

# THE HOWARD ERA - IN RETROSPECT?

*The last eight years have created radical realignments in Australia's political landscape. The PM's bitterest enemies are precisely the same people who would once have been Australian Liberalism's stalwarts.*

## Border Control

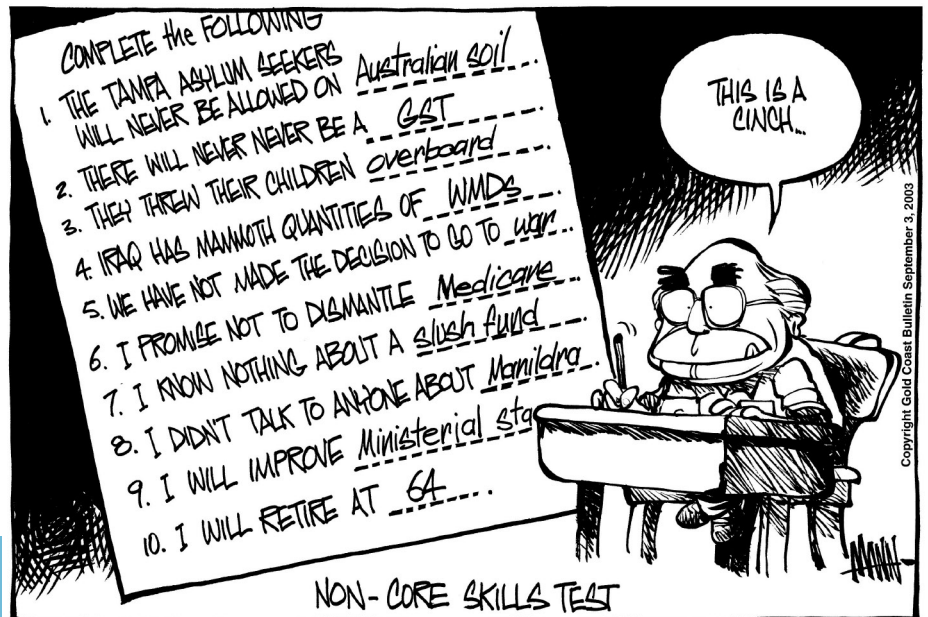
*Judith Brett*

Under Howard the gap which opened up in the 1970s between Australia's intellectual and cultural elites has become a yawning gulf. There are right wing commentators aplenty in the newspapers and journals of opinion, but they are eccentric, trading on exaggerated personalities and maverick opinions, rather than representatives of more generally held views or of an identifiable section of people. They feel embattled and complain regularly of the left bias in the country's cultural and intellectual institutions. There are no successors on the Liberal side of politics to Walter Murdoch. With his 'commonplace sort of mind, [and] knack for putting into words what other commonplace people have thought but never said' he connected Liberal values with the experiences of the educated middle class. If there is a contemporary successor it is journalist and broadcaster Philip Adams. In 1997, accusing the ABC of 'too narrow a spectrum of views' on political and social issues, Howard said, 'It is one of my criticisms of the ABC that it doesn't have a right-wing Philip Adams'. But the problem is that a right-wing Philip Adams, someone with his capacity to talk intelligently on such a breadth of topics, is not easily imaginable in contemporary Australia.

The ABC has become a symbol to the Liberals of their loss of a constituency which was once their own. Ever since the intelligentsia defected to Labor with the coming of Whitlam, Liberals have viewed the ABC with suspicion. It came under such attack for bias during Fraser's governments that a defence association

was formed, 'Friends of the ABC'. The Friends were mostly women, white collar and over forty-five, the sorts of people who were once the backbone of the Liberal Party's moral middle class support. Now they were rallying to 'Save the ABC'. After the Liberals defeated Labor in 1996, the attacks on the ABC began again and have continued. The ABC is seen as providing 'middle class welfare', and arguments for the contribution of an independent public broadcaster to broadly defined public goods are simply dismissed out of hand. Menzies' middle class which provided 'more than perhaps any other the intellectual life which marks us off from the beast', and which filled 'the higher schools and universities' and fed 'the lamps of learning' has become 'the chattering classes' and 'the chardonnay set', self-interested minorities and cosmopolitan elites.

Cartoon by Craig Mann. Reprinted courtesy of the Gold Coast Bulletin



The problem for the Liberal Party since it returned to government in 1996 is that without a strong connection to middle class intellectual culture it risks becoming a populist party of the lower middle class whose voice is the shock jocks of talk back radio. This is not necessarily an electoral problem, but it is a problem for the party's capacity to deliver good government and develop intellectually credible policies. And it is a problem for its long-term historical reputation. The government has put barriers of suspicion between itself and most of those who think and write for a living, which make it less open to the full range of available knowledge and ideas when formulating its policies, and defensive in the face of criticism. If we add to this the Government's difficult relationship with the universities as it has systematically reduced funding, we have a government not only cut off from the educated elite, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, but regularly subject to their

attack. As Howard told Paul Kelly shortly before the 2001 election, 'I am scorned by the elites and held in such disdain'. Since 2001 this scorn has settled on the Howard Government's refugee policy.

The Howard Governments inherited a harsh policy towards asylum seekers from the Labor government. In contrast to many Western nations, people who arrived in Australia seeking asylum were detained in detention centres while their claims were investigated rather than being released into the community. These detention centres are cruel places full of desperate and unhappy people. They have been subjected to continuous criticism in the broadsheet press, on the ABC, and from various community action groups. In the tabloids and on talk-back radio, however, there has been far less sympathy. Asylum seekers are generally seen as illegal immigrants first and refugees second. In the second half of 2001 the number of asylum seekers coming by boat from Indonesia to Australia began to increase. Most were from the Middle East - Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq - and came via Pakistan using people smugglers. In August 2001 a Norwegian container ship, the *Tampa*, picked up 433 people from a sinking Indonesian wooden ferry headed for Australia. The government refused to let the ship enter Australian waters, which would trigger the provisions of the *Migration Act* and allow asylum seekers to pursue their claims on shore. After a lengthy stand off, involving the ship's captain, the Norwegian Government, the Indonesian Government, the Australian military and navy, and a confused and divided Australian public, the asylum seekers were taken to locations in the Pacific while their claims were examined. It

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was a messy and protracted piece of policy making on the run in which the government eventually got its way, and it greatly raised the political stakes around the issue of asylum seekers. For the Government the core issue was the protection of Australia's borders in the face of organised people smuggling. For the Government's opponents the issue was Australia's compassion as a wealthy, developed country towards desperate people and its reputation as an international good citizen.

The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre diverted attention from the *Tampa*, but increased public concern with issues of national security. A federal election was due at the end of the year. Given world events, the campaign was dominated by issues of security. Howard slid between the need to respond to terrorism and the need to protect our borders, arguing both that 'National security is ... about a proper response to terrorism' and that 'we will decide who

comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come'. The Labor campaign was thrown off track by the turn in world events. Six months out from the election public opinion polls indicated that Labor under Kim Beazley would win easily. There was continuing anger at the GST amongst small business people, and in April the Liberals lost the blue ribbon seat of Ryan at a by-election. Imitating Howard's strategy in 1996, Beazley was doing little to project Labor's alternative policies as he waited for Howard's unpopularity to deliver him victory. He was thus unable to project Labor as a convincing alternative government during a campaign focussed on issues of national security and Labor and Beazley were comfortably defeated.

The asylum seeker issue has not gone away however. The Government has been accused of cynically exploiting it during the election campaign, in particular by allowing a story about refugees throwing their children overboard to run when it was known to be false. Howard's critics trace a line from his policy on immigration and multiculturalism, through his stance on native title and reconciliation to his hard line on the mostly non-European asylum seekers to claim that he is racist. And if he is not actually a racist or a bigot himself, then as Philip Adams claims, he is something worse - a cynical opportunist 'willing to manipulate and exploit bigotry for political advantage'. So he refused to condemn Pauline Hanson outright, and practiced what some have described as dog whistle politics, in which he sent coded messages to those who wished to hear them while using forms of words which were publicly defensible.

The moral condemnation of Howard moves from his treatment of one marginalised non-white group to the next. This continues a line of division apparent in opinion polls since the early 1970s on issues of race and migration according to levels of education. The tertiary educated are consistently more positive about multiculturalism and support higher levels of migration. And they were the group least likely to support Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. Katherine Betts has argued that attitudes to race and to cultural difference have been central to the new class's identity formation, providing markers of social status which distinguish them from the small-minded xenophobia and crass materialism of working and lower middle class Australia. The new tertiary educated professionals 'have built their claims to honour and prestige by painting a negative picture of parochial Australians and distancing themselves from that picture'. They see Howard as

a representative of the small-minded, smug Australia they have learned to loathe. Guy Rundle's and Max Gillies' portrayal of Howard as Barry Humphries' Sandy Stone epitomises this view of him as suburban man running Australia with the commonsense of the lounge room and garage. The last time a small suburban man was Prime Minister, Joe Lyons in the 1930s, the educated elites viewed him with condescension but were grateful for his capacity to hold Australia together. Today they view his leadership with dismay.

Betts draws attention to the way the social formation of the post-1960s tertiary educated professionals has set them apart from less educated Australians. The key here is the way tertiary education, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, trains people in processes of abstract and critical thinking which are reflexive, abstract and problematising. It teaches them to justify positions through argument and evidence rather than by appeals to authority, and it devalues the role of experience in favour of forms of knowledge and argument which are relatively situation-free. All of this makes them confident with the new, and excited by the possibility of alternatives, able to reach out for new ideas, inside open-ended systems of meaning and to locate their ideas and experiences inside more universal systems of thought. These may be various technical expert knowledges, or they may simply be a well-developed general knowledge of world history and the breadth and complexity of possible human experience, the sort of qualities valued by an old-fashioned liberal education.

The styles of knowing associated with intellectual training set them apart from those who learn their skills and knowl-

edge in the university of life through hard knocks, practical experience and submission to authority. They learn a knowledge that is densely particular and situation-specific, tied to the local, known world, and of little use with the new and different. These two styles of knowing are associated with another pair of distinctions, that between cosmopolitans and locals, between those for whom the world is their oyster and those who know in their bones that home and its ways are best.

The distinction between cosmopolitans and locals was first

made by American sociologist Robert Merton to describe the difference in social and political orientation amongst the inhabitants of a small American town in the 1940s. Cosmopolitans lived their lives within the structure of the nation, compared with locals whose focus was the small world of their town. In the contemporary world cosmopolitans are oriented to global culture and

society, while those whose horizons of interest and identification are still bounded by the national seem like small-minded locals. Cosmopolitans have the social skills and attitudes that enable them to move amongst people of different cultures with confidence and purpose, whereas locals, even when they travel, are more attuned to the familiar than the different. For Australian cosmopolitans, it is their interest in and skills with cultural difference that most distinguish them from their parochial compatriots.

Cosmopolitans' and local's different styles of knowing are associated with different projected moral communities. One aspect of globalisation is the development of human rights as a universal language which creates a universal human moral community coextensive with the cosmopolitan's potential field of knowledge. Locals still live inside much smaller moral communities - of family, friends and neighbourhood, less and less of class, perhaps of ethnic group or religious congregation. So of course do cosmopolitans, but they are far more ready to acknowledge the legitimacy of universal claims. The historical function of the nation state was to draw locals within territorial units into the moral community of the nation, inside whose boundaries they would recognise reciprocal rights and obligations. The language of citizenship was a universal language of equality which operated across religious and ethnic differences to create moral and political national communities. It operated however within territorially-based states, whose boundaries were created by particular historical processes which privileged those inside the territory against those outside. Sometimes, as with settler

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Australia's relations with Indigenous Australians, it privileged particular groups within the state over others, on the basis of racial and cultural difference, generally by defining the nation in ways that excluded them. But this was a distortion of the equality implicit in the language of citizenship and since the 1960s it has been generalised to include all those legitimately within Australia's borders.

The language of citizenship is now being pushed beyond the boundaries of nation states to encompass the world as a political community, with no boundaries other than that of the globe itself. So cosmopolitans will describe themselves as 'citizens of the world' and be uncomfortable with and even hostile to the traditional languages of national political communities. Globalisation has turned national patriots into locals, and cosmopolitans often treat them with the contempt nationalists once directed at small-town folk. In Australia the intellectuals' traditional scorn for suburbia has slipped easily over into a scorn for Australian nationalists. Nationalists for their part still value territorial sovereignty, and place their obligations to their fellow nationals much higher than to those outside the boundaries of the nation.

Howard is a local not a cosmopolitan, and he is not an intellectual. Just as he believes the national character of the people is built from the experience of the people, both in the high moments of national experience like Anzac and in the habits of daily life, so he too has built his knowledge and ideas from his experience. His speeches are full of references to his personal experiences, to encounters with people, to his own beliefs and feelings. This is the real meaning of his references to his childhood in the 1950s. It is not that he wants to go back, but that he legitimates his beliefs, both to himself and to others, in terms of his own experience rather than in terms of more abstract systems of cultural and social knowledge. It is why he has revelled in the chance being Prime Minister has given him to visit the sites of both his family's and the country's past – the battle fields of World War One, the streets of London, and the halls of Westminster. This is not an exercise in nostalgia so much as an exercise in practical learning, in seeing with his own eyes the places where the man he is and the country he leads has come from. It is also why he has learned from the job. Since he became Prime Minister Howard has clearly become much more comfortable with Australian multiculturalism, as he has travelled around the country talking to a wider range of community groups than when he was in opposition. He has moved a little on indigenous issues. He will, I predict, move his position on the republic when Queen Elizabeth dies. It is true that his intellectual style is stubborn and defensive, that he hates being rushed or pushed, or having words put into his mouth. He is not quick on his feet or adept when faced with novel arguments, but relies on already well-worked out answers to expected questions. He doesn't like hypotheticals and

refuses to speculate. But none of this means that he does not or cannot change.

Howard is also an unashamed Australian patriot, who can claim without even a nod to relativity of perspectives that 'We all know Australia is the best country in the world in which to live'. He has captured much Australian vernacular nationalism for the Liberals and in doing created a workable language of national unity. And he has responded to asylum seekers with a policy of border control which reaffirms the foundation of the nation state in territorial integrity. But in today's globalising world, nationalists are locals. The Liberals' capacity to handle Australia's relations with the world at large has always been a crucial element in their belief that they were the party of good government. They had the knowledge, the social skills and the broader vision necessary for good diplomacy and foreign policy making, in comparison with poorly educated, socially limited Labor politicians. For the first half of the century Australian Liberals' international perspective was framed by the British Empire. Labor became the party of Australian nationalism, asserting national interest and significance against the claims of a distant 'over there' and the deferential habits of imperial membership. It was thus better situated to recognise the rapid decline of Britain after World War Two, to develop the assertive foreign policy of an independent nation state.

But Howard has turned the tables. In turning the Liberals into local Australian patriots he has positioned Labor as more concerned with how Australia is viewed abroad than lived at home. As Howard has shown again and again, his prime audience is national. The consequences can be seen in Howard's awkward foreign policy, particularly in relation to South East Asia. He has repeatedly made comments to a domestic audience and for domestic political advantage with insufficient attention to the ways these comments will be heard in the region. For example, his description of Australia during the Timor Crisis as the deputy sheriff of the US in Asia, or his comment that Australia may need to act if it received credible warnings about terrorist activities in a neighbouring country. These are more than carelessness and less than the vestigial imperialism. They are the result of the groundedness of his knowledge and interests in local experience and the relative intensities of his knowledge and understanding. Like a local he does not automatically scan his comments from the perspectives of distant stake holders. As a local the rest of the world is simply not as real to Howard as Australia. And this is how he thinks it should be for the leader of the Australian nation. ■

*This article is an edited and revised extract from Judith Brett's 'Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class', published by Cambridge University Press.*