

The triumph of selfishness

Clive Hamilton

It wasn't the extraordinary public spending spree of the election campaign that sank Labor but the sustained private consumption binge that Australians have been on for the last decade.

Booming house prices coupled with unprecedented levels of consumer debt have left most Australians absorbed by their own material circumstances with little room left for thoughts of building a better society.

Driven not by financial need but by the very aspirations that Mark Latham has lauded, Australian households are in debt up to their necks and that has meant hundreds of thousands of people have looked at their partners across the kitchen table and said: If interest rates go up by a couple of per cent then we're stuffed.

Having the bank foreclose on you must be one of life's more unpleasant experiences, especially if you have measured your success and place in society by the pile of things you own.

Sure, the economists said that interest rates were no more likely to go up under Labor than the Coalition, but why take the risk if nothing else really matters to you?

And that is where we have got to in Australia after 20 years of creeping affluenza, an era in which materialism and the attendant self-absorption have invaded the daily consciousness of most Australians.

So the Coalition victory reflects nothing more than the narrow-mindedness and preoccupation with self that characterises modern Australia after two decades of market ideology and sustained growth.

Private greed always drives out the social good. Not even engagement in a dangerous foreign war, exposed as being based on lies, and the threat of terror attacks can bounce people out of their financial preoccupations.

It's been particularly disquieting to witness the total disengagement of large numbers of young people who seemed barely aware that an election was on. Clueless and unconcerned to the last, they'd mumble about voting for John Howard simply because they could not think of a reason for doing otherwise.

The depoliticisation of our education systems coupled with the mindless narcissism of consumer culture in which these young people have grown means that, while despair for the future of democracy is warranted, we should expect nothing more.

Ironically, Labor actually put out some policies during the election campaign that differentiated it from the conservatives, policies that were aimed at a fairer society that took away some of the more outrageous middle-class hand-outs of the Howard years. The schools policy was the best example, but even this was a victim of Labor's

schizoid campaign. In the dreams of aspirational voters, Mark Latham's ladder of opportunity leads to Cranbrook or The King's School.

Building a better society through a fairer distribution of educational resources is not so appealing if you hope to benefit personally from the injustice. In fact, it doesn't look like injustice, but 'opportunity'.

Of course, the relentless promotion of self-interest and the rejection of the politics of social progress is no more than we should expect from the Liberal Party. It is, after all, the essence of liberalism.

Liberals have always maintained that asserting individual freedoms, not building a better society, is the object of politics, although one of the founders of liberalism, John Stuart Mill, could see the danger of ending up where we are today. In 1865 he wrote that he was not persuaded that "the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels ... are the most desirable lot of humankind".

These qualities of the aspirational society he saw as the "disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress", regrettably a phase that has been much more enduring than Mill could have imagined.

A Newspoll survey commissioned two years ago by The Australia Institute found that nearly two thirds of Australians believe that they "cannot afford to buy everything they really need". Even among those in the top income group – the richest people in one of the world's richest countries – half say they can't afford all they need.

This sense of deprivation in a country that enjoys extraordinary affluence is constantly recreated by the advertisers and social pressure, and endlessly reinforced by politicians of both sides who talk *ad nauseam* of 'struggling families' and devise policies that pander to the imagined woes of the middle classes.

As long as Australians are preoccupied with house prices, credit card debts, interest rates, tax cuts and getting ahead – in other words, as long as they define their success in life by money – Labor will never win, except by mimicking the Liberal Party.

But there is cause for hope. Not far beneath the surface most Australians have a gnawing doubt about the value of a money-driven life. The Newspoll survey also found that 83 per cent of Australians believe that our society is "too materialistic, that there is too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter".

For they suspect that the money society is at the root of the decline in values – the disposable relationships, instant gratification, moral laxity, selfishness, corporate greed and the loss of civic culture.

It is in showing the link between the money society and the decline in values, and then painting a picture of a new society that is less selfish and materialistic and more devoted to the "things that really matter", that a new politics can be forged.

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