

Ken Rivett: A Review in Tribute

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Kenneth Rivett (2004) *After Defensive War*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, pp. xviii, 439.

Kenneth Rivett (2004) *Purpose and Choice in a Donor Nation*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, pp. xiv, 452

Kenneth Deakin Rivett (1923 –2004) passed away on 4 September 2004. Geoffrey Harcourt said ‘he was an entirely selfless good man’. Damian Grace noted that Ken ‘was a great philanthropist ... His austere lifestyle enabled him to care for others in a remarkable way ... Migrant and refugee groups should be especially grateful to him’. Kaz Kazim observed that he ‘worked away tirelessly, quietly, modestly, without affectations or pretensions, in the Library almost until his last day. ... His simple grace and courtesy left an indelible impression on whoever came in contact with him’. Just a few months before he died, and more than twenty years after his formal retirement from the University of New South Wales, his two companion volumes - *After Defensive War* (DW) and *Purpose and Choice in a Donor Nation* (PC) – were published.

Rivett may be known to readers of this journal for the important role he played in the demise of the White Australia Policy and more recently for his concern for the refugees who reached Australia. (His obituary, written by John Nevile and published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on February 10, 2005 gives a useful overview of these activities). These two volumes, over 900 pages, present his life statement, drawing on the reflective

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lessons of his experiences and voluminous reading. The views he expresses are clearly swimming against the tide of conventional thinking. To advocate pacifism, practise frugal consumption and devoting oneself to improving the lot of the destitute and downtrodden, is not a popular stance these days. Reading these volumes draws one back to an earlier age of scholarship, when economics was a branch of moral philosophy. Rivett is deeply immersed in the historical, ethical and philosophical dimensions of the public policy debates he enters. He does not have the tunnel vision of the modern specialized academic and canvasses an enormous literature from a variety of disciplines, drawing on ideas from Aristotle and J.S. Mill or whoever else provides him inspiration, yet surprising us as he discusses the latest research findings.

The argument in the two volumes is, in a nutshell, that the present distribution of income internationally is indefensible. Those better off should accord unquestioning primacy to the task of reducing the unbounded prevalence of suffering. Prevention and curtailment of acute suffering should so dominate our decisions that the developing world is freed of destitution and disease and more gradually of poverty (DW: 12-13). The books are a plea for richer nations to do more to help those in poverty in poorer nations so that the world moves steadily towards more equal per capita consumption between nations. This can be done if consumers in rich countries cut back their expenditures and release resources to meet more pressing needs in poorer countries. There are solid ethical and moral grounds for this course of action. However, rich nations need to have the moral case for this reinforced by clearly perceived self-interest, namely the avoidance of military destruction. The countries that have strong moral claims to be helped out of their poverty have, or will soon have, the means to threaten unimaginable destruction. Greater international economic equality will be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for avoiding wars (PC:436).

Let us first examine *After Defensive War*, as it is easier to follow than the sometimes tortuous and laborious arguments presented in *Purpose and Choice*, although Chapter 1 of the former is a good summary of the argument of the latter. Rivett argues that there are now 44 nations that are 'nuclear capable' and more than a dozen countries are developing biological weapons. The looming threat of bio-terrorism is particularly frightening with 'at least seventy different types of bacteria, viruses, rickettsiae, and fungi that can be weaponized. We can reliably treat no more than 20 to 30 percent of the diseases they cause' (DW:80). Moreover, with 'the spread of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missile technology ... even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations' (DW:83). Richer nations may face 'a

terrorist enemy whose avowed tactics are wanton destruction and the targeting of innocents; whose so-called soldiers seek martyrdom in death and whose potent protection is statelessness' (DW:84) so that it may not be immediately possible to attribute even devastating attacks to any particular source.

In this context of September 11 2001, 'rogue states', the 'Axis of Evil', weapons of mass destruction, pre-emptive strikes and the apparent non-rational behaviour of terrorist cells, how should a rich civilized country respond? Aggressively via the military option or non-violently by renouncing war in all circumstances (DW:109)? The first response is to exercise our right to self defence by acting pre-emptively against terrorists: the US has stated that it will 'feel free to use nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons to prevent the production of weapons of mass destruction in other countries, and also in other conflicts that otherwise do not directly engage US interests' (DW:73). But can the military threat be thwarted in a non-violent way?

Rivett presents a careful sifting of the arguments for 'a pacifist experiment' – a non-violent response. Unless a country disarms and is known to be pacifist, then it remains a target and threat to rogue states. But what are the strengths and dangers of a pacifist alternative? The author combs the pacifist literature and the war-time experiences of nations. We are treated, for example, to an excellent chapter 6 of DW on a critical appraisal of Gandhi, non-violence and non-cooperation, how Gandhi misunderstood Tolstoy and his growing willingness to endorse physical force when non-violence was not achieving its aim. But it is Rivett's views on armed conflict that are most controversial:

Retrospectively, the verdict on British and US involvement in the First World War has been largely negative, even though the Allies had won the war. On the Vietnam War, which was lost, the verdict is now decisively so (DW:159) the case for going to war with the Axis was weaker than was generally thought at the time, or has been generally believed since (DW:189) Japan's rulers were acting against a background of long-standing grievances. They resented not only tariffs, but also that other powers heavily involved in and tolerant of their own imperialism were not extending a similar tolerance to Japan's ambitions. They resented the barriers the English-speaking nations around the Pacific had raised against Japanese immigration, and the immigration-related refusal to include a declaration of racial equality in the Treaty of Versailles (DW:171) Future wars will therefore *not* be justified in proportion as they seem to resemble what seem to have been the is-

sues in 1939-45 (DW:194) The fact that war, once resorted to, can so easily escalate upwards is a compelling reason for no longer resorting to it, even in a limited way (DW:282).

The rightness of going to war should be judged by the likely consequences. With respect to the second World War, Rivett says 'we are repelled in our innermost being by the Nazis' attitude to Jews and Slavs' which was vile, irrational and inhuman (DW:178). However, 'if Hitler had not been met with military resistance, he would have expelled Jews from Europe but would not have tried to exterminate them'. The Holocaust was 'a by-product of wartime emotion and circumstances' (DW:166, 68). These statements of course are highly contentious. In terms of military casualties he noted that of the American soldiers in the Second World War only a relatively small number did any fighting which brought them into mortal combat with the enemy. Of the 11 million men in the American army, only 2 million were in the 90 combat divisions. Of the men actually engaged in fighting, British and American casualties in Europe were about 13 percent killed and 32 percent wounded, almost identical with rates in the First World War (DW:186-87). Furthermore, we learn that only four percent of British and American prisoners held by the Germans died in captivity, compared with 58 percent of Soviet prisoners (DW:301). These are examples of how Rivett investigates some of the costs of armed conflict.

Similarly, the case for Pacifism is evaluated:

A rich democracy will be well advised to take account of all likely outcomes, ugly and less ugly, before it renounces for ever the means of launching disarming first strikes. It will know, however, that unless it does so, some other government or governments may fear that it will launch one, and may hit out at it because of that fear (DW:145-46).

The best possible outcome is that our decision to disarm, so that we are no longer a military threat to other nations, allows us to live in uninterrupted peace. Rivett thinks it is likely that a highly productive rich nation which turns non-violent may be left alone by poorer countries with destructive capabilities – but only if it makes sizeable transfers to poor countries and lets in more migrants from these countries (DW:286). To avoid the threat of invasion or terrorist strikes, a rich nation should be able to absorb poor migrants (within limits) and still produce enough for its output to exceed, by a considerable margin, the consumption plus savings it would itself need in order to stay innovative. The surplus could then go towards assisting poorer countries (DW:353-54). The poorer nations will be unable

to maintain the productivity of economies richer than their own if they seize too big a share of the incomes these generate, and so reduce too greatly the rich nations' consumption. So we need to make some estimate of how much a non-violent nation could be required to pay a threatening nation - the rich nation will most likely still be allowed consumption levels that are tolerable, although modest - and how many migrants it would be required to accommodate (DW:343) to satisfy the aggressor's sense of economic entitlement. But the possibility exists that the transfers may not go to the deserving poor, but rather to a corrupt ruling elite in the poorer country.

It may also be possible that the disarmed country comes under foreign occupation. Rivett examines the potential costs of occupation, torture, and the intensity and psychology of suffering. A worst case scenario is presented by the near-extirmination of those Cambodians whom the Khmer Rouge considered to have the wrong class background (DW:144). Yet he believes poorer countries will use military power to enhance their country's economic position at the expense of richer nations, even if the primary purpose of such attacks is defensive:

Nor, to repeat, can it be assumed that a government willing to take advantage of another country's military weakness will seek economic gains only, nor that it will pursue these in a rational way. It would, however, be a very odd government that was prepared to put pressure on another country and even to invade it, but was quite uninterested in economic gains for itself or anyone else (DW:146).

Rivett agrees that 'total non-violent non-cooperation with a really ruthless aggressor is impracticable' (DW:275) and so there is a need to look at the sort of selective cooperation that is feasible. What sort of collaboration is needed in return for concessions? He hopes that the economic self-interest of the aggressor country will prevent it from interfering with the productive capacity of the richer nation and so maximizing the surplus that can then be siphoned off to the poorer nation.

It is clear, he says, that we currently choose to not share much of our wealth with poorer countries. Rich countries go to war, in part, to maintain high levels of consumption. However, the military option, especially if it is used to defend current consumption levels is outmoded. Rivett states that using violence to protect these consumption levels (via access to middle East oil, for example) is repulsive. We have a duty to limit our consumption and so release resources for meeting more pressing needs and sharing our

good fortune with migrants from poorer countries. Releasing a nation's resources from military production is a good start in that direction.

Rivett concludes his examination of the 'pacifist experiment' by noting that:

the changes that members of a rich pacifist nation must make to their lifestyles, if they hope not to be invaded, will have to be considerable. Will any country conceivably adopt such a stance? The answer should be a tentative Yes (DW:396).

It may well be cheaper for the aggressor to keep us as 'aid-giving, migrant-receiving, politically independent people' than bear the alternative costs of a military occupation (DW:406). Whatever one's own judgment on the risks involved with the pacifist option, Rivett's review of the evidence, for and against, provides a valuable service, particularly in a context where the pacifist position is so rarely heard in contemporary debates.

The companion volume, *Purpose and Choice in a Donor Nation*, is a stand-alone volume in the sense that the moral argument for reducing world inequality can solidly rest independent of the national security scenarios examined in *After Defensive War*. So long as need elsewhere remains more urgent there is a moral claim on earners whose circumstances are better. Rivett states that the gaps between consumption levels in different parts of the world 'are morally wrong, so wrong as to cry out for rectification even if moves towards closing them had not also become a condition of international peace' (PC:xiii). Regardless of the security threats, Rivett says we need to relate real income to need more closely and calls for a much greater degree of economic equality internationally.

Yet while the scale of consumption should be influenced by need it also should take into account what each individual was contributing to the welfare of all. Although there is a need to lower the consumption levels of the better-off nations it should not fall below a level that would affect their working capacity. Rich nations need to stay highly productive. In these respects, Rivett parts company with the anti-globalization movement. He believes that productivity and much of the prosperity of the developed countries is helpful to the developing world via trade, foreign investment and technology transfer. In addition he believes that inequality in the ownership of productive assets is not in itself a great evil.

Unnecessarily high consumption levels are his key concern. Individuals in rich countries need to value consumption less and lead a 'moral life'. The hope of helping is the mainspring of morality and to help others where one can is a duty. Unmet needs are more serious elsewhere and so richer

countries need to be induced to act more generously towards poorer societies and incoming migrants. This will not happen unless they learn to restrain themselves as consumers and that will only occur if they stop overvaluing consumption and identifying it with prestige and achievement. There has to be a change in consumer culture.

It is acknowledged, however, that most of the ends that consumption serves are immensely worthwhile. It sustains life. It can contribute to health and working capacity. It can act as a carrot that evokes effort. Those that work harder than others should receive a bit more in return as earnings bear some loose relation to contribution to production. So 'almost all Western consumption contributes somewhat to well-being, and . . . much of it is also believed to contribute to working capacity, and hence to the enhanced production' of goods and services (PC:103). It is clear then that only excess or surplus consumption, over and above that required to sustain productive capacity, ought to be redistributed. Consumption should not exceed that which is needed to sustain a person's workforce capacity in order to release resources for more urgent uses elsewhere.

Rivett dwells on the concept of a person's 'net contribution'. A person's net contribution is the difference he or she makes to the well-being of others (PC:116). What is valued is a person's contribution net of what they consume. Reducing consumption in order to relieve the suffering of others will then be seen as a direct way of maximising net contribution. The most obvious way to increase one's net contribution is to assist the worst-off in lower income countries, whether by gifts or direct service (PC:166).

Rivett states that you are making less of a contribution if you earn a high income and spend all your income on yourself and your family when instead you could do a great deal for others. 'Such a man is an irresponsible fool, and should be so thought of' (PC:11). They should learn from people who 'combine a limitless aspiration to serve with voluntary restriction of their consumption' (PC:12). An unskilled worker is unlikely to be a positive net contributor. Negative net contributors make others worse off because of their existence: 'many people consume so much compared to what they produce that the world might possibly be better off if they had never been born and if the resources they use had been made available to others' (DW:13). In overpopulated areas, where workers toil with very low productivity, negative net contributors may be widespread, but some of these could emigrate to countries where they could be vastly more productive. Net contribution declines when we consume too large a share of our economic rewards. From a global perspective, the direct effect of raising one's consumption must be that someone else consumes less.

How far can consumption be cut back without impairing the ability to

produce goods and services? Rivett focuses on that part of consumption that is undertaken only for the gratification of vanity and invidious comparisons. Consumers need a jolt to change their attitude away from conspicuous consumption and envy and prestige. What we can change are the *intensities* with which prestige and consumption are desired, to make high consumption less alluring, and to promote the welfare of others. The work of Thorstein Veblen is critically evaluated and use made of the concepts of conspicuous waste, conspicuous consumption and the drive of emulation. Consumption appeals because it confers 'status' and 'prestige' but we need to reject this endlessly wasteful, endlessly seductive, consumer culture.

Chapter 6 of *Purpose and Choice* outlines how consumption might be cut. It tries to establish a norm which richer countries should revert to as a pre-condition for helping poorer nations. Families, says Rivett, should be small, there should be less time spent on food preparation, they should live in smaller homes - 'waste occurs when wealth is tied up in unduly costly homes on unduly large sites' - or family-sized homes could be shared. Rivett recommends the flatette, in which bathrooms and possibly the kitchen are shared with other households. Families should own fewer objects (so becoming less of an acquisitive society). Cars should be used sparingly and greater use made of public transport. 'The car's future should be in question even if it was safer ... it is a sobering thought that Australian road fatalities have been nearly twice as great as the number of Australians who died in the two World Wars, Korea and Vietnam' (PC:326-27). Copenhagen, where one-third of the city goes to work by bike, has one of the world's lowest rates of transportation deaths. Unnecessary foreign travel should also be avoided. There should be less of what Robert Frank has called 'luxury fever'.

Other aspects of contemporary living likewise earn Rivett's displeasure. Poker machines 'have proved an unmitigated evil' (PC:292). The rearing and slaughtering of animals for human consumption is degrading to every society in which this is allowed and the author suggests pushing our eating habits in the vegetarian direction. Clothes should be easily replaced and low maintenance and remain outside the reach of fashion. We should also reduce the differences in how income groups dress. In terms of our leisure activities there needs a wider acknowledgment that risk overall, not just in sport, is being grossly underestimated. We need to promote less dangerous living (in terms especially of alcohol consumption, smoking and substance abuse).

Perhaps some individuals will make voluntary choices to restrict their consumption and take a stand against societies in which consumption, wealth,

prestige and publicity are overvalued (PC:361). We need to applaud consumption patterns that are modest but nonetheless consistent with high productivity. However, a household that spends very little will only deserve our admiration if it uses the fruits of its frugality in order to do more for others. Acts of generosity – such as giving away money – should be performed quietly and without publicity. A choice to live in a particular way provides *some* evidence on how others ought to live (PC:364). Readers familiar with Rivett's own frugal lifestyle, eccentricities and untiring philanthropy will clearly see that he lived exactly the lifestyle that he wishes to establish as the norm in contemporary rich societies.

Rivett's stance is informed by his version of the ethical doctrine of Preference Utilitarianism – informed preferences should remain the main criterion of moral decision – and particularly by his use of 'consequentialism' under which the rightness of ethical actions is judged by their expected effects. If one adopts the ethical position of consequentialism then it is clear that rich individuals should live frugally because of the greater urgency of claims elsewhere. In rich countries, consumption aspirations are often set higher than is ethically appropriate as there is a moral need for more equal consumption internationally. A consequentialist ethic requires us to treat all persons impartially. Hence you need to focus on more than your own family – there is an 'obvious duty' to give away surplus income (PC:381). In terms of policies, a consequentialist ethic never imposes rigid rules. Many should consume less but some clearly should not. Any change, however, should be incremental change and Rivett takes pains to highlight the exceptions and qualifications to his proposals.

What is clear is that voluntary decentralized choice about consumption is *never* an alternative to redistribution by the state (PC:369). The state needs to impose measures that force consumption to more modest levels. The taxation system is seen as the main vehicle to restrict consumption and to finance foreign aid transfers and release resources to absorb more migrants from poorer countries. Consumption should be taxed more heavily than saving. There is a need to tax luxuries or have a general expenditure tax with rates that rise sharply with a taxpayer's expenditure:

Saving is good; only high consumption expenditure is wrong; and a combination of high rates of tax on high incomes with some exemption for saving, as well as exemptions for most publicly useful giving, is the best way to signal which uses of income are most appropriate (PC:424).

There needs to be a new attitude towards consumption otherwise consumption will continue to drift upwards. Rivett is comforted by Swedish experiences showing that income redistribution can go quite far without serious losses in terms of economic efficiency and freedom for most individuals (PC:420). Yet he acknowledges that in many countries the demands on the welfare state have risen *without* a rise in the willingness to pay for them.

Voluntary charitable contributions are also likely to be small in aggregate, so that foreign aid transfers will only occur on the necessary scale if carried out by governments. The case for more substantial foreign aid needs restatement, says the author, as it has generally assisted economic advance and (harking back to the thesis of *After Defensive War*) 'Substantial transfers will provide the only means by which the richer nations can avoid being *threatened* with annihilation (PC:441). The present scale of foreign aid is too modest, far short of what is needed.

Richer nations have to be far more accommodating to migrants from poorer countries. The freer movement to and settlement in rich countries should therefore be part of any process of international redistribution (PC:78):

Removing all immigration barriers would be a spectacular means of greatly increasing world production while, barring bad political repercussions, also making distribution between individuals more even. Hence, overall the world will almost always be a richer place, the freer migration is (PC:75-76).

Yet there are strong non-economic arguments against very high immigration so it should play only a limited part (PC:386).

The pattern of technological advance also needs redirecting. Technical progress not sufficiently geared to dealing with poor countries' problems – less than 10 percent of global spending on health research addresses the illnesses that constitute 90 percent of the global disease burden (PC:74). There is a need for the international redistribution and redirection of innovative efforts from luxury products to production most useful to the poor. Technology should target acute suffering and play a part in the general movement towards restraint on the part of rich nations and the redirecting of resources to more pressing needs.

How do we respond to this moral treatise? Is it only 'a morality for saints' (PC:26)? Is Rivett someone who deserves praise as an 'Idealist' but whose proposed agenda is subject to reservations as to its workability? Is it likely that the seemingly unstoppable tide of materialism and militarism

can be reversed? Is modest spending compatible with happiness in rich nations? What democratically elected government would risk electoral suicide by raising taxes and curtailing consumer choice?

Rivett tells us that sacrifice is almost certain to be necessary as the price of peace in a world made rotten by inequality between the nations (PC:431). It would be nice to have some quantitative feel for the magnitude of this 'sacrifice'. Rivett says we 'need to quantify the feasible cuts in consumption required' (DW:348) but does not provide them. Others have been less circumspect. Jeffrey Sachs, earlier this year, advocated that rich countries must dedicate about 0.5 per cent of their combined GDP to aid - which is about twice what they currently offer, but less than the 0.7 per cent of GDP that they long ago promised to set aside for development. The 0.7 per cent should be the minimum requirement for any very rich country, Sachs states. It is clear that Rivett would regard this as only a desirable first step as he envisaged much larger transfers than this.

Kenneth Rivett has done us a valuable service in presenting moral and ethical arguments and policy proposals that are rarely canvassed in contemporary policy circles. Perhaps his message would have been more influential if presented in a short, pithy book - like Arthur Okun's best-seller, *Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff* - rather than in two weighty volumes that could in no sense be described as page-turners. Yet Rivett's ideas and pleas deserve to come to the attention of a wide audience. Rivett states that prestige is not always proportionate to gross contribution: the point is proved every time a life of obscure service comes at last to wider notice (PC:209) and work attracting very little prestige may still have been immensely worthwhile (PC:221). This is certainly true in this case and a testament to a person who conducted his life with dignity, with integrity, with courage and, perhaps most of all, with modesty.