

# Why Civility Matters

Nicole Billante and Peter Saunders

Contemporary confusion over the informal rules of social interaction goes to the heart of what it means to be a citizen in a free and open society.

In recent months, civility has been a topic of much discussion in the newspapers. There have been both supporters who see it as a necessity and critics who think it is the new political correctness. But throughout the debate about civility, there appears to have been some confusion about what exactly it is and why it is important. Most of the commentators seem to be basing their argument on connotations of civility as good manners or politeness. But this understanding is too simplistic. The concept of civility goes much deeper and requires clarification.

## The three elements of civility

The Centre for Independent Studies has just started a new project on civility. From our review of an extensive academic literature, and from talking with ordinary Australians in focus groups,<sup>1</sup> we would suggest that civility should be understood as being made up of three elements.

### 1. Civility as respect for others

The first is that civility involves a demonstration of respect for others. At the age of 16, George Washington set down his '110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation'.<sup>2</sup> His first rule was: 'Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present.' This emphasis on respecting others is still central to the idea of civility today. Harvard law professor Stephen Carter, for example, defines civility as: 'An attitude of respect, even love, for our fellow citizens',<sup>3</sup> and philosophy professor Cheshire Calhoun argues that

civility involves communicating an attitude of respect towards others.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of showing respect was recognised in our focus groups. We asked participants to consider minor acts of civility, such as younger people offering their seat on a bus to their elders. Such behaviour was commonly seen as important because it expresses and recognises a norm of respect:

*(Elderly female):* I think it's a matter of respect that my generation was imbued with. It happens to me on occasion I get on to a bus, I'm more than middle aged but I do get on to buses and young people give me a seat. Men never do. But younger people do, even a young woman will do it. I think it is just a sign of respect.

*(Middle aged female):* I was brought up that if I was on a bus and somebody older than myself got on then you give your seat up.

*(Middle aged male):* It was all part of that unspoken rule of respecting your elders.

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**Nicole Billante** is a Research Assistant at The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) and **Peter Saunders** is Director of Social Research Programmes. CIS is currently undertaking a project based on civility in Australian society as part of its Social Foundations research programme. This article is based on the project's first Occasional Paper, *Six Questions About Civility*.

Calhoun echoes these ideas when he explains that civility is the common language for communicating respect for one another.<sup>5</sup> The importance, in other words, is in the symbolism of the gesture more than the outcome of the behaviour. Irrespective of whether the other person on the bus is physically capable of standing for the duration of the journey, offering your seat is a way of communicating respect towards them.

### 2. *Civility as public behaviour*

The second element of civility relates to *public* behaviour in the sense that it governs relations between people who may not know each other. American philosopher Michael Meyer notes that, 'Civility is primarily a stance taken towards strangers'<sup>6</sup> and Carter says it 'equips us for everyday life with strangers . . . we need neither to love them nor hate them in order to be civil towards them'.<sup>7</sup>

It is the fact that civility requires us to show respect for people we do not know that invests it with a strong moral quality. Consideration shown to friends and family may derive from empathy or affection, and it is likely to be reinforced by the knowledge that we shall have to interact with them again in the future. Civility towards strangers, however, requires that we behave in certain ways towards people who may mean nothing to us, and whom we are unlikely ever to encounter again. This Good Samaritan ethic means that civility does not rest upon a concern or sympathy towards specific others, but is rather the product of a generalised empathy and sense of obligation which we feel with all who share our society with us.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. *Civility as self-regulation*

The third element of civility is what Carter calls 'sacrifice', or what might less dramatically be referred to as self-regulation. Civility involves holding back in the pursuit of one's own immediate self-interest—we desist from doing what would be most pleasing to us for the sake of harmonious relations with strangers. Civility means doing the right thing:

*(Middle aged male):* The corollary of personal freedom is personal obligation. You get what you give . . . once you go into a public place you have to accept a reasonable level of public protocol.

*(Middle aged female):* So [civility is] probably thinking before you act and it's as if everybody came from a position of generosity.

Adam Smith recognised that the desire to do the right thing by others is based in a deep-seated human need to feel worthy in the eyes of others. It was Smith's genius to understand, not only that the pursuit of self-interest produces outcomes beneficial to others (the well-known proposition from *The Wealth of Nations*) but also that individual behaviour is driven by the desire to win the justified approval of others. He writes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* of the 'impartial spectator' in our breast which produces a bitter sense of self-hate within us when we act in ways that we know would incur the justified disapproval of others.<sup>9</sup>

The approval of others has to be earned. We feel shame-faced when we receive praise or honour that we know is undeserved, and we gain nothing by having our 'self-esteem' boosted by psychiatrists, social workers and feel-better paperbacks if we have done nothing to warrant it. We need to know that others hold us in high moral regard and that we are worthy of their admiration.<sup>10</sup> As George Washington noted in the last of his 110 rules of civility: 'Labour to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.'

These three elements of civility—respect, relations with strangers, and self-regulation—together lead us to a definition of what it is we are talking about. Civility is behaviour in public which demonstrates respect for others and which entails curtailing one's own immediate self-interest when appropriate. Defined in this way, civility is clearly a demanding public virtue. To be prepared to sacrifice one's own self-interest out of respect for people one has never met is a 'big ask'.

### **The importance of civility**

Why does civility matter? Are there not more pressing economic and social problems for us to be worrying about without fretting about the minutiae of people giving up their seat on the bus or rustling lolly wrappers in the cinema? Our concern with such things as manners and etiquette might be thought rather quaint or archaic in this post-modern age, so why does the issue of civility warrant our attention? There are three reasons.

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*1. Civility is a moral virtue*

Civility is a good in and of itself: ‘It is morally better to be civil than uncivil.’<sup>11</sup> Being civil towards others is part of being a good and moral person. More specifically, it signals to other people our willingness to obey shared rules and to regulate our behaviour so as not to undermine their wellbeing. As Carter reminds us the question of ‘how we *should* treat our fellow citizens is independent of the question of how we *feel like* treating them’.<sup>12</sup>

*2. Civility aids social cooperation*

The American sociologist Edward Shils notes that civility is a social good because ‘there is not enough good nature or temperamental amiability in any society to permit it to dispense with good manners . . . Good manners repress the expression of ill nature.’<sup>13</sup> In other words, we need people to be civil to each other if social life is to function efficiently and with a minimum of unnecessary conflict and disruption.

This insight links our interest in civility to earlier CIS work on ‘social capital’.<sup>14</sup> The idea of social capital relates to the spirit of mutual trust and norms of reciprocity which enable members of a social group to cooperate spontaneously to achieve shared outcomes.<sup>15</sup> A spirit of mutual cooperation and ‘give-and-take’ enables us to get more done more efficiently than when people have to be monitored, regulated or coerced.

Clearly there are similarities here with the core idea of civility—that of showing respect for others. But they are not the same thing. Civility differs from social capital in two ways. First, it is an attribute of individuals whereas social capital refers to the quality of relationships. Individuals are civil or uncivil—this is something they are taught, and they bring this virtue with them when they enter social situations. Social capital, by contrast, is the quality of relations between individuals—trust and reciprocity are based in relationships, not people.

Second, individuals bring civility to interactions while social capital is an emergent property of social interaction. It is because we are civil to each other that interaction is possible; it is only after interacting over an extended period that we can come to trust and cooperate with each other. It is in this sense that civility predates social capital. Indeed, there is a plausible case

that civility is a prerequisite of the emergence and sustenance of social capital in a community. Uncivil people will have difficulty building social capital, for incivility breeds distrust and suspicion.

*3. Civility is the desirable alternative to repression*

The third reason why liberals in particular should take civility seriously is that the self-regulation that it demands of people is all that stands between us and increasing coercion by the state.

John Rawls argues that if ‘liberties are left unrestricted they collide with one another’.<sup>16</sup> This is true by definition, for different individuals will always want and desire different and incompatible things, and their unfettered pursuit of their own objectives will inevitably bring them into conflict.<sup>17</sup> The question, therefore, is how (as well as how far) individual liberties are to be restricted or restrained. In the end, this will either be done by external political agencies of the state, or it will be achieved through enlightened self-regulation. As Edmund Burke recognised back in 1791: ‘Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their own disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites.’<sup>18</sup>

In liberal-democratic capitalist societies, individuals legitimately pursue their own self-interest through two spheres of power—the market economy and the political system. Both offer ways of aggregating individual interests into collectively-binding outcomes, but as Friedrich Hayek explained, the market is in principle much more flexible and responsive than even the most democratic and participatory of governments. This is because markets transmit and register millions of people’s changing preferences every minute of every day through shifting price signals.<sup>19</sup>

For a market system to work, however, the pursuit of naked self-interest has to be limited in all sorts of ways. All players must respect the rules, and all need to act respectfully towards each other and to recognise the obligations which they incur to one another. As the recent wave of corporate collapses and stockmarket losses following the disclosure of the Enron fraud in the US demonstrate, unrestrained use of market power can lead to levels of fraud and exploitation that can threaten the

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prosperity and functioning of the whole capitalist system. Francis Fukuyama argues this is why trust is important for the functioning of markets.<sup>20</sup> As traders on the London Stock Exchange used to claim with pride, 'My word is my bond.'

The market system is of course subject to formal controls and regulation, but markets work best when regulation is internalised. Each time some new abuse of power occurs, formal controls are increased and external regulations are tightened. Over time, individual autonomy is eaten away and the scope for enterprise and innovation gets whittled down as bureaucratic power extends to cover ever-increasing areas of activity.

The same applies in other aspects of life as well. For example, in June 2002 the Victorian Government felt obliged to respond to what the press has begun to call 'Ugly Parent Syndrome'—the increasing use of bad language and even physical aggression displayed by parents watching their children participating in junior sporting events. The state government announced that it was introducing an official code of practice which parents would be required to endorse as a condition of their children taking part in sporting events in the state. On one level, it is admirable that the Victorian Premier is taking action to maintain public standards of civility, but on another it is worrying that government is now encroaching this deeply into yet another area of everyday life.

Classical liberals abhor the trend to ever-increasing government control and regulation and generally seek to reverse it. But the intrusion of legislation and regulation can only be stemmed if individuals are willing to recognise and understand the need to restrain their own behaviour. It may be that things have deteriorated to a point where governments will have to show a lead.

### **What should be done?**

Civility is an essential virtue in a free society, for without it, both free market capitalism and liberal democracy risk degenerating into anarchy or repression. While this prospect is not in the immediate future for Australia, a perceived decline in civility is already affecting our everyday freedoms. As the self-regulation of civility declines, so government intervention takes over.

In the analysis of civility, as in research on other ethically-charged areas of social life such as family

relations, the relief of poverty or the schooling of our children, we come up against the core problem of balancing the freedom of the individual against the obligations which we owe to the society in which we live. We must work out ways in which government policies can be used to enrich and preserve liberty, not erode and destroy it.

We need to think about what, if anything, public policy can and should be doing to protect and promote civil virtues and values in contemporary Australia.

### *Policy instruments*

The instruments through which a 'civic education' could be delivered are fairly obvious. Schools, for example, would have a pivotal role in any policy initiative aimed at strengthening civility, for schooling plays a crucial part in the socialisation of each new generation. Many countries, of course, already use the education system explicitly to transmit the core values, norms and beliefs that are taken to define social membership and the civic obligations that go with it.

Schools are not the only instrument through which a civility policy could be pursued. Edward Shils has identified various traditional carriers of public morality including the churches, the universities and business leaders, but in all cases he finds that they have largely abdicated their civic responsibilities in recent times. He argues that this then results in a trickle-down of incivility into the rest of society: 'It is dangerous for the internal peace and good order of a society if the centers are very incivil internally and in their relations with each other . . . their example encourages uncivil attitudes in other parts of the society. Incivility within the centers and among them breeds incivility in the citizenry.'<sup>21</sup> This being the case, any serious strategy for strengthening civility would clearly have to encompass some sort of 'moral renewal' among elite institutions.

Finally, the police and other official guardians of the law would have a key role in any programme to renew public civility, for as Mayor Giuliani recognised in New York City, official rules need to be clarified and consistently applied if informal norms of behaviour are also to be strengthened. This is why the New York City police were encouraged to clamp down on petty infractions like graffiti and jaywalking, for this

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reinforced public perceptions that there are clear rules which are deemed important and which command compliance.

### *Civility and civil liberty*

Although the instruments exist through which we could pursue an effective campaign to renew public civility, it is by no means clear that we should use them for this purpose. For classical liberals, there is something rather disturbing about a policy decision that deliberately enlists schools, opinion leaders, the mass media and the police in promoting a core set of values about how people 'should' think and behave. Is this not dangerously authoritarian?

Such cautious instincts should be taken seriously. We do not want a 'Singapore solution' to the civility problem in which we eradicate anti-social behaviour at the expense of individual liberties and cultural pluralism. Better to put up with chewing gum on the pavements than policemen in the newsrooms.

But this is not a black-and-white, either/or dilemma. After all, even radical libertarians will accept that there must be some common agreement on the rules by which we are all constrained to live, and there is little serious disagreement about imposing and enforcing norms of behaviour governing things like robbery and homicide. The question, therefore, is not whether we should use available instruments to promote and defend core values—it is rather one of identifying and defining what those core values are. ■

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> We conducted focus groups with people of different ages and social backgrounds to see how they think people should behave and whether they think standards of public behaviour have been changing.
- <sup>2</sup> See <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/civility/transcript.html> for a list of the rules. A published version (1994) is also available through the 'Little Books of Wisdom' series from Applewood Books.
- <sup>3</sup> Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), xii.
- <sup>4</sup> Cheshire Calhoun, 'The Virtue of Civility', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29: 3 (2000), 255.
- <sup>5</sup> Calhoun, 'The Virtue of Civility', as above.
- <sup>6</sup> Michael J. Meyer, 'Liberal Civility and the Civility of Etiquette: Public Ideals and Personal Lives,' *Social Theory and Practice* 26:1 (2000), 71.
- <sup>7</sup> Carter, *Civility*, 58.
- <sup>8</sup> Edward Shils, 'Civility and Civil Society: Good Manners Between Persons and Concern for the Common Good in Public Affairs', in *The Virtue of Civility*, ed. Steven Grosby (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1997), 72.
- <sup>9</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, [1759] 1976), 203-268.
- <sup>10</sup> This is precisely why modern attempts to raise people's 'self-esteem' are so flawed, for in the end, one's judgement of one's own worth must depend on a realistic appraisal of how others value us. Much the same point is made by Charles Murray in *In Pursuit of Happiness and Good Government* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1994).
- <sup>11</sup> Carter, *Civility*, xii.
- <sup>12</sup> Carter, *Civility*, 35.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Civility and Civil Society', 79.
- <sup>14</sup> David Popenoe, Andrew Norton and Barry Maley, *Shaping the Social Virtues* (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 1994); Andrew Norton et al., *Social Capital* (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 1997); Martin Stewart-Weeks and Charles Richardson, *Social Capital Stories* (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 1998); Andrew Norton, 'The Market for Social Capital' *Policy* 17:1 (Autumn 2001), 40-44.
- <sup>15</sup> Ian Winter, *Social Capital and Public Policy in Australia* (Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2000); Wendy Stone and Jody Hughes, 'Social Capital: Empirical Meaning and Measurement Validity' *Research Paper 27* (Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2002).
- <sup>16</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 203.
- <sup>17</sup> This is the essential starting point for Max Weber's sociology—the 'warring gods' of ultimate values must inevitably generate clashes as different individuals try to impose their incompatible wills upon each other. See Weber, *Economy and Society* Part I (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968).
- <sup>18</sup> 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', Edmund Burke, *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Daniel B. Ritchie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, [1791] 1992), 69.
- <sup>19</sup> Friedrich A. von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).
- <sup>20</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (London: Penguin Books, 1995).
- <sup>21</sup> Shils, *The Virtue of Civility*, 86.

### ON SACRIFICE

When the happiness or misery of others depends in any respect upon our conduct, we dare not, as self-love might suggest to us, prefer the interest of one to that of many. . . . One individual must never prefer himself so much even to any other individual as to hurt or injure that other in order to benefit himself, though the benefit to the one should be much greater than the hurt or injury to the other.

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, [1759] 1976), 235-236.