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**TITLE: Churches could hold key to salvation for the Left**

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After three decades that have seen neo-liberalism and social conservatism become dominant, where can we expect a new progressive politics to come from? What social movement or popular yearning could generate such a politics in an affluent society characterised by profound loss of meaning?

When we consider the existing major social movements, it seems to me that the new politics cannot be found in environmentalism, crucial though the environment movement is to our future. Nor can it be found in the social democratic model of the trade unions, important as they are in protecting the interests of their members. ACOSS and the welfare sector are to be admired for standing up for the underprivileged, but in an affluent society welfarism cannot be expected to motivate far-reaching political change.

But, despite the suspicion of many progressives, the churches could be the answer. Traditionally, the churches have attended to and represented the deeper aspects of life, those that transcend the individualism, materialism and selfishness that so characterise modern affluent societies. It is in this transcendent concern that I believe we can find the roots of a new progressive politics—not in the institutions of the churches themselves but by rediscovering those aspects of life that, at their best, the churches articulate and cultivate.

The old model of the "Left" is based on the idea that the principal problem of modern society is material deprivation. In a past era this was justified, but in rich countries like Australia the opposite is the case. So the model that many progressives have operated on is out of date and irrelevant. The principal social and personal problems we now face arise out of the sicknesses of affluence—over-consumption, wastefulness, materialism, selfishness, and loss of meaning.

For decades we were promised that if only we attended to the economy and pursued higher incomes, then we would be happy. But the tragedy is that we are not. In fact, now that most people in rich countries have conquered material deprivation we see a rash of psychological disorders and a pervasive emptiness in everyday life. This is the great contradiction of modern society.

The churches remain the repository of the deeper understanding of life that once motivated some elements of the Left. There has always been a tradition in the Left to

focus on alienation, the sense of the loss of self. And we can use this idea to understand the way in which modern consumer society deprives people of the opportunity to pursue a more truthful, a more authentic life.

There are many people in the churches who still cleave to that stream of progressive thought. Although I have no connection with it, it seems to me that this is particularly true in the Catholic Church.

What the Left desperately needs is a new approach to morality. The error of post-modernism, which grew out of the broad academic Left and now dominates Western society, is that it has no metaphysical foundation for a moral critique. Without a metaphysics that is common to humanity, any moral stance must be relative and therefore be contestable and lacking in conviction.

Yet there is a pervasive sense throughout society that we live in an era of moral decline. People want firmer moral rules that apply to them and others, particularly ones that govern sexual and personal relationships. And in a way that's the fundamental problem of modern society; it's crucial for people on the progressive side of the fence to acknowledge these concerns and engage in moral debate, which means developing new foundations for moral law.

The anxiety and yearnings which ordinary Australians have about moral decline have been recognised and articulated by people that I fundamentally disagree with, by those on the Right who often distort that moral anxiety for right-wing political purposes. The Left, for want of a better word, really needs to get over its fear of engaging in moral judgment and moral argumentation and to go back to the community with a moral vision so that the Right can no longer monopolise and distort those sorts of concerns.

After all, every political debate is a moral debate. If you open up a newspaper on any day, in virtually every story there is a moral argument going on, and we shouldn't pretend otherwise.

That applies particularly to economic issues; economic issues are really moral questions rather than analytical ones. So we need a new politics of morality, one that is rooted in some of the traditional concerns of progressive people, in social justice, in the maldistribution of power, and the way in which that affects the capacity of people to pursue a truly fulfilling life.

The churches have been re-entering political debates. Usually progressives regard this as a dangerous thing, because the most newsworthy stories concern sexual and reproductive questions where the churches often line up against the progress made by the liberation movements of the '60s and '70s.

Of course, church and state must remain separate but I regard the re-entry of the churches as a good thing. For example, quite unexpectedly, Anglican Archbishop Peter Jensen spoke out strongly against the Howard Government's IR legislation. More predictable but no less welcome criticisms were made by the Catholic bishops. Some on the Left have trouble acknowledging this support, because these Anglican and Catholic leaders have been opposed to the extension of gay rights, for example, and are seen as the enemy.

So there are re-alignments occurring that challenge our usual assumptions about where various groups stand. There should be more of this on the Left. When we at the Australia Institute produced a report three years ago, expressing alarm at the way in which teenagers in Australia are exposed to huge amounts of pornography, particularly extreme and violent content on the internet, many of our supporters were surprised and disconcerted.

Yet we believed, on the basis of our analysis, that this trend is very damaging. Some of our supporters wondered why we would have entered into territory that is more often associated with those of the moral Right. The answer is because it is a very important issue causing widespread concern in the community and a progressive voice was desperately needed. But perhaps there was a deeper puzzlement: why would the Australia Institute engage in any moral issue because doing so means making moral judgments? The answer is that we are no longer afraid of making such judgements, even in the case of the most difficult questions concerning sexual behaviour, because they are of enduring importance to ordinary people.

The same can be said about our recent work on the sexualisation of children in marketing and popular culture. Although traditionally seen as an area of concern for the moral right, there are just as many parents with progressive political views who view the premature sexualisation of their children as very disturbing.

If it had been the so-called "usual suspects", such as Fred Nile or Family First, saying these things, everybody would have yawned and said, "Oh yes, they would say that." But because we at the Australia Institute are on the progressive side of the fence and are not supposed to talk about those things, let alone object to them, when we do analyse them and take a position, it attracts a lot of attention.

There is a fundamental contradiction within conservative politics nowadays, exemplified perhaps by John Howard. On the one hand, there is a strong element of moral conservatism which speaks to the moral anxiety and moral concerns of ordinary Australians. On the other hand, it also espouses economic liberalism which exacerbates the anxieties.

Moreover, giving free rein to the market very often leads to an erosion of moral values—the work we have done on youth and pornography and on the sexualisation of children is an illustration of that. So here's a real contradiction in the heart of conservative politicians; it astonishes me that a moral hard-liner like Tony Abbott can resolutely refuse, time after time, to reign in the market forces that exacerbate the problems he complains about.

This contradiction in modern conservatism leaves a gaping political hole that must be filled. It must be said that there are contradictions in the Left too. While often being in favour of more regulation of the economy, including labour markets and income distribution, the Left has traditionally been strongly opposed to governments intervening in moral issues.

So I would argue that the Left too needs to accept that government, expressing the wishes of the citizenry after a proper debate, should also take a stronger role in some of those areas of moral concern where the Left has traditionally been too afraid to tread.

These moral concerns, spanning both personal behaviour and broader social trends in the market, are the traditional grounds of the churches. I don't believe we should look to the churches, as institutions, as the source of a new progressive politics. But I believe that the answers will come from perceptive, inspired and compassionate individuals, whose political ideas combine social analysis with a direct apprehension of the transcendent insights that underpin all deeper human yearnings.