. In this tumult Machiavelli sought to discover the best strategies for Florence. There was no simple option.

Alliances appear attractive and confer some benefits, but alliances are problematic. A nation's affairs are complicated by the demands of allies. And allies may not be trustworthy; almost certainly they'll have different aims and priorities. Self-determination is compromised, sometimes to a disastrous degree. For example, an ally may take action which you're under obligation to support, but support may be remote or even antagonistic to your own interests. Moreover, in war, if you win with an ally, you'll have to share the spoils. Also, you may have created a more powerful partner and you'll find yourself doing their bidding. If you lose a war alongside an ally, you're on your own. Your ally will now be confronting the belligerent victor and have its own problems. If your ally loses a war, you're still its friend and under obligation to help. At best, together your luck may turn.

Machiavelli called allies *auxiliary armies*. They're not under your command and they have independent aims:

Auxiliary armies—that is, when you ask a powerful ruler to send military help to defend your town—are likewise useless ... Auxiliaries may be efficient and useful when it comes to achieving their own ends, but they are almost always counter-productive for those who invite them in, because if they lose, you lose too, and if they win, you are at their mercy.

So, sensible rulers have always avoided using auxiliaries and mercenaries, relying instead on their own men and even preferring to lose with their own troops than to win with others, on the principle that a victory won with foreign armies is not a real victory at all.

Machiavelli valued a strong military always standing ready. Neglect was stupid; the unprepared ruler would be hated for his negligence if his people were conquered. Luck and changing circumstances are a constant in life and of course it's hard to discern what might happen and plan for it, but war is so common and catastrophic there's no excuse for being unprepared for battle. Machiavelli weighed luck and circumstances versus fate and free will, and concluded that humans have sufficient free will to make important decisions and be held responsible. No ruler can claim that failure in battle-readiness was fate or bad luck. He—or she—bears the blame.

One of Machiavelli's priorities was to establish a Florentine army and militia. They could be relied on to fight with vigour because they were fighting for their own interests. In addition, they were familiar with their own territory; they knew their leaders and were ready to embrace their aims. Motivation and local knowledge were crucial to success:

No state is secure without its own army; if it hasn't got men to defend it determinedly and loyally in a crisis, it is simply relying on luck. Those who understand these things have always thought and said: There is nothing so weak and unstable as a reputation for power that is not backed up by its own army. And having your own army means having a force made up of subjects, or citizens, or men dependent on you ...

A ruler then must never stop thinking about war and preparing for war and he must do it even more in peacetime than in war itself ... Another thing a ruler must do to exercise his mind is read history, in particular accounts of great leaders and their achievements. He should look at their wartime strategies and study the reasons for their victories and defeats so as to avoid the failures and imitate the successes.

Machiavelli preferred defensive wars; protecting one's homeland was paramount. He knew that campaigns in foreign territory might be necessary at times but they were very complicated and the result could be ruinous. Offensive wars were best avoided because the invaders were not just fighting the enemy army—the entire population was against them. Even if the invaders were victorious, pacifying conquered territory was a long, damaging struggle. It required a powerful occupying force, or establishing dominant colonies or evicting the resident population. Uncertainty ruled these enterprises. Bloodshed, many troubled years and a depleted or empty treasury were certainties. One wonders if foreign policy boffins in Washington or Canberra have read *The Prince*.

A wise ruler looked after the interests of the common people rather than the nobles. It was simple mathematics: common people outnumber nobles. Plus, plots against the ruler come from the nobles. The commoners aren't much interested in politics or especially ambitious. They're content with sensible laws and freedom from tyranny so they can get on with their lives. Given these minimums, they'll respect the ruler and fight for the status quo when the country is attacked. When treated fairly, commoners formed the most stable basis for government. The nobles had more complicated, often destabilising aspirations which needed to be watched and curtailed by the ruler, without causing undue antagonism. In Australia the

equivalent of nobles might be leaders of party factions, senior bureaucrats, big business operators, union bosses, strident activists and the agents of international bodies like the UN, WHO and the IMF. They want rulers to rule for *them*, not for the people:

So long as he has the people on his side a ruler needn't worry about conspiracies, but when they are against him he'll have to watch everybody's every move. Sensible rulers and well-run states have always done all they can not to drive the nobles to despair and to keep the people happy and satisfied; indeed, this is one of the ruler's most important tasks.

A class of the common people that a ruler needs to encourage particularly are the merchants, entrepreneurs, small business owners and tradespeople. They—not the nobles—were the primary generators of employment, skills, wealth and innovation. Taxes and regulations should not be punitive:

A ruler must show that he admires achievement in others, giving work to men of ability and rewarding people who excel in this or that craft. What's more, he should reassure his subjects that they can go calmly about their business as merchants or farmers, or whatever other trade they practise, without worrying that if they increase their wealth they'll be in danger of having it taken away from them, or if they start up a business they'll be punitively taxed. On the contrary, a ruler should offer incentives to people who want to do this sort of thing and to whoever plans to bring prosperity to his city or state.

The ruler's trust and favour towards the common people even extends to arming rather than disarming them. Machiavelli insisted this was good sense. In war, a large number of people across the country familiar with weapons is a great advantage. A ruler who disarmed the people signalled his distrust of them and left himself without the benefit of their prowess. Perhaps it's time for Australia to consider volunteer local defence forces, coached by the regular army in light infantry and insurgent tactics. Machiavelli reasoned:

When you're the one giving people arms, those arms become yours; men who were potentially hostile to you become loyal, while those subjects already loyal become your supporters rather than just your subjects. It's true you can't arm everyone, but in favouring some you can feel safer about the others too. Seeing that they've been preferred, the men you've armed will be under an obligation to you. The others won't be resentful, understanding that the people facing danger for you and binding their lives to you will inevitably deserve the greater rewards. But when you take arms away from people, then you start to upset them; you show you don't trust them because you're frightened or cagey. Either way, they'll begin to hate you.

This sort of policy needs a determined ruler, but any other type of ruler is weak. People appreciate clear, sensible policies; they grow impatient with equivocation and confusion. Ambiguity in a ruler is self-destructive. In particular, if a ruler has to take harsh or unpopular action it must be done early in his rule, firmly implemented and thus completed quickly, allowing equilibrium and popularity to return. Assuming the policy was necessary, the benefits will show, the memory of distress fade and the ruler gain respect. But if done ambiguously, the pain and confusion will linger and the ruler will lose support. Rulers must be adaptable and discern the different responses required for different situations, but procrastination or mealy-mouthed neutrality is self-defeating.

The Prince is a short book, but its principles have many qualifications because politics and society are forbiddingly complex. It's possible another reader might extract different lessons which would amend or refine the principles I've highlighted. Hopefully, every reader will avoid using Machiavelli's name as an insult. It's a slander on a man with faults, but who also was so scrupulous with his employer's money that when investigated by Florentine officials for possible embezzlement, they discovered that they owed Machiavelli money for unclaimed expenses. His deviousness has been exaggerated, his honour and good sense unfairly impugned. *The Prince* is necessary reading for anyone interested or associated with politics.

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