Aussie Battler, or Worldly Opportunist?

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Judith Brett dissects the differences between the Howard world-view and that of the intelligentsia, using Robert Merton's dichotomy between 'locals' and 'cosmopolitans' as her means. On this account, Howard's preoccupation with national sovereignty – and hence with border control and security – is the characteristic trait of the 'local', knowing 'in (his) bones that home and its ways are best'. His critics, the 'cosmopolitan' intelligentsia, are too ready to ascribe his policy preferences to bigotry and cynicism, failing to recognise that locals 'place their obligations to their fellow nationals much higher than to those outside the boundary of the nation'. They refuse to see the world from Howard's perspective, and hence have given him an opening: 'He has captured much Australian vernacular nationalism for the Liberals and in so doing created a workable language of national unity'. Brett's book is wonderfully persuasive on this last point, showing Howard's political savvy and skill in deploying a plain man's rhetoric to wrong-foot more knowing critics. She establishes one point beyond refutation: that unless the critics can imagine themselves in Howard's shoes, appreciate the skill with which he has used everyday language to create a political imaginary, and understand the appeal of that construct to a constituency, they will never lay a glove on him. Brett can do all of these things, and that is her gift to us.

Nonetheless, Brett is too ready to identify belief rather than calculation as the source of Howard's actions, and this is because of three limitations in her argument. First, noting historical changes in the roles of knowledge elites suggests that, rather than speaking for 'the broad mainstream' against elites, Howard is part of a battle between elites that has clear political purposes. Second, in her attention to Howard and the Australian context, Brett omits the comparative dimension, and so understates how closely Howard's tactics are modelled on anti-elite discourse and the 'securitisation' of politics in Western polities. In this, he is firmly enmeshed in a cosmopolitan network. Third, Howard has adopted a mode of Realpolitik based on what he calls 'a coalition of interests' that is progressively alienating what Brett calls the moral middle class – and this may no longer matter for the Liberal Party. The argument, so extended, suggests that Howard is both a national patriot-seeing the world much as Brett suggests-and a breathtakingly hard-nosed opportunist.

In Australia, interwar liberal thinkers forged the notion of a civic elite comprising intellectuals with social responsibilities.[1] The elite would have the ability to identify the public good and to utilise expert knowledge in the pursuit of what that demanded: it could not be left to collective mediocrity. In the period of post-war reconstruction, the expectation that bureaucratic and business experts would guide social development was widely accepted, the system appeared to be delivering prosperity and progress, and the work of elites was valorised

because they served the national interest. A survey in 1969 showed that a majority believed that political elites were generally intelligent people who knew what they were doing.[2] There was congruence between the elite's assumption that state agencies and business were interdependent in the development enterprise, and the public's expectation that the bureaucratic order should ensure a reasonable standard of living for all.

In the 1970s, the conditions that underwrote this consensus broke down. This opened up a battle between elites – on the one hand those unwilling to sacrifice some version of social liberalism and its equalising project and, on the other, those whose interests were better served by what, in Australia, we called economic rationalism. Apostles of the latter are no less reliant on technocratic experts than were their post-war counterparts, it is simply that the economic paradigm has changed. US proponents of the new dispensation, however, pioneered the technique of short-circuiting the gap between elites and citizens by targeting social liberals alone as 'the elite' and representing themselves as the defenders of the people's right to determine their circumstances through market choice. Howard's speeches faithfully follow the American model (as articulated by, say, Jeffrey Bell[3]) – it is US market populism that Howard has adopted and adapted as a discourse that he can use to effect the inversion of the post-war consensus, and to castigate his critics (and the ALP). He can ground it in local example and local experience, and use it to name the enemies of self-realisation – but it is not the discourse of a 'local': it is a product of globalisation and promotes reform that favours cosmopolitan elites and that has seen a widening gap between rich and poor.

Recent research indicates a growing gulf between the values of ordinary people and those in power.[4] To Howard's advantage, the ALP has offered no persuasive alternative, but it is clear that there is disillusionment with politics, frustration with the effects of neo-liberal policies, widespread belief that government should do more, support for the old institutions and a conviction that reform has favoured big business rather than the average wage earner. In particular, Howard is losing the 'moral middle class'[5] that once constituted the Liberal's base.

Howard's response has been to increase the stridency of his attacks on 'the elites', but also to change the terms of political debate by resorting to threat politics – witness the Iraq incursion, and the border control and security agendas. He has strenuously sought to reach out to ordinary people as a 'war-

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time prime minister',[6] thus claiming a symbolic identification with the national interest, positioning dissenters as unpatriotic and implying that everyday politics are in questionable taste when we confront bigger emergencies. The consistency of the elisions between terrorism and illegal immigrants suggests that asylum seekers may represent a war by other means. The security agenda also allows him to narrow the field of politics, to deny some forms of debate and some forms of opposition altogether, as many commentators have argued in their analysis of the ASIO bill.[7] The metaphor of on-going battle is now his favoured tactic of building 'coalitions' across 'the mainstream' – edging out those he depicts as noisy minorities. If the moral middle class – those whom Pusey found to be most offended by the new dispensation[8] – find themselves relegated as one such minority, it may not matter to Howard.

In effect, he is building coalitions between insecure battlers (who respond to populist rhetoric about meeting threats head-on), that section of the middle class most committed to personal choices and the cosmopolitan beneficiaries of the new economy. How much is this driven by belief, and how much by the ruthless pursuit of advantage? Brett provides a salutary reminder that we must recognise the former: to underplay the latter is generous to a fault. *a*

Footnotes

1. James Walter and Tod Moore, 'The New Social Order? Australia's contribution to "new liberal" thinking in the interwar period'. (Refereed paper). The jubilee conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association, ANU, Canberra, 2-4 October, 2002: at http://arts.anu.edu.au/sss/apsa/default.htm.

2. Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics: Second Edition*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982. pp275-8.

3. See Jeffrey Bell, *Populism and Elitism: politics in the age of equality*, Regnery Gateway/National Book Network, Washington, 1992.

4. See Michael Pusey, *The Experience of Middle Australia: the dark side of economic reform*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2003; and Peter Saunders, *The Ends and Means of Welfare: Coping with economic and social change in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2002.

5. See Pusey, *op. cit.*

6. As Mark McKenna shows, see his chapter in Raymong Gaita, ed. *Why the War Was Wrong*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2003.

7. Jenny Hocking, 'Counter-terrorism and the criminalisation of politics: Australia's new security powers of detention, proscription and control'. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 49(3), September 2003, pp. 355-72.

8. Pusey, *op. cit.*