

# The Politics of the Past and the Future

*A talk to the National Civil Society Dialogue  
convened by the ACTU, ACF, ACOSS and  
the National Council of Churches in Australia*

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## The Right

The Prime Minister's speech at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Quadrant* provides an opportunity to assess the state of political debate in the nation. Howard argued that the great battle between right and left continues despite the fall of communism in Europe. Pro-communist influence, he believes, has marched through the institutions and from there still exercises its nefarious influence.

Like those who gather around *Quadrant*, Howard is haunted by the ghost of past ideological conflict. Others look around and wonder where this enemy is that Howard and his fellow-travellers at *Quadrant* are fighting.

Someone should tell our Prime Minister that the Cold War is over; and that he won. But an ideological warrior needs enemies and if there aren't any he must invent them. This explains his continuing attacks on universities, teachers, trade unions and NGOs. He may still be fighting yesterday's battles but he is doing real harm in the process.

The Workchoices legislation is really about settling old scores. Few experts believe the changes to workplace laws will improve productivity and even among business the reception has been at best luke-warm. Yet the unions are no longer the militant force they were when Howard cut his political teeth in the 60s and 70s; they are now service organisations that facilitate the smooth operation of the bargaining system. Yet he is determined to crush them.

Environmentalism is another pet hate because it has historically been associated with the left. This can be the only explanation for Howard's refusal to address the most severe threat to Australia's future, the climate crisis. Climate science is not left wing

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and Coalition voters are just as vulnerable to the devastations we face, indeed more so in the bush. Yet it is more important to give environmentalists one in the eye than to protect the country from a threat far greater than terrorism.

Any modern Prime Minister, of either party, would understand that one of his or her foremost duties is to continue the historic task of reconciliation. But because the Indigenous cause was taken up by the left it is anathema to Howard and his barrackers. Thus he told the *Quadrant* crowd that of the causes the journal had taken up, none was more important to him personally than its role in undermining the 'black arm-band' view of Australian history. Proving the left wrong is more important than solving Indigenous disadvantage. In an editorial commemorating its 50 years, *Quadrant* gloated that 'on many indicators Aborigines are worse off than they were nearly forty years ago' because the left had been intolerant of alternative views on Indigenous policy. The editor conveniently forgot that the Howard Government has had 11 years to do something about it yet, if anything, the situation has become worse. They blame the left for its failures and even for their own.

It is particularly disturbing to watch the orchestrated campaign against public schools launched by Howard. Everything is wrong about them - their values, their curriculums, the standard of teaching and the alleged political extremism of the teachers. We now have the astonishing spectacle of the education minister Julie Bishop condemning 'Maoist' influences in the schools. If one's only sources of information were Government speeches, it would be impossible to accept the fact that, according to the OECD, Australian students consistently rank among the top five of 41 rich countries. Instead of acknowledging this, our education minister imagines reds under the desk.

But it is the universities that attract the most bitter diatribes of the Cold War warriors. The Prime Minister is especially agitated by the ranks of leftist academics, the purveyors of political correctness who pander to tyrants and are intolerant of dissenting opinion. On the same theme, *Quadrant's* editorial - which, incidentally, is so poorly written that I began to wonder whether the editor had had one of those grammar-averse post-modern primary school teachers - presented the journal as the true defender of liberalism and tolerance.

Neither the Prime Minister nor *Quadrant* mentioned the recent case of the ANU academics who argued, in an article published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, that the US-Australia Free Trade Agreement may mean that blood collected in this country will be sent overseas for processing, potentially jeopardising the safety of blood products. The Vice-Chancellor, Ian Chubb, received threatening phone calls from powerful interests suggesting that the researchers were ‘anti-American’ and that the university would be unwise to promote the research.

Nor did *Quadrant* and its chief political friend mention the case of Dr John Goldberg of the University of Sydney who wrote an article critical of Macquarie Bank for benefiting from public subsidies on its toll roads. After a strongly worded letter from Warwick Smith, Executive Director of Macquarie Bank, the Vice-Chancellor publicly dissociated the University from Dr Goldberg and said that the University had not ‘authorised’ his paper. Since when did universities have to ‘authorise’ the research output of every academic? The Vice-Chancellor then claimed that he was concerned that some people ‘may believe [Goldberg] is speaking for the University of Sydney’. Since when did academics doing their research ever speak for a university?

The role of universities in Australia *is* under grave threat, but not from the ‘political correctness’ of some ‘progressivist’ consensus as the Howard-*Quadrant* axis would have us believe. It is under attack from conservative political interference and corporate threats.

*Quadrant* and the Prime Minister set themselves up as Australia’s foremost defenders of ‘liberal democracy and genuine tolerance of debate and dissent’. In a more honest contribution to the debate the next day, one of Australia’s real dissident voices, Liberal MP Petro Georgiou, spoke of how he and his fellow dissidents had been ‘hounded’ for speaking out in defence of liberal values. He said the dissidents were being attacked and denigrated by people inside the party. We know that Prime Ministerial favourites Bill Heffernan, Eric Abetz and Tony Abbott act as enforcers, and there is genuine fear in the eyes of many back-benchers. Outside the Parliament one thinks of the vicious attacks on Justice Michael Kirby endorsed by the Prime Minister, and the targeting of individuals and organisations that are critical of the Government.

Defending tolerance of debate and dissent in his speech, the Prime Minister also bewailed the left's tactic of 'character assassination'. Yet sitting in the audience was a bevy of right-wing commentators - including Piers Akerman, Christopher Pearson and Miranda Devine - whose stock in trade is vituperation. In truth, the Liberal Party under John Howard has become Australia's Nasty Party.

Recognition of the fact that Howard is still locked into the political battles of the 60s and 70s explains perhaps the most remarkable feature of the gathering of the right at the *Quadrant* anniversary. They presented themselves as the *victims*, the outsiders who are courageously battling against the forces of a powerful elite of "progressives". They patted themselves on the back for their "non-conformity" and talked of their proud tradition of "dissent".

Yet gathered together at the *Quadrant* anniversary were the Prime Minister of the nation, several of his senior ministers, cardinals, bishops, top-draw jurists, agenda-setting commentators and editors, the cream of the business establishment, heads of influential think tanks, and senior executives of public institutions. All of them, it is suggested, are under siege from those of us gathered here today.

One of the Prime Minister's right-wing acolytes, Miranda Devine, declared that it was the speech to cement the real John Howard in history. One can only concur.

### **The Left**

But, it must be said, if Howard and his fellow conservatives are fighting old battles, then so are many on the progressive side of politics. The world that gave rise to social democracy as a political ideology is no more. The clear divide between class interests, the emphasis on regulating the economy to promote social justice, the solidarity that bound working people together politically and culturally are gone. In an affluent society, the 'deprivation model' on which progressive politics was built is today the opposite of the truth. The dominant characteristic of contemporary Australia is not deprivation but abundance.

Yet the left continues to base its social philosophy and political strategy on the circumstances of the bottom 10 or 20 per cent of the population. It must be admitted that after three decades of neoliberalism, and especially the last decade of

conservative rule, which has seen an unprecedented increase in individualism and preoccupation with self by most voters, the traditional empathy of many Australians for the misfortunes of the genuine battlers has dissipated.

We live in new times, in a society dominated by affluence, individualism, the obligation to find one's own-identity, and an ideology of personal responsibility. We can bewail it, or embrace it and build a new politics.

This does not mean that poverty and disadvantage have been abolished and that the circumstances of the poor and dispossessed do not matter. But the deprivation model cannot provide the basis for a politics of social change in a society characterised by affluence, and the continuing focus on the conditions of those who have not enjoyed the benefits of affluence is a recipe for eternal opposition.

Most Australians, including those caught up in consumerist lifestyles, feel the prevailing value system is warped. They believe Australia has become too selfish and superficial, that people have lost touch with the more desirable standards of personal behaviour, such as self-restraint, mutual respect and generosity. Our own research shows that 80 per cent of Australians believe we buy too much stuff; three-quarters say that we are too focused on work and money-making instead of on family and community; four in five say that our materialistic society makes it harder to instil positive values in children; and nearly nine in ten support more limits on advertising to children.

Conservatives have been much more adept than progressives at tapping into popular concern about moral decline, even though in the name of choice they promote the very market values and consumerist goals that corrode the values we seek.

The yearning of most Australians for a society built on stronger ethical foundations has been twisted into support for a retrograde conservative morality, including vilification of single mothers, hostility towards gay relationships, and attempts to demonise the 'undeserving' poor. The values of a decent society have been overlaid by outdated prejudices and positions based on particular religious convictions. And, responding to a pervasive sense of social disintegration, conservatives have made political gains by taking a disciplinarian stance on crime and drugs.

A large majority of Australians want to live in a society with greater moral certainty, stronger constraints on anti-social behaviour and clearer sexual standards; conservatives appear to offer solutions, even if those solutions are wrapped up with other positions that many find uncomfortable.

Thinkers and leaders on the progressive side have become wary of the new politics of morality, seeing it as the stalking horse of conservatives whose approach is often punitive, divisive and repressive. Schooled in the ethical universe of the 1960s and 1970s, - when the assertion of minority rights saw the overthrow of oppressive rules - many progressives have failed to engage with the moral concerns of the citizenry and have abandoned to those on the political right the most fertile grounds for social change.

Nowhere are these contradictions more keenly fought out than in debates over the idea of the family. Defending 'the family' has become conservative territory, but it is time progressives contested that dominance with a new politics of relationships. Everyone wants a happy family life. Families are the source of most of the companionship, emotional support and love we experience throughout our lives; they are where we form our most enduring, caring and loyal relationships.

Yet many progressive people, as if still crippled by the feminist and leftist critiques of the nuclear family, are afraid to defend the family; and, perversely, the more the moral conservatives have seized on the notion and moulded it into a romantic and reactionary caricature of the nuclear ideal of the 1950s, the more the progressives have vacated the field. This has been a grave political mistake.

The widespread unease with consumerism, even among the so-called aspirational classes, and the longing for a society with stronger ethical foundations derives from something deeper than a perception of social decline. Like all humans, what modern Australians want above all is for their lives to have purpose. But finding meaning is not easy, especially when people are subjected to a barrage of commercial messages that promote superficiality, self-deception and laxity. Some are following a religious path, and they find growing church communities where they can, for a time at least, immerse themselves in a social environment that is welcoming, caring, joyous and devoted to a higher purpose.

Progressives feel uneasy about the importation of American evangelism, and for good reason. Evangelical churches lend themselves to capture by conservatives who distort the participants' desire for a stronger moral order into an assault on outsiders who deviate from 'the one true path'. But, rather than deriding the 'happy clappers' of the evangelical churches, we need to realise that it is only through understanding and accepting the urge to find something more satisfying than a consumer life that a 'politics of meaning' can be built. Responding to most people's wish to live with purpose in an ethical society ought to be the natural territory of progressives, since the sentiments that underlie this hunger are consistent with the construction of a more just, sustainable and peaceful society.

Let me finish by asking which of the four social movements whose peak bodies have convened this conference might provide the ideas for a new progressive politics. Admirable as its work is, the welfare sector does not have the answer to the politics of an affluent society. The activism of the environment movement is vital to the future of the earth and all of its inhabitants, but environmentalism cannot be the basis of a broad-based political movement. In an individualised and affluent society, the trade unions are no longer the principal force for social change, although they will continue to play an essential role in protecting their members' interests and campaigning on wider issues. Even woven together, a commitment to social justice, environmental sustainability and workers' solidarity cannot be the basis for a new politics.

This leaves the churches. Curiously, in an age in which the mainstream churches are said to be in terminal decline, I believe that they hold the key to a new progressive politics. I am not appealing to the authority of the churches as institutions, and have no personal affiliation with any of them. But to the extent that their field of concern is the deeper aspects of life, and to the extent that they articulate values that transcend individualism, materialism and selfishness, it is from religious thinkers and activists that progressives might learn to speak to the concerns of Australian citizens. Only by understanding those deeper yearnings and appealing to those deeper values can we develop a new politics of meaning.