The abuse of power must be understood, not just condemned

John Sturrock, QC

We have heard a lot recently about abuse of power. Most publicly, it has manifested itself in various allegations of sexual misdemeanours in the political and entertainment worlds. It follows scandals about expenses and other misuses of public funds.

These are usually characterised as personal failings and reactions have been highly critical of individuals. In a sense, this is a natural extension of our cultural focus on celebrity. More widely, bullying and harassment, whether physical or mental, are probably endemic, even if often implicit rather than explicit.

These behaviours reveal deep-seated issues about identity, entitlement, status and hierarchies. They may be throwbacks to another age or representative of unconscious biases developed over generations. It is right to focus on them and to seek to reduce their effects in the future.

Critically, however, we also need to understand them. That does not imply acceptance. But underneath the power games will often lie deeper needs, feelings of loss and shame and perhaps downright fear. While there is a natural impulse to blame and shame, that may not address the underlying problems. No doubt that is why lengthy public inquiries are held into serious failings at systemic levels. Whether the present time-consuming and resource-sapping form of inquiry is the right forum to achieve real learning, rather than finding scapegoats and diverting attention for long periods, is another question altogether.

The abuse of power manifests in many ways: curtailing public debate, failing to present full information, redacting documents for self-interest, falsifying key facts, letting political survival trump the national interest, manipulating media reporting, shaping committee membership to influence outcomes, hinting that funding is dependent on curtailing criticism, misrepresenting public views, rewriting independent reports.

These abuses can be harder to pin down. Sometimes those who should call others to account fail to do so or are timid in their pursuit. Often the story does not have enough traction for a media obsessed with personalities. In any event, the same quest for understanding is necessary for these more subtle abuses. Why do people behave, usually collectively, in these ways? What are they frightened of? In the long term, what will the cost be? For how long are we prepared to pay such a cost? How could we do things differently?

These are the kind of questions we will need to pose if we really wish to tackle the more insidious abuses of power in our society.

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