

calling them 'queue jumpers' and accused them of demanding luxuries denied to other hard working Australians. Focus groups started revealing that this issue above all others excited interest from the otherwise sleepy electorate; more than interest – visceral anger. Even before the *Tampa*, the Liberal Party had started distributing leaflets in marginal electorates highlighting the Howard Government's strong stance on asylum seekers and detention centre inmates. Howard set up a unit within his Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to exploit the issue and prepare a political campaign around it. During 2001 Howard resembled one of those early nuclear physicists, slowly inching two hemispheres of radioactive U235 toward each other. When the *Tampa* arrived he finally got the chain reaction he was looking for. The rest is history.

Where to from here? Ultimately the Liberal Party is irrelevant to the ability of the nation to overcome this sorry episode. The silence of the 'wets' (especially their leader Peter Costello) in the face of lies and racism gives them no credibility. The electorate will eventually take out their anger on the Liberal Party. If Australia is to recover from the moral damage inflicted on the nation by the *Tampa* episode the leadership must come from the Left. It requires the swallowing of some hard truths.

During the Tampa election Labor was painted as simultaneously too soft on border protection and too hard on refugees. How did this collective act of 'doublethink' succeed?

One of the things highlighted by the 2001 election was the polarisation of the opinion forming class in Australia (the politicians, journalists, opinion columnists, radio commenta-

tors and even letter writers to the newspapers). Almost without exception, those on the right denounced Labor as weak on border protection (even though the Howard Government eventually adopted Kim Beazley's compromise border protection legislation) and all of those on the left denounced Labor as pandering to racism (even though Kim Beazley sunk his own chances of winning the election by rejecting John Howard's initial *Border Protection Bill*).

This is not all the fault of the Labor Party; much blame lies with a broad Left that is out of touch with the sentiments of the great majority of the Australian people. The Australian Right, led by John Howard, has won the culture war, and the Left has to try to fight back. If it accepts that the Right will always hit it hard, the Left has to learn to defend itself by being tougher, more united and more realistic about the political options that confront its parliamentary wing – Labor.

If commentators on the Left thought Labor lost the election because it wasn't compassionate enough, they must have been reading different polls, listening to different radio stations and reading different newspapers to me. The Tampa election illustrates a wider problem for the Left. The Australian Left has walled itself within the inner city and lost touch with the opinions of its old constituency in the suburbs. Until it gets that contact back and becomes more politically realistic it will do no more than help reinforce the implicit message in John Howard's wedge politics and culture crusade – that the Labor Party is weak and stands for nothing. The real message from the success of John Howard's wedge politics is the need for the Australian Left to get real and win the culture war. ■

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# 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 awareness, and prioritise political issues on the basis of their capacity 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 imagination 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 conservative in inclination, and the Labor Party was largely the preserve of male skilled blue-collar workers and their industrial 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 religious construction - overwhelmingly the social 'causes' of high Victorian England and Australia were propelled by those whose moral compass was Evangelical as much as professional, 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 descendent 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 cosmopolitan 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 contemporary 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 century 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 phenomenon, 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 assiduity 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 repeating the findings of the social attitudes surveys.

When the 2001 Australian Election Study asked 2000 Australians 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! *a*