

Essay

On the Process of Thinking in Public Life: A Conversation in the Interest of Democracy

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ABSTRACT

We all have our own individual system of checks and balances, which kick in quite unconsciously before we speak and even before we listen to someone. The neurological research shows the myriad of connections and networks in the brain when we operate through our senses, when we move any part of the body and when we speak, think and remember. Given such knowledge, it is possible to assume that everyone else uses the same processes and inner structures, giving rise to the further assumption that we are the same in every way so far as remembering, learning and thinking are concerned. The main points of this essay are that the mind is always busy and this busyness is spread over many issues; obviously there is a need to set aside the busyness before one makes a decision. A simple practice is to stop and reflect on what is in your mind. Begin counting to ten and restart when a thought appears. Over time this practice will reach the point where you reach ten before a thought appears; and the goal is to have the mind become still, and that is the state in which we can make a truly valid decision. It is also the state in which we can cast a valid vote in an election for any of the three levels of government.

Key Words: thinking process, public life, state of mind, still mind, valid decision.

As a Councillor in Local Government I attend numerous meetings and discussions requiring decisions to be made, all of which have an effect on the community I am privileged to serve. These meetings and discussions involve a number of people who, like me, are there in good faith to serve the community. As Elected Members of Council, issues are discussed and there are inevitably differing views and opinions expressed. We all value diversity, and it is thought to give a better representation of the diversity of views within the wider community. I believe that if one is to be honest, in the intent to make the best decision based on the evidence at hand, one should at least understand why he/she reasons in a particular way.

I often marvel at this diversity and wonder what parallel universe some of my colleagues have been visiting to consult their community on the issues under discussion. It may well be down to the fact that here in South Australia Local Government is apolitical: which is to say we do not have political parties in our form of Local Government. We have very clear legislation governing the matter of Conflict of Interest, and at the same time that conflict of interest is still in the background at times and the persons concerned will be honestly unaware of its subtle presence in the way they think.

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I am not making any accusations here; instead I am exploring something that has been resonating in my mind because I have always been aware that I often think very differently to my colleagues. It is highly likely that I may also visit my own parallel universe just as much as everyone else on the planet. One of the benefits of having an apolitical form of Local Government is that one is able to recognise a brilliant suggestion from another member in Council. In a party system one is constrained by ideology and party rules from accepting the suggestion that an opposition member is capable of having any idea worthy of consideration.

The constraints mentioned above are not just in party systems; we all have our own individual system of checks and balances, which kick in quite unconsciously before we speak and even before we listen to someone. The neurological research shows the myriad of connections and networks in the brain when we operate through our senses, when we move any part of the body and when we speak, think and remember. Given such knowledge, it is possible to assume that everyone else uses the same processes and inner structures, giving rise to the further assumption that we are the same in every way so far as remembering, learning and thinking are concerned. Unfortunately, what we omit in that assumption of sameness is consciousness, which encompasses not only what we know, what we think and what we remember but also how we do it and with what.

In coming to grips with my own questions about all of this I eventually stumbled across the Hindu traditional knowledge from the Yoga Sutras, which had addressed these questions thousands of years ago. The same knowledge is contained in Buddhism and other eastern philosophies, and essentially it all boils to the evolution of suitable responses to situations by any living organism for its survival. Where we differ from other species is that our responses are accompanied by conscious observation and sometimes to anticipation, all of which appear in mind as thoughts, both conscious and unconscious. One of the most common responses to what we see, hear or feel is the perennial question of **what's in it for me**.

Much of what has been written about the mind likens it to a computer, and what we call consciousness is the awareness of the information being processed at the present moment. There is much speculation too about the sense of self being which arises from the information being experienced as consciousness. An interesting point from some neurological research is that the signal to act is always ahead of the awareness of intending to act. That signal is outside of our awareness until after we decide to act. I have noticed that there have been times when I say something during consideration of an issue and notice that the answer I have given has been a surprise to me. I take the view that this is another manifestation of acting before one is aware of having acted as given above, and that the actual action or words delivered are determined by more than the content of my conscious mind. Just what this "more than the content of my conscious mind", my thoughts in other words, will be is the central issue in the decision making process. To embark on a discussion of these neurological aspects of mind would be to enter an academic minefield, and I have no wish to do that. Instead, I want to remain with thinking as it relates to the decision making process and what it means in terms of life's journey and the structure of our thinking process.

The Hindus addressed these questions thousands of years ago; the Buddha for example was seeking to address the issue of suffering, and like the other philosophies of the time, came to the

conclusion that the answer is all in the mind. But not just the contents of the mind, it was all about the way we think. In today's terminology one could say it was all down to the brain's software. So let us look at our software from that Hindu perspective.

Certainly, from the moment of birth and to a large extent during the gestation period, a person will experience something in every moment. I have no doubt that memory is active at some level even before birth, but it is a bit later that accessible memories are developed. The Hindu philosophies catalogue our experiences in five categories. 1 fear of death, 2 attraction, 3 repulsion, 4 stupor, confusion about who I am, and 5 ignorance, mistaking self for non self.

Fear of death covers quite a wide field; it is the fear that I may cease to be, and of course this extends to what defines me; things such as position, status, possessions, self-image and the like. Attraction and repulsion are fairly straight forward as likes and dislikes, which will influence choices we make. Stupor is confusion in its existential sense of not knowing who or what I am. Ignorance is mistaking me for something else; it also covers ignorance in respect of the previous four categories. My observation here is that all of these modifications of the mind have their root in the survival mechanism innate in every form of life.

We must bear in mind that these philosophies were developed by people who thought deeply about life and their relationship with the whole reality. They were sufficiently self-aware to realise that we all die, that nothing is permanent and everything is related to everything else. In the context of our quest to understand what underpins our decision making process, it is sufficient that we consider these five ignorances in terms of the more modern catch-all question of **what's in it for me**.

So what this means is that for practically every Councillor, when we read an agenda item, or watch and hear a presentation related to an issue under discussion, we will evaluate that information against the practical matters of cost, affordability and where it fits on the Long Term Financial Plan, plus **what's in it for me**. This last point may become more relevant as the Council term approaches the election cycle. And there is the matter of the voter support base one has within the community. This last point is where the apolitical notion is not particularly valid anymore because, through lobbying others it can become akin to a party line where the party is one's personal voter base or special interest group, and is even more evident in the party system of government.

All of these influences are almost always outside of one's awareness in the period before the Mayor puts the matter to a vote and we must make a decision. I am not saying that this is what happens for every Councillor at every call for a vote. I am simply saying that as Elected Members we have a responsibility to make the best decision we are capable of making, and we can only do that if we are aware of the inner process we are individually running. That inner process is the same unconscious process between the signal to decide and becoming aware of one's decision.

Around 300 BC Confucius wrote the first book on governance in public life. He said "One should never aspire to high office. One should aspire to have the qualities the community would want you to have in high office".

For the elected Councillor, a characteristic of modern society, in comparison to the time of Confucius, is the adversarial nature of modern public life. Much of this has is apparent in the way information is presented in the media, although I wouldn't place everything at media's door. At the level of Local Government Councillors may feel under some pressure to be seen to be on top of local issues and this can have an effect on the way one thinks. For example, it might be strategic to make an assessment about who might vote for or against on a particular matter being considered, and if those likely to vote contrary to the desired outcome of the strategist can be isolated then the desired outcome can be relatively assured. Of course this is me being hypothetical, and with an experienced Mayor presiding over a meeting such an event is hardly possible, but not impossible either.

In the cut and thrust of politics at the state and federal level the adversarial model really comes to the fore, and the attention from the media is immediate and colourful. We appear to live for sensational news, and whether the news is even true is rarely factored in to the digestion of this diet of the daily grabs for notice. The party system minimises the possibility of having a democracy because, in the final analysis, any matter is assessed against a party's need at that moment in time. Granted, the party will be aligned to a conservative or a liberal ideology of varying hue, and the rules can be as fluid as a situation demands. Here the strategies revolve around the media cycle, the election cycle and brand differentiation, all plotted against the poll ratings according to whatever message is deemed to be the one in today's particular spin. What might have escaped notice is the spin of one day will create the need for a fresh spin the next day, and at times even in the same day.

Where there may be, say, one hundred members of a party, it is likely that there could be one hundred different personal opinions on a particular issue. In a two party model of government and opposition it is quite possible that, given a conscience vote, the combined vote would be overwhelmingly supportive of a particular motion. On the other hand, a vote on party lines would mean that the motion was lost or won despite the personal views of the members, views based on what views the electors have given their representatives. I think that a high majority of us (voters, left, right and centrist) feel misrepresented presently.....frustrated and unheard!

In considering this vexing question of just who does a Member of Parliament, or Councillor represent, a couple of points of view come to mind? First is the view of the elector, which might reasonably regard their representative in this instance as an intellectual prostitute. The second is the view of the realist, which would say that at issue is the survival of the party view. This second point is what drives any vote in the parliament and while a particular view might exist as a strong view in an electorate it might be not particularly important for the party. It is an acceptable risk within their bigger picture. This is often the case in 'safe' seats.

Our Prime Minister has said that politics is theatre, and I often wonder if he meant to use that word to encompass comedy, tragedy, drama or farce, or was it a nod to the ever present media. Unfortunately, what I think that choice of words conveys is that politics is always a contest in the sense of a blood sport rather than a contest of ideas in an honest meeting of minds. This "theatrical" element of parliament allows/feeds/breeds the hypocrisy we experience daily. And more's the pity that a high percentage of the media and population seem to enjoy it - thus it gets

rewarded. Ego runs the highest percentage of government/business/personal lives. In the distant past serious thinkers in America addressed the matter of their lack of representation in the English parliament, and that was a real demonstration of a meeting of minds to discuss a common problem. Out of those minds came the United States of America.

If one contrasts those conversations against what one can watch during Question Time on television I would certainly agree with the Prime Minister that politics is theatre, but more in the vein of “bread and circuses” than the serious matter of governing the country. The party system appeals to the voters at the same level as watching a footy match or, on a slow day, a cricket match.

Of course it will be obvious to anyone reading this that this is just my view at this point in time, and equally, it is my view because of the way I think within the modifications of my mind. I accept that there are millions, even more than millions, who have their own views about governments and the party systems. The simple fact is that this is the form of government we have and there is little chance of changing the system. My concern is that with the rise of terrorism in its many forms worldwide, we will be too preoccupied with our local stuff to notice this ever present threat in time to actually save what we take for granted as a way of life.

If we can accept that the ancient ones have a point about the modifications of the mind, **do** we say, “so what”? Or do we set out to understand **our** thinking process and how that affects our decisions. As Councillors there is little we can do about the thinking at the state and federal levels of government. What we can do about our own processes is relatively simple and effective. It is called meditation or reflection and can be very instructive.

1. Find somewhere quite where you can sit for about twenty minutes without any interruption.
2. Concentrate on your breath and notice your thoughts.
3. Count to ten in time with your breath and notice the thoughts.
4. Start counting again every time a thought appears.

Obviously you will not get very far in the early stages, but you will confirm that there are thoughts arising all of the time, and I can assure this is true of everyone. The point here is that the mind is always busy and this busyness is spread over many issues. Over time this practice will reach the point where you reach ten before a thought appears. The goal is to have the mind become still, and that is the state in which we can make a truly valid decision. It is also the state in which we can cast a valid vote in an election for any of the three levels of government.

If you, the reader, have noticed what I said earlier about the neurological signal to move which is some milliseconds or so before one is aware of beginning to move, you might like to ponder a little further with me. If we accept that the mind was behind the decision to move, and we become aware of it a short time later then what we have is a possible model for what we call consciousness. Biology tells us that both sperm and ovum are alive prior to conception, then it is not too much of a stretch to concede that life does not begin at conception but is something a person shares with one’s parents, in fact life goes all the way back to the first successful single cell creature.

Every living entity from that first species would evolve a relationship with its environment, together with an awareness of its environment. Predators would cause life to develop strategies which we would now regard as survival mechanisms, varying only in the local context from that we humans and other species exhibit today. I am suggesting that the inherent awareness in every specie would have evolved as the particular animal evolved, and the interaction of that awareness as a survival mechanism would evolve the means to act, a mechanism we call mind. I am sure the neural circuits in all mammals would be similar to our own, and the controlling mind would be much the same. What is different is the extrapolation of our awareness into the mind itself, possibly arising from our migration from forest tree dwelling animal to the more open savannah with a whole spectrum of threats. The evolution of language would have given us the ability to think in a more practical sense of the word, and communicate our thoughts to our fellow creatures.

It is probable that much of what we feel and think passes unnoticed because it is an everyday part of life. But if you can remember recalling a significant event it is likely that emotions such as joy, love or fear can accompany those memories. These reactivated emotions demonstrate the mind's connection to the rest of the neural networks, and because we think with the mind and the networks we never notice the time gap between the two which probably confirms that the mind is running the show. So it is just possible that what we call consciousness is an evolution of the survival mechanism. As our environment has changed, so too have the ways in which mind presents what is now a wide range of information into what was formerly the decision process.

And for our politicians this means refining what was used to protect an individual or community from a predator or catastrophe into a way of presenting information in a context far removed from the expectations of the common man or woman.

Let me add my perspective - "what's in it for me" seems to mostly to be an ego-driven statement/question as a way of thinking, or should I say, "not thinking" - and it is mostly genuinely unconscious - as it suggests that one is not really "thinking" but rather being driven by the monster mind or by others - in the case of Hitler, by the human monster.

When I watch the parliamentarian players around the world - with particular interest in our own national and regional (and in my case our local) representatives, the majority appear to operate from this truly unconscious mode. Their operating systems run on an unconscious reactionary system, rather than a conscious responsive approach. This continues to be lauded and applauded by shock jocks and a high proportion of society.....who the representatives represent!! And we call that democracy!