

IS MACHIAVELLI OR TACITUS MORE RELEVANT FOR CONTEMPORARY POLITICS?

Tacitus rather than Machiavelli may be more relevant to an age of Democratic Caesarism, argues **Greg Melleuish**

We live in an age in which the work of fifteenth-century Florentine thinker Niccolò Machiavelli is often offered as the key to understanding how politics and politicians operate. For example, Tony Blair's chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, published a study of his time with Blair in terms of the political principles of Machiavelli.¹ For Powell, Machiavelli's ideas hold the key to wielding power in the contemporary world.

There has certainly been an increasing concentration of power at the federal level in Australia, and in most other countries of the world. The key issue is the extent to which this concentration has gone hand in hand with the capacity of leaders to move 'above the law' and to act according to their will in the name of necessity.

Machiavellian morality

According to Machiavelli, if one wishes to gain and hold political power, one must be not so much immoral as amoral, doing whatever is necessary—or as Graham Richardson put it, 'whatever it takes'—even if it means doing things that are beyond the normal moral order (always taking care to appear as if one is acting in a moral fashion).

Machiavelli believes that sometimes it is necessary to behave immorally to achieve a moral outcome as defined in terms of ensuring the survival and flourishing of the state. This position can be seen as an outgrowth of nominalism. The ruler, like God, is defined in terms of his or her will rather than his or her

adherence to law. For Machiavelli, the operation of natural law is limited because no such set of laws regulate the whole world. Rather there is chaos in the world. This ensues from the operation of Fortuna who is capricious, and consequently, must be mastered by anyone who wishes to maintain his or her power. The exercise of will is the key if one wishes to maintain one's position so that the greater good of the state prevails. One must sometimes do evil if one wishes to achieve the greater good. Michael Allen Gillespie argues that Machiavelli seemed to believe that God would reward the ruler who did evil if the aim was to achieve good.²

According to this view, the laws or rules that govern politics are not the same as those that govern normal morality. The political leader must act in ways that ordinary people cannot. This can be seen quite clearly in a comparison of Machiavelli with Cicero in their use of the metaphor of the lion and the fox, which first appeared in Book 1 of Cicero's *De Officiis*.



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Machiavelli allows that a ruler may behave like a beast, be it a lion in the hope of frightening one's opponents or a fox as a way of outsmarting those who lay snares to entrap one.³ Cicero describes the use of both the fraud of the 'cunning fox' and the force of the lion as 'wholly unworthy of man.' More importantly, Cicero denounces the hypocrite, 'who at the moment when he is most false, makes it his business to appear virtuous,'⁴ whereas Machiavelli advocates the necessity at times of appearing other than one is. In *De Officiis*, Cicero makes constant appeals to natural law; Machiavelli's praise of the Prince who can, on occasion, be both a lion and fox, and who makes a career out of being a hypocrite, indicates that for him the will of the Prince always trumps whatever laws nature has prescribed. Those who follow nature and behave as Cicero prescribes in *De Officiis* will most likely come to a sticky end.

Machiavelli wrote the *Prince* as a guide to aspiring leaders at a time of immense political competition and political turmoil in Italy. However, most people are not leaders but followers. Machiavelli comments on the need for any leader to have good advisers who must be loyal to the prince, but provides no advice for those in the category of followers. Apparently they must simply tolerate the potentially capricious behaviour of their leader and be prepared to be subject to that leader's will. Where must one go if one wishes to understand how to survive leaders who do not believe that they are bound by Law? One obvious answer is the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus who described what it was like to live under the early Principate, when there were a number of *Princesps* who were bad and often mad.

Tacitus and Pliny

In both the *Annals* and the *Histories*, Tacitus narrates the dangerous lives led by the nobles of Rome at a time when they had lost their liberty to act freely but continued to serve the *Princesps*. As Tacitus put it in discussing Augustus: 'It was thus an altered world, and of the old, unspoilt Roman character not a trace lingered. Equality

was an outworn creed, and all eyes looked to the mandate of the sovereign.'⁵

In such a world the quest for glory by men of fierce independence, so lauded by Cicero, could no longer continue, just as the appeal to the laws of nature made by Cicero was superseded by the need to comply with the will of Caesar. Tacitus' response is a sort of ironic detachment, an aristocratic disdain for the world and its evil and corrupt ways. This provides him with the capacity for great insight into human behaviour but it also indicates that he is unable to do anything other than continue to serve whoever is in charge. One can point incisively to the evils of the world and to human nature in all its weakness, but this does not translate into any form of action. One must simply endure, continue to be virtuous, and do one's duty; the best one can do is to take refuge in an attitude of superiority.

Nevertheless, as Robin Lane Fox points out, the world of the Principate created a new type of man who may have lost his capacity for individual action but who maintains his sense of duty, honour and moral rectitude.⁶ Fox points to Pliny the Younger as the model of this new type of man; we can also see it in Tacitus' account of his father-in-law, Agricola.⁷ Agricola is a simple, virtuous man who is both humble and assiduous in doing his duty. He is a capable soldier and administrator. His one failing is that in performing his duties so well, he attracts the jealousy of Domitian who proceeds to treat him badly.

Pliny is a different case. Having survived Domitian, he became governor of Bithynia under Trajan and his correspondence with Trajan has survived. Two things stand out in Pliny's relationship with Trajan. The first is how obsequious Pliny is towards his leader. This can be seen quite clearly in the Panegyric Pliny wrote for Trajan: 'Surely nothing could reveal him as citizen and senator more appropriately than the title bestowed on him of *Optimus*.'⁸

The second is the extent to which he refers what seem to be fairly minor issues to Trajan for approval to be rewarded with a 'you've all done very well' from the emperor. Hence,

Pliny begins his famous letter to Trajan on the Christians as follows: 'It is my custom for me, sir, to refer all my difficulties to you, Sir, for no one is better to resolve my doubts and to inform my ignorance.'⁹

Pliny and Agricola are men of restrained virtue. They have learned to do as they are bid. They have learned to trim their sails and use their capacities for the public good as servants, not as independent entities. They have learned how to defer to a higher power.

Decline of morality

Ammianus Marcellinus, writing at the end of the fourth century, shows the extent of decline of morality. Holding to traditional Roman values of service and virtue, he depicts how corrupt the Roman upper classes had become, addicted to their pleasures.¹⁰ He paints an extraordinary portrait of the court of emperor Constantius, with its use of torture and atmosphere of mistrust and deceit. It is an extreme version of the world of the early Principate.¹¹

The major point to come out of Tacitus and Marcellinus is that under the rule of one person, the health and well-being of the commonwealth comes to rest on the character of that person. Therefore, these authors place a great deal of importance on the character of the ruler as the basis of the happiness of the commonwealth. In such a world, that is the only safeguard of the public good.

There is an ideal 'prince' or character type for both these men. For Tacitus, it is Agricola, the emperor Trajan, and the emperor Vespasian. For Marcellinus, it is the emperor Julian. There is virtue in the world and it is manifested from time to time, but there is no mechanism for ensuring its regular appearance. One simply has to endure a world full of despotism and vicious behaviour and wait for the virtuous ruler to appear. Both Tacitus and Marcellinus describe a world of tyranny in which vice is more common than virtue and virtuous men are threatened.

The rare virtuous leader

Virtuous rulers are rare. Hence, Tacitus had to endure a Domitian and Ammianus a

Constantius. There is no mechanism for ensuring that good men end up in charge. That Julian succeeds Constantius would seem to be more a matter of good luck than good management. That occasionally a Vespasian or a Trajan or a Julian emerges owes little to good design. Tacitus and Ammianus describe the horrors of a regime in which one man of almost unlimited power rules.

They provide a picture of what it means to endure a despotic regime. One can read into Tacitus a survival guide to living under a despot. What they do not provide is any sort of alternative to enduring tyranny. It is no accident that Tacitus was to become so popular in the age of princes, in the years following Machiavelli, when advisers had to learn the best way to behave if they were to survive. It is a useful picture of tyranny and how to endure it, but endurance is about all one can do.

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Machiavelli provides two faces to the modern reader. One is in the *Prince*, which is essentially a primer for new rulers. The other is in the *Discourses*, which are essentially about the means and mechanisms for preserving a strong and virtuous commonwealth.¹² There are two essential points about Machiavelli:

- He believes in the principle of activity, which is to say that one should do something. The Prince is an active character who if he simply endured what happened to him would soon come to a sticky end. Machiavelli is looking for ways to mould his world by applying certain political principles. This is the opposite of the far more passive outlook of Tacitus.
- Machiavelli in the *Discourses* enquires into ways in which a commonwealth can be made free and virtuous, and consequently, successful. In particular,

it comes down to creating what has long gone by the name of mixed government or a system of checks and balances.

However, as discussed earlier, Machiavelli's nominalism leads him to give the leader a capacity to act that is not limited by natural law but rather is founded on the capacity of the Prince to exercise his will and make a judgment regarding the common good of the political community. It can be argued that it is extremely dangerous in any political community for the constraints of law to be replaced by a faith in a leader, and allowing that leader to do what he or she believes to be appropriate. Who is to judge whether the actions of the leader are in the interest of the state or just in the leader's private interest?

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The other problem is that the practices advocated by Machiavelli corrode cooperation and trust. 'Whatever it takes' means exactly that, regardless of who gets hurt. By emphasising the primacy of will over the limitations imposed by law, Machiavelli repudiates civic humanism. Hence, while Cicero emphasises the importance of winning 'the affectionate co-operation of our fellows'¹³ to overcome the power of Fortune, Machiavelli observes that as Fortuna is a woman, she must be 'treated roughly' and coerced.¹⁴ Both men wrote in response to hard and cruel times; Cicero dreamed of a return to a cooperative *res publica*, while Machiavelli argued that if one is to defeat Caesar one must become like Caesar. Hence he admires the ruthless brutality of Cesare Borgia.¹⁵ In a world of competing princes who take account only of necessity, there is little room for trust or cooperation. The consequence is a world founded on mutual mistrust, in which there can be no real friendship, praised as the highest

form of human association by Cicero, only expediency in which one uses other people for one's own purposes.

Concentration of power

At its heart this is all about the difference between what we might term 'republican' principles and 'monarchical' principles. By republican principles, I mean those political arrangements that seek to limit and restrict power. They limit power because they recognise that individual activity is only possible if power is not allowed to accumulate in the hands of a single person, or a single political body. They use law to restrict appetite and will. Monarchical principles seek to concentrate power in the hands of a single person or controlling body.

Now there are many arguments put forward in favour of concentrating power, but they largely come down to considering efficiency and order as the foundation of the common good. The emerging states of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe often had very little time for constitutional niceties. They sought to concentrate power in the hands of the monarch and rely on the monarch's will as the source of law and authority. In the face of these Machiavellian rulers, those who served them had to adopt Tacitean strategies to survive, combining servility with diplomacy and developing a capacity for expediency and prudence.

Ever stronger federalism

Over the past one hundred years, one can track the growing concentration of power in the hands of the Commonwealth government in Australia, and the justification has always been efficiency. It can also be argued that the system of responsible government inherited from Britain is inherently monarchical as it tends to concentrate power. The Australian version of the Westminster system contains remarkably few checks and balances, and those it does possess have only really been introduced into the Australian political system through federalism. State governments, in particular, lack much in the way of checks and balances. The introduction

of responsible government in the nineteenth century involved a rejection of the idea of 'mixed government,' based on the sharing of power. This process has often been described as 'democratic' but there is nothing contradictory in a political system being simultaneously democratic and monarchical.

There are good arguments for suggesting that our system of government has become increasingly monarchical over time in the sense that it has increasingly concentrated power in itself. Does this mean it has also become increasingly despotic? Canadian political scientist Donald Savoie has coined the term 'court government' to describe the direction in which Westminster-style governments have moved over the past 25 years.¹⁶ By this he means power has moved out of traditional institutions such as the parliament and the cabinet into a small coterie of advisers and key ministers surrounding the prime minister. This group makes the key decisions and is the group Powell describes in his account of Blair.

According to conventional views, we in Australia possess a limitation on the concentration of power in the shape of the separation of powers, the rule of law as embodied in the constitution, and some checks and balances, ranging from bicameralism to the free operation of the media. However, in Australia, we have not tended to place much emphasis on the institutional means through which power can be checked and divided. Rather, in the name of economic development, government has sought to claim for itself the right to do things in the national interest and hence, supposedly, in the common good. The accumulation of power by the Commonwealth government since World War I can be seen in this light. It has manufactured legal devices to do things it was never intended to do, such as fund universities.

The public or the institutions

In a republican system, political structures are more important than the individuals who work within those structures. Both democratic Athens and republican Rome were obsessed with institutional structures that limited the

capacity of one man to dominate the political system while allowing a range of individuals to compete for the honour of serving the political community. Julius Caesar was assassinated because of what were seen as his monarchical intentions. He also possessed populist or democratic tendencies; he would rule to benefit the ordinary citizens of Rome. The Principate dismantled the old institutional structures of the republic or rendered them meaningless.

When the institutions are weak and rendered incapable of limiting leaders and capping their ambitions we are left with *leadership!* And, of course, this means placing our faith in particular leaders to do the best that they can to make the political system work. The more we focus on leadership as opposed to structures that limit and divide power, the closer we move towards a monarchical system, even if we call it a democracy. And, as Cicero correctly argued, it is the 'greatest souls' and the 'most brilliant geniuses' of whom we need to be most wary.¹⁷

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But surely, it can be argued that we live in an age of law when human actions are restrained by the plethora of laws emanating from our parliament in ever increasing numbers. Those laws, however, seem to be designed more to regulate the behaviour of ordinary citizens than to prevent political leaders from overstepping their bounds. Citizens in a modern democracy are more interested in getting governments to do things for them and to prevent bad things happening to them than in finding ways of placing limits on government power. Leaders look for ways of fulfilling those democratic desires by accumulating ever more power in their hands. One fundamental way of fulfilling the democratic will is through the bureaucratic regulation of behaviour deemed to be dangerous. Unfortunately, there is an awful lot of behaviour

with the potential to be dangerous, ranging from baking homemade cakes for charity functions to individuals expressing ideas of which the government disapproves.

Democratic Caesarism

Democratic Caesarism can be seen as the characteristic political form of our age. It may function within a political structure defined by law, and it may use law as a means of restricting behaviour and ideas of which it disapproves, but its basic instinct is to give force to the will of Caesar, whoever that person may be at a particular point of time. It may be objected that modern Caesars are not despotic because their tenure of office is limited, which is true, but it can also be argued that while they are in office their *imperium*, their capacity to do things, has been growing. After all, the people demand that they be protected and their lives enhanced, and the role of the leader is to answer to those demands, even if it means placing more power in the hands of the leader and restricting the capacity of individuals to do things for themselves. The process, driven by necessity, is informal rather than formal and can occur because most citizens of a modern democracy are less concerned with the niceties of how things are done than with ensuring that things are done.

Hence, expediency becomes the order of the day as leaders look for ways of getting things done. Such leaders become impatient with criticism and seek to hide the ways in which they do things. It is interesting that both Howard and Gillard have been accused of attempting to suppress dissent, which suggests that such behaviour may have little to do with the personality of a particular prime minister and much to do with the way in which the office is evolving. The office of prime minister has grown increasingly distant from the people, as can be seen in the way electoral campaigns are now managed so that the 'real' person is not actually exposed too much in the way of personal contact with the electorate. One now approaches a prime minister less as a fellow citizen than as a suppliant acknowledging one's inferior status. Democratic Caesar is becoming more godlike.

Conclusion

In these circumstances, when we move away from a belief in the capacity of laws and political institutions as the foundations of our politics to a faith in the capacity of great men and women to tame fortune for us, we have as much to learn by reading Tacitus and Marcellinus as Machiavelli. In their pages, we learn the appropriate modes of behaviour to practise when dealing with a powerful leader who seeks to impose his or her will on politics. We learn how to practise virtue and endure the capricious behaviour of leaders. We endure rather than becoming active participants seeking to express ourselves. We learn how to obey our monarchical masters, who have now taken the form of bureaucrats. We learn how to criticise in an oblique fashion so that the meaning of what we say remains hidden. One can see in the way the current government has treated critics such as Andrew Bolt or Alan Jones, by refusing to engage with them, the fate that awaits those who are too critical of the leader. We become more distrustful of our fellow citizens as everyone tries to take advantage of a world in which friendship and cooperation have been replaced by individuals seeking to maximise their advantage by exploiting their connections with those in power.

Even the representatives of the people have become courtiers rather than independent actors. Hence, Maxine McKew writes that MPs like herself were 'only deemed effective to the extent that we stayed in line and did what we were told.' To do otherwise risked being 'treated like an idiot.'¹⁸

In such circumstances, Tacitus becomes very relevant for our emerging monarchical democratic system based on the cult of the Machiavellian leader. Just as one reads Machiavelli to learn the techniques that enable one to become a leader, so lesser mortals must learn from Tacitus how to behave so they can become successful courtiers able to carry out Caesar's will. Such are the consequences of a political system based on democratic Caesarism.

Endnotes

- 1 Jonathan Powell, *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World* (London: Bodley Head, 2010).
- 2 Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 90–91.
- 3 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 61–62).
- 4 Cicero, *On Duties*, Walter Miller (trans.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 45–47.
- 5 Tacitus, *Annals*, Books 1–3, John Jackson (trans.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), 249.
- 6 Robin Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History of Greece and Rome* (London: Penguin, 2006), 548–574.
- 7 Tacitus, *Agricola*, M. Hutton (trans.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 3–115.
- 8 Pliny, *Letters*, Books 8–10, *Panegyricus*, Betty Radice (trans.), 327.
- 9 As above, 285.
- 10 Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, Books 14–19, John C. Rolfe (trans.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 35–53.
- 11 Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, Books 20–26, John C. Rolfe (trans.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), 173–185.
- 12 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (trans.) (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).
- 13 Cicero, *On Duties*, as above, 187.
- 14 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, as above, 87.
- 15 As above, 23–29.
- 16 Donald Savoie, *Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability in Canada and the United Kingdom* (Toronto: 2008).
- 17 Cicero, *On Duties*, as above, 27.
- 18 Maxine McKew, *Tales from the Political Trenches* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 2012), 107.