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*Symposium: The Liberal Conversation*

## Howard, Tampa, and the politics of reactionary modernisation

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On the face of it, John Howard and Tony Blair are very different political beasts. They appeal to different constituencies, belong to different ideological traditions, and have more in common with their respective opposition parties than with one another. But a common thread runs through their hostile policies towards refugees, their adoption of ‘workfare’ social policies, and their strident stance on law and order. In a very important sense, Howard’s political program—which I call the ‘Tampa project’—and Blair’s New Labour share a common political logic: a strategic mix of enthusiastic commitment to the values and policies of economic liberalism with an equally assiduous propagation of illiberal policies that draw on reactionary and nostalgic understandings of community and culture.


Disturbingly, this political logic is hostile to ideals of political equality or citizenship. Its proponents reject or devalue the universality of citizenship, rights, and entitlements the expansion of which has been a hallmark of the post war social revolution in countries such as Australia. Instead, they seek to make the benefits of citizenship conditional on membership of a cultural community. This conditional citizenship is grounded on the basis of acceptable responsible behaviour, or the capacity to participate in the formal economy.

Pitched on the terrain of culture, this new politics poses serious difficulties for opposition political parties such as the Australian Labor Party (ALP), which is unwilling or unable to contest these new forms of cultural politics. As Carol Johnson (2000) notes in her perceptive book comparing prime ministers Paul Keating and John Howard, a defining characteristic of Keating’s political project was to have woven a neoliberal economic program with a distinctive motif of social modernisation around diversity and indigenous rights. After Kim Beazley’s accession to the leadership much of this program has been marginalised or even abandoned, leaving the ALP with it no alternative to the new conservative politics of cultural identity so well played by the Liberals under John Howard. (Of course, this is equally a pressing problem for Peter Costello as he jockeys for the Liberal leadership.)

That Howard’s Tampa Project taps into an old style pre-Whitlam Laborism makes the position of the ALP even more difficult. John Howard seems less to resemble

his mentor and ideal Robert Menzies than Labor's Arthur Calwell. It is no coincidence that Calwell, a staunch supporter of the White Australia policy, is much admired by the One Nation Party. Old style Laborism of the Calwell era forged the links between ethnicity, identity, and security that now underpin the new political landscape. (Similarly, perceptive observers of New Labour have noted that some of its themes such as personal responsibility resonate strongly with very older labour ideas about personal and moral responsibility within the working class.) Howard has been able to tap in to this older labour tradition still latent in the psyches of his 'battlers'.

At the same time, it needs to be noted that at the state level Bob Carr's Labor government in New South Wales has been, if anything, more extreme than Howard in seeking to promote an old style cultural politics that harks back to the exclusionary traditions of old Laborism. This is reflected, for example, in Carr's stance on ethnic identification of police suspects, on immigration, in the shift from the language of ethnic to community relations, the emphasis on law and order, and more recently the draconian security legislation passed by the New South Wales Parliament.



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## THE CULTURAL TURN AS 'REACTIONARY MODERNISATION'

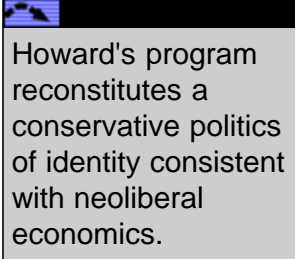
The amalgam of economic modernisation and nostalgic or backward looking communitarianism is not a novel ideological configuration. Noting a similar configuration within German conservatism during the Weimar period, historian Jeffrey Herf (1984) has appropriately described this politics as a form of 'reactionary modernisation'. Herf's analysis emphasises how German conservatism was able to reconcile modern technology with a reassertion of forms of cultural community. Extending this insight, the term 'reactionary modernisation' captures well the way conservative political programs can be committed to *technological* modernity while at the same time remain hostile to *political* aspects of the Enlightenment, such as the values of universalism, political equality, and social amelioration that underpin liberalism and social democracy.

Both Blair's New Labour and Howard's Tampa Project combine commitment to economic reform and modernisation with a nostalgic return to the virtues and values of the past. Howard looks back to the post war Menzies era, steeped in what Miriam Dixon (1999) refers to as 'the anglo-celtic core culture'; Blair's New Labour appeals to the Victorian virtues of work and moral responsibility. Looking back to these pasts, these projects of reactionary modernisation seek to re-invoke the confines and security of local particularisms supposedly vanquished by the destructive forces of the post war social revolution.

This return to the past echoes in the pervasiveness of the idea of 'community' in contemporary policy discourse; 'community' understood in terms of the staking and manipulation of cultural boundaries. Economic reform has been infused with an insistent culturalism that seeks to make serviceable a new politics of cultural identity for conservative political forces. Howard's political program does not

repudiate ‘identity politics’ as he claims, but rather reconstitutes a *conservative* politics of identity consistent with neoliberal economics.

Even as it claws back the gains of the social revolution of the 1960s and 1970s by reviling social movements such as feminism, multiculturalism, or the indigenous rights, the Tampa project does so in the name of another form of identity politics. It emphasises the same elements of cultural particularism and identity that conservatives so vehemently attacked on the left. In this sense, ironically, the new cultural politics of the right is a mirror image of the cultural politics of the left.



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There is more to this project than the sheer political opportunism of John Howard. Foot soldiers in these new culture wars include the talk-back hosts with their cozy suburban fascism as well as a broad range of conservative social columnists, academics, and writers who fulminate against feminism, multiculturalism, and Aboriginal affairs. Under the guise of challenging ‘political correctness’ these foot soldiers of various hues represent a kind of ‘intellectual’ anti-intellectualism.

## CULTURAL POLITICS HARD AND SOFT

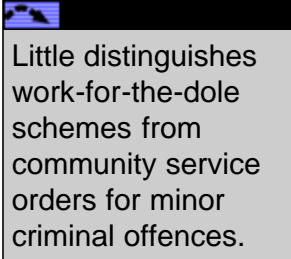
The ‘cultural turn’ in conservative politics is glaringly evident in the demonisation of refugees and the way foreign policy, driven by the need to preserve our ‘cultural’ territory, has been neatly woven into the fabric of identity. The new culturalism seeks to redefine membership of the political community in terms of the acceptance of a set of core cultural values essential for social cohesion and ‘harmony’.

Take, for instance, border security. From a culturalist vantage, the question of borders is not just about the defence and integrity of territory; it is simultaneously *cultural*. Herein lies one of the perplexing dilemmas of contemporary globalisation in the developed world—the opening of *some* borders while others are simultaneously closed. Economic borders are opening for the movement of capital while political borders are closing to the movement of people. Once more, Howard, much to the discomfort of Simon Crean and the ALP, follows some of the policies pursued by Blair’s New Labour. Thus we find David Blunkett, Blair’s Secretary of Home Affairs, is rapidly becoming the new Enoch Powell of British politics, defending draconian legislation against refugees with increasingly venomous attacks on asylum seekers. And to cap it off, his cabinet colleague, former civil libertarian and now Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw led an abortive attempt to push the European Summit on illegal immigration to withdraw aid to countries refusing to take action to hold back illegal migrants.

The hard version of cultural nationalism expressed in policy on border security sits alongside a softer notion of culture, couched in the touchy feely terms of social inclusion. Here, social inclusion simply means the inculcation of certain standards of responsible social conduct. Under the banner of mutual obligation or workfare, both Tony Blair and John Howard have used social policy as the cutting edge of

this soft cultural politics. Again, an illiberal set of practices lies at the heart of this new social policy agenda in documents such as the McClure Report (McClure 2000). In this form of ‘conditional citizenship’, access to social entitlements or benefits is tied to accepting moralising forms of social conduct.

What is novel about Howard’s policy of mutual obligation is the way it uses social policy as an instrument of ‘moral responsibility’. This curious moralism of responsible conduct lies at the root of both Howard’s and New Labour’s social policy. Failure to meet specified standards of conduct results not only in the denial of benefits or entitlements but also in the criminalisation of whole groups of people. There is little to distinguish the work-for-the-dole schemes from community service orders for minor criminal offences, while zero tolerance policies on crime effectively criminalise social problems.



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## GLOBALISATION AND THE NEW CULTURALISM

The roots of this new cultural turn in politics are to be found in the very distinctive dynamics of globalisation. Economic globalisation has undermined the ability of governments to deliver on significant elements of the social contract that remained at the political heart of statecraft in many developed countries during the post war period. Instead, governments now seek to implement a new kind of ‘security and identity bargain’ to substitute for the insecurities and anxieties created by the erosion of the social contract. Political programs such as Blair’s Third Way or Howard’s Tampa project have become influential as neoliberal economic programs of market reform have run their course, and as governments of advanced industrial countries manifest an increasing anxiety about social solidarity, social order, and cohesiveness. This broad anxiety about social order, often embodied in political programs that emphasise a return through cultural renewal to a more secure—often mythical—idea of community.

Hence we have—especially in the English speaking world—on one side, a declining capacity to deliver social goods and on the other, the intensification of a form of a communitarian politics geared around issues of morality and culture. This cultural turn leads invariably to the marginalisation of the social and distributional conflicts associated with economic restructuring.

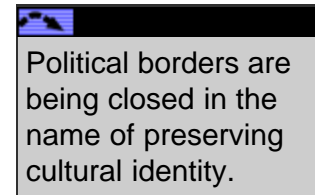
The complex relationship between globalisation and programs of reactionary modernisation is manifest in the emergence of a rather paradoxical approach to globalisation. On the one hand, reactionary modernisation embraces economic globalisation in the form of encouraging the movement of trade and capital, and on the other, it seeks to erect unprecedented barriers to the movement of people. Significantly, political borders are being closed in the name of preserving cultural identity and protecting the ‘integrity’ of the nation, which is reflected in an increasing assertion of national sovereignty. This is evident in the intensification and monitoring of national, or even regional borders (such as those of the European Union). However, this new ‘reassertion of sovereignty’ is also apparent

in the international effort to circumvent well-established international treaties for the treatment of refugees, and in the United Kingdom and Australia, in the attacks on the judiciary or other groups that seek to protect refugees or asylum seekers. Under the rubric of the reassertion of national sovereignty, many individuals are stripped of their political rights and of the very ability to make claims on the political community.

## AN ANTI-POLITICAL POLITICS

These developments highlight one of the most important motifs of the new reactionary modernism: it seeks to constitute a new form of governance that depoliticises social and economic life. The new culturalism remains strenuously anti-political in that it seeks to displace messy conflicts of politics through sanitised appeals to ideals of harmony and social cohesiveness. It depoliticises issues of inequality, social disadvantage, or even complex foreign policy issues by the obscure language of culture—whether the hard version of cultural nationalism or the touchy feely ‘culture’ of social inclusion. Inequalities become problems of cultural differences rather than intertwined with political struggles and conflict. For example, workfare policies in the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia frame issues of unemployment in terms of the lack of individual endowment of skill, social capital, or moral virtue rather than in terms of structural change and conflict. In so doing, it turns unemployment into a cultural rather than political problem.

At the same time, appeals to community lend to the new cultural politics an affinity with populist notions of democracy that are often antagonistic to representative institutions and the institutions of judicial review. Hence the attack is on ‘élites’ who in reality act as a proxy for these institutions.



But this new cultural turn remains profoundly, illiberally, ‘anti political’ in another important sense. Welfare recipients—under the rubric of mutual obligation, or asylum seekers in detention camps, or indeed, those trapped within the dragnet of increasing draconian anti-terrorist laws, or those considered to be habitual criminals—are increasingly subject to the vicissitudes of the exercise of executive discretion. At issue here is that it is not so much whether people are treated with compassion or brutality, but the suspension of the legal and judicial order that places the individual beyond the boundaries of the political community. And this force of ‘sovereign decision’—to use a term coined by Carl Schmitt (1985)—applies not just to refugees, but increasingly to others such as income support recipients under onerous forms of workfare regimes. Therefore, the ‘assertion of national sovereignty’ and the consequent marginalisation of political agency occur both inside and outside the territorial boundaries of the nation state. Citizenship becomes a privilege rather than a right.

The emergence of these new forms of culturalism is linked to the construction of new depoliticised forms of economic and social management. Clearly visible is the disturbing illiberal direction of political programs such as Howard’s Tampa project.

If the ALP is to confront this new political landscape it must surely be by contesting this illiberal direction and not by succumbing, for whatever reason strategic or otherwise, to the language of culturalism.

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