On October 12, 2002, political life in Australia became more difficult. By political life, I mean not just what politicians do or the discussions of public issues and events that flood the media but the activity that belongs to all of us as citizens. We all carry a responsibility to know and to care about the quality of life in our nation, our state, our municipality and the other non-constitutional associations to which we belong. This responsibility is not the same for all of us but varies according to such things as profession, education and opportunity for involvement. It surfaces as opinions about how things are and what should be done.

My own reaction to the Bali bombing, which affected many Australians both directly and indirectly and the nation as a whole, was to say that cause and effect had gone out of politics in Australia. How cause and effect might work in politics needs detailed discussion and will be taken up later in this paper, but to note its absence is a way of saying not only that it is impossible to predict what might happen in the future but also that it is impossible to understand what is going on at present. Such inability to understand the moment makes informed or responsible opinion impossible and so rattles the foundations of political life.

This reaction is, of course, not simply a reaction to a single incident but to the events, actions and understandings of a period of time that can be located between the Tampa crisis beginning on August 26, 2001, and the Bali bombing of October 12, 2002. It includes the events of September 11 in New York and Washington and the American response to these - the ‘war on terrorism’, war in Afghanistan and attempts to initiate war in Iraq. It involves a period of various forms of economic instability. It covers a time in which we have raced to understand vast parts of the world that were previously almost unknown to us - their geography, culture, religion, history, economics and politics. In Australia, one needs to include the Federal election called on October 5, 2001, and conducted on November 10, 2001. It includes the ‘children overboard’ affair, in which false claims were repeatedly made by senior government ministers about an event on October 6, 2001, despite the existence in government of adequate information to correct the claims.

There is too much in all of this to examine in a single article. There are global issues, issues to do with particular parts of the world and specifically Australian issues. This article will first examine one aspect of Australian politics at the present moment, which is the predominance of machiavellianism. It will then examine the issue of cause and effect in more detail showing the kinds of fragmentation that have entered into our political life. Its claim is that machiavellian politics has left us ill suited to deal with the unfortunate events of the wider world.

**Machiavellianism in Politics**

‘Machiavellian’ is a term that is usually used to imply gross wickedness and trickiness. Though the name of an Italian political writer of the 16th century, it has made its way as an adjective into the English language. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines it as [36] ‘elaborately cunning; scheming, unscrupulous.’

Machiavelli’s fame is often thought to have sprung from his invention of all sorts of dirty tricks for use in politics. Many of them are found in his little work, *The Prince*. ‘There are three ways to hold [newly acquired states]: first, by devastating them; next by going and living there in person; thirdly, by … setting up an oligarchy which will keep them friendly to you.’ (Chapter 5) That this is an incomplete understanding of Machiavelli shows up when we read Aristotle and his philosophical analysis of political life based particularly on his experience of different forms of constitution in the Greek world of the 4th Century BC. In a section of his *Politics*, he proposed strategies that were remarkably like those that Machiavelli was to suggest two millennia later. Aristotle is even blunter than Machiavelli, ‘[he] should lop off those who are too high; he must put to death men of spirit; he must not allow common meals, clubs, education, and the like; …’ (*Politics* V, 12)

The difference between Aristotle and Machiavelli is that when Aristotle discussed these strategies he did so in the context of the ways in which a tyrant
might preserve his reign. In his analysis of political life he examined different kinds of rulers, both those he thought bad and those he thought good, since they all seemed to turn up from time to time. The machinations of a tyrant could be effective but certainly not good. Machiavelli, on the other hand, made his proposals in an exposition of the character of any successful ruler in a book meant as a guide to ensure success. In this lies the difference between what we might call classical politics and machiavellian politics.

Classical politics looks to various senses of the good. Classical politicians, statesmen and stateswomen, dedicate their lives to the pursuit of good - the good of the state, the good of persons and communities within the state. The fundamental question of politics has to do with the best practicable constitutional arrangements for a people in the light of the particular circumstances in which they live. Irrespective of whether such politicians are successful or not, the question that drives all they do is the question of what is good or best. Politics in this view is deeply ethical.

What Machiavelli did in the famous Chapter 15 of *The Prince* was rid politics of ethics.

The gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done moves towards self-destruction rather than self-preservation. The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous.

In Chapter 18, Machiavelli dealt with lying by way of illustration.

Everyone realizes how praiseworthy it is for a prince to honour his word and to be straightforward rather than crafty in his dealings; none the less the contemporary experience shows that princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their word lightly, who have known how to trick men with their cunning, and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles.'

At stake here is the moral character of the ruler. He is a shifty character, who nevertheless appears firm. He would never admit to lying or to any other inappropriate action, because he would judge himself in terms of what was expedient for his own ends. Again in Machiavelli’s words,

He should appear to be compassionate, faithful to his word, kind, guileless, and devout. And indeed he should be so. But his disposition should be such that, if he needs to be the [37] opposite, he knows how.'

The point of such a character is that a person who has it will be able to change readily with circumstances. Much of what occurs in politics appears as if by chance. A true machiavellian is always ready to respond to events as opportunities, even if this requires an apparent change of character. Someone of firmer character will be caught out - bound by previous statements and judgements, by a sense of what is right and wrong and by what we traditionally call virtue. For Machiavelli, the key to political success apart from actual strength lay in the ability to master fortune, that is, to turn any new circumstance to one’s own advantage.

Under Machiavelli’s inspiration, the goal of the politician became to secure and to hold power. Although machiavellians generally want to achieve something else as well, power is for them an end in itself and no longer simply a means to pursue what they take to be the good of those they rule. Action and policy can shift readily without any implication of inconsistency because the fundamental goal is simply to stay in control.

Such a view of politics implies also a view of those who are ruled. Again, Machiavelli is explicit. ‘Because men are wretched creatures who would not keep their word to you, you need not keep your word to them,’ and ‘Men are so simple, and so much creatures of circumstance, that the deceiver will always find someone ready to be deceived.’ Where in the classical tradition politicians took responsibility for the moral betterment of their citizens, in the machiavellian tradition they diminish them.

Politics in the Australian Parliament tends to be a mix of classical and machiavellian politics. One can certainly bring to mind politicians of the past who clearly established themselves as people who spent their lives seeking the good of the nation understood in broad and rich ways. No doubt there are such politicians today, but we seem to be dominated by machiavellians, and in the time since the Tampa crisis, this domination has been extreme. The Senate Report into the ‘children overboard’ affair painted a picture of which Machiavelli would have been proud. It and other records of the time reveal a government in which senior ministers were prepared to cultivate extreme prejudice among the populace on the basis of information, which was questionable when first used and which was soon known to be false, simply in order to win an election. They reveal a government that has done its best to ensure that the full truth was not discovered even well after the event and ministers whose claim to integrity is that they ‘acted on advice’. The reward has been short-term electoral success; the damage with us for the longer term is more serious and lies in the destruction of the possibility of ethical political life.
Cause and Effect in Political Life

Cause and effect in political life is not to be reduced to some kind of mechanical system, in which moving one lever moves another and so on, until a predictable outcome emerges. If causality did function like this, a political science that told politicians exactly what decisions to make would be not only possible but also easy. Rather, causes are the conditions that render an entity, a state of affairs, an event or an action intelligible. They have to do with what something is, how it came to be and its place in the order of things. They are, therefore, necessarily complex and multiple. One of the fullest examinations of causality is that of Aristotle, who divided causes into four general kinds: material, formal, efficient and final.

One can consider a state in this way. The material cause is a group of human beings with their own culture and history living on land of a particular geography that allows for certain economies. The formal cause is the law, which constitutes a people politically and which provides the structures by which they coordinate their activities. The efficient causes, that is, ends [38] or purposes, have to do with the kinds of life that are desired by the people. The efficient causes are the citizens and politicians who act in political affairs according to their characters and beliefs. These causes are inter-related. For instance, a constitution has to suit a people and their situation, and citizens and politicians act for ends, whether they be their own ends or the ends of a larger group. Such analysis applies not only to entities like a state, but also to actions and events.

A person who understands these kinds of things both generally and with the particularity of their application to a single group of people is able to make sound judgements about what the state of affairs is, about what might happen and about what would best be done. Such judgements are based not only on information, which might be assembled and given to many people, but also the ability to penetrate causes with understanding, which is given to people in different degrees. Good political analysts in contrast to partisan opinion writers have this gift. Accomplished politicians also have this gift though their knowledge of the causes may be more through experience than study and the gift may work more through instinct than through careful consideration.

Although this picture is somewhat ideal, in normal times it functions fairly well. The best expectations may always be changed by surprise events based on free action or on the chance conjunction of different actions or on unpredictable natural phenomena, but prudent observers can usually maintain a hold on what is happening. The difficulty of the present moment, which is symbolised in the Bali bombing, is that this possibility is breaking down. Affairs are becoming so chaotic that it is extremely difficult for anybody to know just what is going on. This is the fragmentation of political life, and this article will suggest three levels at which this fragmentation is occurring.

The first level of fragmentation has to do with the fact that we are now being seriously affected by causes that we neither know nor understand. Peoples of whom we know little and groups constituted in ways that are beyond us are suddenly important to us. Mysterious agents, whose characters, beliefs and goals are foreign to us, have become significant on the world stage. This, of itself, is not enough to say that we have moved beyond cause and effect. We are simply dealing with causes that we do not know or understand. Usually, we hope that a few senior academics or specialised government officials know enough to keep the government informed so as to be able to make the best decisions in respect of policy and action.

The second level of fragmentation has to do with the reactions of peoples and governments, particularly in the United States. September 11 created such a dent in the American psyche that few seem to have been able squarely to face the question of why people in the world would want to do something like that, or in President Bush’s terms to ask ‘why do people hate us?’ The issue here is not that the attacks be justified in any way, for they cannot be justified, and they will remain heinous crimes. It is rather a matter of comprehending what has shifted in the world to make the attacks possible, so that it will be possible to make adjustments that enable a world that is more liveable for everyone in it. Questions need to be raised about the United States’ cultural, political and economic presence in the world not just because it is strong but because of the ways in which it uses its strength. Among these, the manner of its support of Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is extremely relevant.

There are thoughtful people in the United States who think about these things, and one hopes that some of them are in government. Such is not the case, however, for the general population or for the President in his public statements. Instead, the United States embarked on a war not against nations or persons or organisations but against an abstraction – terrorism – and did this with a certainty about its own goodness and a notion of [39] progress that would see the whole world become like itself. The Taliban in Afghanistan provided a real and useful initial focus, but what comes after that? Can the world really be divided into those nations that are simply good and those that are simply evil? Such simple categorisations
are likely to lead to action that is incoherent and at
cross-purposes with goals of peace and harmony.
Might not a better response be a cooperative large-
scale police operation such as has happened in
Indonesia? Besides, the declaration of a ‘war’ could
be seen to legitimise further responses by the other
side.

The third level of fragmentation occurs when we
realise that governments may be acting
opportunistically or for motives other than those
they publicise. What, despite the difficulties with
weapon agreements, lies behind President Bush’s
ardent desire for war with Iraq, when Iraq’s link
with active terrorism is at best tenuous? What role
does oil play in the way in which the Middle East is
viewed and in the formation of policy? What lies
behind Prime Minister Howard’s resolute
adherence to American plans and policy? Are
Australia’s goals so reduced to economic goals that
its major interest is in a free trade agreement with
the United States? At a more speculative level, we
might ask whether the United States is attempting a
form of empire based on its own kind of democracy
and market forces? We might even ask whether
the West itself is in need of a war so as to restore
its moral fibre and to refocus its goals? It is too
soon to answer these questions, but they are abroad,
and they are unsettling.

These kinds of fragmentation have given rise to a
moment in which lack of connection between
events and actions can be said to have taken cause
and effect out of political life. Affairs are murky,
and sound political judgement has become
exceedingly difficult. In Australia, we are
peculiarly unready to deal with such a confusing
situation because of the excessively machiavellian
character of the government that is in power. Can
we trust it to determine what is good for us, when it
has adopted a politic that is theoretically devoid of
ethics? When its electoral success is based in fear,
can we believe what it is telling us, especially when
alerts and warnings themselves increase fear?

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