Something to Chew On

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It’s never easy to connect long-term social and cultural changes to short-term electoral ones. They’re like two different time-scales – one incremental, even geological in pace, the other immediate and seemingly will-o’-the-wisp. Opinion polls are like weather reports, where the weather-systems seem to scud around with arbitrary and unintelligible speed. Social changes are like the movements of river-channels, where sand and silt washes and ebbs imperceptibly.

Yet Brett is surely right to link Howard’s remarkable electoral ascendancy over the last eight years to the profound movements in Australian society and culture that have characterized the last two or three decades of our national life. To put the matter crudely, over this time-frame ‘progressivism’ as a political force has become more and more the preserve of the articulate, well-educated and largely well-heeled, and less and less the natural habitat of those towards whom its solicitations are directed.
Denizens of social-justice politics nowadays place a high
store on their cultural sophistication and inter-cultural aware-
ness, and prioritise political issues on the basis of their capac-
ity to empathise with vulnerable others, overseas or at home.
In this sense, as Brett (following Robert Merton) observes,
their political outlook mirrors their personal experience of a
global employment market and labour-force skills which are
based upon increasingly nebulous conceptions of knowledge
and ‘knowledge-work’ and their merits.

And they are only too prone to depict the laggards in this
shift towards a globalised, conscience-driven political imagina-
tion as backwards, inward-looking, ethnically-prejudiced and
morally-challenged. The moral psychology of progressives has
become ruled to a disturbing extent by the logic of the so-
called ‘dog-whistle’, according to which the great majority of
the population are passive receptors of the manipulations of
conservative demagogues, ready to be turned towards racism
and intolerance at the flick of a psychic switch. Conversely,
‘locals’ and ‘patriots’ tend to view the moral predilections of
the highly-educated with barely-disguised contempt.

As Brett points out, this is on the face of it a massive shift
in our political culture, given that a mere half a century ago
the Australian professional classes were overwhelmingly con-
servative in inclination, and the Labor Party was largely the
preserve of male skilled blue-collar workers and their indus-
trial representatives. As Brett’s longer analysis also suggests,
though, there is much that is familiar in this apparently novel
alignment of social and political forces. After all, for the better
part of a century since the high-Victorian period it has been
the urban professional classes (as opposed to their despised
neighbours, the commercial middle classes) who have carried
aloft the banner of the social conscience and concern for those
‘less fortunate than themselves’, as the old mantra had it.

In its early years this social imagination was a frankly reli-
gious construction – overwhelmingly the social ‘causes’ of
high Victorian England and Australia were propelled by those
whose moral compass was Evangelical as much as profes-
sional, and who sought salvation for the oppressed as much
if not more than liberation. In a classic historical essay from
the 1950s, Noel Annan (himself a desendent of this culture)
traced how the earnest English social Evangelicals of the 1840s
and 1850s gave birth (quite literally) to the agnostic social
workers of the 1880s and 1890s, who in turn spawned the cos-
mopolitan ironists of Bloomsbury in the 1910s and 1920s, and
then in turn the Oxbridge radicals of the 1930s and 1940s. I’ll
leave you to fill in the dots.

Likewise, there is a direct line of descent from the liberal
pacifists of World War One to the Moratorium organisers of the
Vietnam period, and from the liberal anti-imperialism of the
era of the Boer War to the anti-Americanism of today. The
intense (and arguably over-the-top) preoccupation of contem-
porary liberals with the evil influence of talk back radio on the
great unwashed, today replicates the intense preoccupation
of Edwardian liberals with the influence of so-called ‘Yellow
Press’ on the bellicose patriotism of the working classes a cen-
tury ago. In short, social concern and political dissent (from
the majority, that is) have been the life-blood of the modern
professional classes since their creation in the first half of the
nineteenth century. What is novel is not so much the phenom-
emon, as the labels put upon it. The social conscience seems
to have become social radicalism, and localism and patriotism
have become synonymous with conservatism. Or, if you like,
social and moral values have triumphed over economic and
sociological ones as markers of political progress.

The problem with this state of affairs – as Brett implies
rather than states – is that liberals and radicals have lost
the capacity to speak to their fellow-Australians in a shared
moral and political language. The problem is a fundamental
one. How to talk equably to people who are vehemently and
unapologetically patriotic and nationalistic when you yourself
feel compelled to bracket any idea of patriotism with ‘scare-
quotes’? How to communicate the ideal of the great global
community of humankind to people who are accustomed to
viewing the rest of the world as competitors for their only-too-
vulnerable job? How to trumpet open-hearted empathy as the
highest moral value to those who’ve grown up in the school
of hard knocks?

As Brett also explains, the present Prime Minister has
exploited these political frailties of the liberal Left with an assi-
duity that borders on genius, not least because he himself has
a large tincture of the ‘local and the ‘patriot’ inside his breast.
Of course, knowing something about what the great mass of
the population thinks about the world helps, too. When the
Prime Minister exclaimed that ‘We all know Australia is the
best country in the world in which to live’ (without, as Brett
puts it, ‘even a nod to relativity of perspectives’), he wasn’t
musing out loud, or reciting a homily from Politics 101. He (or
his researcher, or his scriptwriter, or both) was simply repeat-
ing the findings of the social attitudes surveys.

When the 2001 Australian Election Study asked 2000 Aus-
tralians if they ‘would rather be a citizen of Australia than of
any other country in the world’, more than 85% replied in the
affirmative and a mere three percent in the negative. Compare
that with the response you’d get from a survey of members
of our own Union, and the extent of the different-languages
problem becomes painfully apparent. When next you raise
a spoonful of cornflakes above the morning newspaper and
snort with scorn about the populist proclivities of Howard’s
possible nemesis and Labor’s new hopeful, Mark Latham, chew
on that!