

## What is in the Emperor's Wardrobe?

Remember the old story of The Emperor's New Clothes? The Emperor had been convinced by a couple of scoundrels that they wove the finest cloth in the world. It was such a light fabric that it could hardly be felt on the body but the colours and designs woven into it were breathtaking in their brilliance. A magical cloth, it could not be seen by those who were too incompetent or ignorant to appreciate its high quality.

Inevitably, a range of high-ranking officials and the Emperor himself, saw nothing, but weren't quite prepared to say so. He even agreed to parade through town to show off his new suit of clothes to his people. There were sounds of amazement, and a few quiet giggles, but everyone had to acknowledge the magnificence of the cloth --- even though all that they saw was their stark naked Emperor! No-one could bring themselves to honestly admit what they saw, because they didn't want to run the risk of being thought stupid or incompetent!

The story created by the scoundrels, who became quite wealthy from the experience, is an early version of what today we might call 'spin'. The story they created for the Emperor appealed to his vanity. No-one, the Emperor included, could admit what they really saw because their judgement had been thrown into question.

I think we often deal with such situations today. "Spin" has become a political term, and people are employed to put the right spin on things, so that the bulk of the community can be convinced of a particular view. Once upon a time we might have called this being hoodwinked and there was nothing positive about it. Nowadays advertising campaigns are built on spin, as are public relations promotions.

Recently, I had an experience of the impact of spin. I attended a meeting with some people who had come to convince us that their view, which was diametrically opposed to that of mine and my colleagues, was in fact sound and acceptable. I went to the meeting to listen. I did not set out to argue the point or to try to convince them to change their perspective. I was trying to be genuinely open to learning what underpinned their decisions. I thought a dialogue might then be possible. After almost two hours I was beginning to think that I had the issue entirely wrong. These visitors were very convincing; they were good at what they did. But it was clear that their decisions and plans were based on a very different values base than the one on which I was building my judgement. For them there was no other view, no other perspective. They believed that what they had to offer was the fine cloth of the Emperor's new clothes ... and I began to feel that if I couldn't see that, it must be because I was ignorant or incompetent!

I am not implying that each of us doesn't have a right to express our differing opinions. That is one of the basic principles on which democracy is built. It is one of our basic human rights.

What we need to grapple with is our understanding of honesty. We need to present our experience of reality with integrity and truthfulness. Maybe we won't be as convincing, but perhaps we will be able to enter into productive dialogue with others, so that, together, we

come to a clearer understanding of the reality and complexity of any situation under discussion. It seems to me that genuine dialogue is the only way we will cut through the spin.

In the story it was a small child, with no reputation or image to uphold, who voiced what everyone else was thinking - "But the Emperor is naked!" Perhaps the best way to cut through the spin we meet in so many situations is with simplicity, with a readiness to run the risk of standing alone before the powerful who shape the decisions and directions of society, and of voicing the minority view. I wonder if the recently announced government consultation into Integrity and Accountability in Queensland will allow some of these voices to be heard.