Surveillance State

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MPS, Sydney, October 2010

Why is it that so many people around the world – whatever their culture, history or circumstance – appear willing to give up certain freedoms in return for either security or prosperity?

The question underpins my latest book, *Freedom For Sale*, which was published in the UK and Europe in September 2009, in the United States in March 2010 and this August in Australia. It has been translated into Russian, Italian and Spanish, with Arabic and other languages under discussion. This is clearly a global question. It encapsulated so many of the concerns I had been having about the state of politics and economics around the world, about the state of civil liberties, and intriguingly about the state of us, the people.

I selected eight countries as case studies: Singapore, China, Russia, the UAE, India, Italy, UK and US. But I could have chosen also from a host of others. The first four states I loosely describe as authoritarian or semi-authoritarian; the latter fall loosely under the democracies. Between these two categories lie both important distinctions but also similar patterns of behaviour.

My study does not look at tyrannical regimes that rule by the barrel of a gun, where the state is an unambiguously malevolent force and there is no element of consent. This is not therefore about Zimbabwe, North Korea or Burma. In countries such as these there is no pact between the government and the people, but an instinct simply to survive. Nor do I focus on countries with their own particularities, such as Israel, or Hugo Chavez's avowedly leftist Venezuela or post-apartheid South Africa.

I focused on countries that, whatever their political hue, have accepted the terms of globalisation. This is what I call the pact, or trade-off. It has dictated the terms of engagement over the past two decades, since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the onset of globalisation and the accumulation in many regions of steady or spectacular economic growth. This is what I call the era of global glut.

In order to succeed, governments have come to discreet agreements with their peoples, or to be more precise, a critical mass of their population. The alliance of political leaders, business and the middle classes has been the key. What mattered in all these societies was that the number of people who benefited from this deal gradually increased, and that the state remained clever enough to meet their various needs.

The rules vary between countries, but the template is similar. Repression tends to be selective, confined to those who openly challenge the status quo or who ask too many questions. The number of people who fall into that category, in any society, is actually very few – journalists who criticise the state or published information that cast the powerful in a negative light;

lawyers who defend these agitators; and politicians and others who publicly go out of their way to "cause trouble". I use that term advisedly.

This is the difference between what I term "public freedoms" and "private freedoms". The former comprises free expression, freedom of association, a vigorous multi-party democracy and a pluralist and active civil society. I return to the term, "causing trouble": it is not just about permitting but *encouraging* citizens to get involved in the public realm.

Private freedoms revolve around the freedom to lead one's atomised existence relatively unencumbered. This means, within a law-based society, the freedom to travel, to own property, the freedom to live one's life more or less as one wishes, from personal and sexual life, to choose the schooling or health requirements of one's family. The pre-eminent private freedom, however, is the freedom to make and spend money.

This is the deal, in a nutshell: I (the state) won't mess with you (the citizen) in your daily life, as long as you (the citizen), don't mess with me (the state) and the exercise of my power. The pact gets into difficulty only when either side reneges on its pledge. In Russia when contract law is not observed, when private property or savings are threatened by politically-motivated confiscation, the deal breaks down. It is no wonder, whether rhetorically or not, that President Medvedev talks of his aim to enshrine a less arbitrary jurisprudence. In Singapore reformers wonder whether the state is not over-reaching itself in recommending modes of behaviour. These cases and more suggest that the state must remain smart and flexible in order to keep the pact working to its ultimate benefit.

For many people these private freedoms present a very attractive proposition. Who could possibly, for example, play down the delight of Russians at their freedom to travel over the last 20 years without being part of an official delegation? Who could decry the right of Chinese to wear the clothes they wish to wear since the Cultural Revolution? I do not in any way seek to be glib about private freedoms. But the sad conclusion is that for the vast majority of citizens they suffice. After all, how many members of the public, going about their daily lives, wish to question the structures of power? One can more easily than one realises be lulled into thinking that one is *sufficiently* free.

In democracies, public freedoms became disposable. In emerging states they became lower order priorities. In each country the freedoms ceded by the individual vary according to the needs of the state and the priorities of its citizens. In some it is press freedom; in some it is the right to vote out their government; in some it is an impartial judiciary; in some it is the breadth of permissible intellectual thought; in others it is the ability to get on with one's life without being spied upon. In many it is a combination of these and more.

I now explain my choice of country studies.

The model is Singapore, the remarkable socio-economic experiment of Lee Kuan Yew, the state in which I was born, and which has long intrigued me. I am constantly struck by the number of people there I know – people who are

well travelled with long stints at Western universities – who are keen to defend a system that requires an almost complete abrogation of freedom of expression in return for a very good material life.

Singapore is often perceived as a one-dimensional consumer paradise. It may in part be that, but it also asks more fundamental questions about our priorities. On independence from Britain, it had the same per capita GDP as Ghana. In the past forty years it has grown to become one of the world's economic miracles, an island of stability in a region of upheaval. I look at the vicious defamation culture, in which the authorities prosecute local citizens and foreigners alike for the slightest criticism; I assess an electoral system in which constituency boundaries are rigged and opposition activists are regularly jailed. Yet the achievements are striking. Previously fractious ethnic groups – the majority Chinese, Malays and Indians – live in relative harmony; through remarkable social housing and public services, all the population is well catered for. The pivot is a middle class that, with some exceptions, is comfortable with a pact in which their private space is unimpeded, as long as they do not interfere with the public realm.

In China, corruption, human rights abuses and environmental degradation have accompanied a one-party structure that has depended on economic growth to keep itself in power. Yet progress has been remarkable and it has taken place within a system that interprets the theory of democracy in accordance with its needs. I note the porous nature of the pact. Free speech even if formally circumscribed in China, particularly on the Internet, is alive and well on the street and in semi-private situations. The government is trying to manage and channel it, through a combination of technology, modern-day "spin" techniques and brute force. However, the middle classes appear to share the state's suspicion about excessive accountability and openness. Many people I spoke said they had no vested interest in granting the vote to hundreds of millions of poorer people with different political priorities. The lack of democracy is, for the moment at least, part of the deal. All the while, the government knows that the delivery of comforts to the private realm will determine its success. That is why, in 2009, achieving the fabled 8 per cent growth target assumed such immense importance.

In Russia, which I have been visiting regularly for thirty years, I focus on people I have known from Soviet times when the expression "to get hold of" was more important than "to buy", when foreign travel was allowed only through officially sanctioned groups. These friends celebrated the failure of the coup of 1991 and the subsequent collapse of their autocratic system. They discovered new freedoms and revelled in them, before Boris Yeltsin consolidated his power by manipulating an election with the tacit approval of the West. Democracy became associated with chaos and sleaze. The ascent of Vladimir Putin in 2000 was in keeping with his time, his security clampdown coinciding with a surge of wealth thanks to the global price of oil and gas. As their country became richer and more assertive, my friends would recite a slogan of the only three Cs in the English alphabet that were important to the New Russians – Chelsea, Courchevel and Cartier. While doughty journalists and human rights campaigners continued to ask questions, the vast majority of people acquiesced in the pact. These jet setters continued to fear that their

fortunes and their properties could at any point be seized. That is why they took their money abroad. But they enjoyed the fruits of their private freedoms, and left the *siloviki* – the politicians who hailed from the security elite – to rule unimpeded.

My study of the United Arab Emirates, specifically the brazen and gaudy city of Dubai and the more discreet and oil-rich Abu Dhabi, revolves around external manifestations of the pact and its transnational identity. From young British traders, to Russian mobsters and B-list celebrities, the ruling sheikhs offered steady wealth from property deals to tax-free salaries in return for keeping out of trouble. In Dubai they were even more accommodating, putting religious concerns to one side to allow Westerners to lead their lives as they wished, prosecuting them for sexual or drunken displays only *in extremis*. Monuments to conspicuous wealth sprung up all around, as hotels and apartment blocks vied with each other for luxury on the back of cheap labour or industrial slavery mainly of workers from the Indian sub-continent. Everyone sought to turn a blind eye to the egregious hypocrisy and abuses of the other. They were united in the celebration of easy accumulation of wealth, and the role of the Emirates as a friendly bridge to the Islamic world. The sheikhs believed their model was immune to the Western economic crisis. Dubai, in particular, took a major hit, but thanks to the bail-out from Abu Dhabi is set to recover, albeit perhaps a little less brashly.

The second part of the book looks at the countries that profess adherence to democracy. I begin with India, which prides itself on having the world's most populous multi-party system. The general election of May 2009 epitomised the celebration of the ballot. Yet the robustness of the vote masks less healthy tendencies. India's wealthy citizens have devised their own pact. The burgeoning middle class supplies itself the basic services that the state has failed to deliver; it makes few material demands. In return, it requires the government to leave it alone to make money, and to keep the poor away from its door and to get on with whatever it needs to do in the more unruly parts of the country such as Kashmir and Bihar. This arrangement was challenged less by the global economic crash, more by the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in late 2008. For the first time, the affluent classes were caught up *en masse* in the violence that has long afflicted other parts of India. They demanded protection and at the same time they demanded economically to be left alone.

Of all the countries in the world, why choose Italy? It matters, not because of any geo-strategic relevance, but because it serves as an example of a sham democracy. In terms of its institutions, Italy fails on almost every count. The three checks on the executive – parliament, the media and the judiciary – have seen their independence and authority eroded. Corruption is rampant. And yet, three times its voters have chosen in Silvio Berlusconi a man noted for his financial irregularities, his affection for autocrats like Putin and his general vulgarity. He has outwitted his opponents with consummate ease, and is seeking to expand his powers. It is easy to dismiss Berlusconi and his antics. And when he finally leaves the stage, which even he will eventually do, will any lessons be learnt? His enduring popularity among a large swathe of the population highlights the extent to which notional democracies can thrive and

even depend on the same exercise of arbitrary power that authoritarian states are criticised for.

In 1997, the accession of a centre-left government in the UK that prided itself on its liberties could have been an inspiring moment. Yet, in just over a decade, Britain went a long way to dismantling its liberties. It accumulated a fifth of the world's closed-circuit television cameras, and was planning an identity card system that would be one of the world's most technologically advanced and intrusive and a universal DNA database. Add to that some of the world's most punitive libel laws and one of the Western world's largest per capita prison populations, a consistent picture emerged. A government that was seeking one of the longest terms of pre-trial custody for terrorist suspects proudly brandished its authoritarian credentials, arguing that they were generally well received by the public. In many cases they were, particularly before they were closely analysed.

By the time Blair left office in 2007, he had bequeathed a surveillance state unrivalled anywhere in the democratic world. Parliament passed 45 criminal justice laws – more than the total for the whole of the previous century – creating more than 3,000 new criminal offences. That corresponded to two new offences for each day parliament was sitting. The scope was broad; police and security forces were given greater powers of arrest and detention; all institutions of state were granted increased rights to snoop, and individuals were required to hand over unprecedented data. Abroad, the government colluded with the transport of terrorist suspects by the US to secret prisons, giving landing rights at British airports for these "rendition" flights, while serious questions were raised about the UK's role in torture.

The three unhappy years of Gordon Brown saw little change. The new Conservative-Liberal coalition is seeking to unravel parts of the authoritarian agenda. It has already scrapped the ID card scheme. Other changes are planned, but it will be interesting to see whether ministers buckle in the face of a civil service obsessed with secrecy and security. Labour in opposition remains just as suspicious of civil liberties as it was. To me, as someone who describes himself as a Left-liberal, this remains a source of deep regret. Conservatives have been allowed to seize the human-rights mantle. Invoking John Stuart Mill as one of their own, they have re-framed his thinking in patriotic, libertarian tones. Their subtext is: regain the rights for freeborn Englishmen and roll back the state. I do not see the state as necessarily malign. What matters is not the size of the state but the role it is required to play, and the checks and balances that are provided.

These questions also pertain to my last destination, the United States, where the pact has been played out visibly since the events of 9/11. George Bush's neo-Conservative mission grew out of a mixture of hubris and frustration. The removal of Saddam Hussein would, he believed, be the catalyst for the overthrow of dictators in the Middle East and beyond. That the Iraq adventure failed was the result not just of double standards but of a deeper confusion about "democracy promotion". Was democracy an end in itself? Or was it a means to an end? Should multi-party elections be encouraged in states where

the outcome might produce regimes hostile to the West and to the concept of liberal democracy, or might internally produce ethnic or political instability?

Domestically, Bush presided over a security clampdown that was rarely challenged by mainstream politicians or public opinion. The US media showed itself to be supine, failing to hold power to account on many of the gravest issues. To what extent would the arrival of Barack Obama reverse the democratic erosion at home, and America's loss of democratic credibility abroad? Certainly, the nature of his election victory provided a much-needed boost to the credentials of America's constitutional democracy. Yet those hopes for a fresh start were offset by the dramatic collapse in the US and global financial systems. The cruel irony was that a new administration, in which many around the world had pinned their faith, began its work just at a time of eroding American power.

In any case does the United States' relative strength determine the answer to my original question? An entire industry of academic papers and books has researched the question of a new authoritarian order emanating in the East challenging the hegemony of the democratic West. I had originally envisaged the book as falling into the post-1989 globalisation genre, as articulated by the likes of Francis Fukuyama, Fareed Zakaria, Robert Kagan, Thomas Freedman and many more besides.

Yet my research led me to a different conclusion – the pact is common to us all. We are closer to each other – authoritarian and democratic societies – than we think. We are by no means identical. The outcomes are quite different. Yet many of the traits are similar. What I have tried to do is to show that we all trade different freedoms, to a greater or lesser extent as we worship on the altar of wealth or through the threat of terrorism and crime. We do so at our peril.

Citizens in both systems have colluded, but those in the West colluded most. We had the choice to demand more of their governments, to rebalance the pact between liberty, security and prosperity, but for as long as the economic going was good we chose not to exercise it.

The context changed during 2008 as years of steady growth ended spectacularly. The collapse of the banks led not only to economic crisis but called into question the future of governments that had derived their legitimacy through securing sustained wellbeing for their peoples. Yet far from unravelling the pact, the global financial collapse enhanced it. Western countries that had dismissed the idea of the state as an economic force were forced to rehabilitate it. In conditions of insecurity, and with the state once again intervening wherever it saw fit, the conditions were propitious for it to assume even greater control over other aspects of people's day-today lives. The clamour for security that was exploited after the terrorist attacks on New York in 2001 was adapted for the new "emergency".

My research challenges the claim that the enrichment of a country or the growth of a middle class provides an impulse towards greater liberty. Barrington Moore's theory of "no bourgeoisie, no democracy" has surely been

refuted by the past twenty years of materialist aspiration. During this period, people in all countries found a way to disengage from the political process while living in comfort. Consumerism provided the ultimate anaesthetic for the brain.

My discoveries are discomforting but it is more useful to understand than to judge. It has always been the instinct of the politician to seek power and to hold on to it, by fair means or foul. Less understood are the reasons why so many of us – in authoritarian and democratic states alike – succumb, and why so few of us ask why we do it.

Will a new generation of world leaders produce something different and more inspiring, a post-crash version of freedom that actually inspires and addresses the many iniquities around the world? I fear the answer is “no”, although I hope I am proven wrong. People’s priorities reflect the socio-economic conditions of their time. So although it may have been the bankers and hedge fund managers who caused the immediate financial crisis the bigger culprits were we, the people, particularly in the West, for allowing democracy to mutate into something it should never have become – a vehicle merely to deliver consumption. In order to flourish, freedom needed to be more than that.

Around the world, a critical mass of people vested in their leaders almost unlimited powers to determine questions of liberty. In return they were bought off by a temporary blanket of security and what turned out to be an illusory prosperity.

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