

Tailor-made battledress for the continuing class war

Sydney Morning Herald October 3, 2006

IF WE were to go back to the drawing board and address the question, "What are good ways to clothe the human body?", I doubt that anyone would come up with the suit as a solution.

Of all the ways to cover our nakedness, the suit would have to be one of the least satisfactory.

The suit is a testament to the persistence of unexamined assumptions and institutionalised habits. Its most obvious shortcomings are its uncomfortableness and its price, plus the fact that it is nearly always worn with a collar and tie, the other really dumb sartorial habit that seems to have survived in the face of common sense.

And think of all the unnecessary stuff that a suit brings with it, such as the padded shoulders, the little buttons on the bottom of the sleeves, coat pockets that don't get used and lapels (not to mention double-breastedness, when it's in fashion). And a suit is so complex it has to be made by an expert.

But the really significant thing about the suit is that it is the uniform of those who run the show. Suits are symbolic of power and money. A Zegna suit is the same sort of status symbol to a power merchant as Nike sneakers are to gangsta rappers.

Pollies love suits so much that they even wear them on the beach. The corporate world loves suits, too; and it doesn't matter what nationality you are, if you want to fit in with your international brethren, you'd better wear a suit.

Suits are today's uniform of the oppressors in the class war that has been going on for centuries but which has become particularly savage since the economic rationalists got their greedy grasp on the helm of most countries.

If you were to draw up an organisational chart of the army of exploiters who wear suits, it would match pretty closely a similar chart of the army that wears camouflage: petty bureaucrats and privates at the bottom, and corporate executives and senior brass at the top.

The social rules governing suit-wearing have relaxed considerably since I was a kid. I haven't owned a suit for more than 40 years, but it hasn't stopped me going to weddings, funerals or other formal occasions. Yet people still wear them, despite the lack of comfort and the symbolic significance of the suit in the continuing class war.

I suspect this is because most people don't realise how comprehensively they are being shafted by the dedicated suit-wearers, despite the evidence in the headlines every day. When you wear a suit you are publicly declaring whose side you are on - and it ain't the side of the workers.

Bill Bottomley