David McKnight

John Howard and the Reborn Right

The election of John Howard as Liberal leader symbolised, in a dramatic way, the inroads which the New Right has been making within traditional conservatism, as well as Australian political life. Is the New Right a passing phenomenon, "reactionary chic", as Bill Hayden calls it, or are deeper forces at work?

Introducing 'reactionary chic'

A new force is shaping the political agenda in Australia. It is radical, uncompromising and scornful of parliament. Though it has support in parliament, it primarily aims to win hearts and minds, not just numbers in party committees.

It values being in touch with The People, often speaks in their name, takes demonstrative dramatic action, and makes attention-grabbing statements. Even from those suspicious of this new force, it sometimes wins a sneaking admiration for its boldness, brazenness and preparedness to risk unpopularity in the short term, in order to stand on principle.

Ten years ago, the preceding statement could have referred to the radical left. Today, it refers to the New Right — or rather, the image they try to project.

These days, it is the New Right which is using the language of "overthrowing oppression", of "liberation and freedom" from the state and opposition to conformism.

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What's so new?

What is the New Right? Is it really new? If so, why?

It could be argued that there is really nothing new about conservatives trying to shackle unions, promoting racism and greedy, individualistic values; nothing new in wanting to privatise the public sector, nothing new in praising the mean and narrow-minded "virtues" of small business; nothing new in wanting to solve the crisis on the backs of the workers. At various times, nearly all the things articulated by John Howard have been said by Sir Robert Menzies.

Indeed, if the above list was the sum of what the New Right is all about, there would be little new. But it would be a dangerous mistake to ignore several key differences between the New Right and traditional conservatism. To take two of their best known positions: the privatising of profitable public sector enterprises, and the so-called deregulation of the labour market.

Mainstream conservatism has always scorned the "wasteful", "inefficient" public sector just as the New Right does. But, in fact, a large part of the regulatory and welfare functions of the modern state were created or nurtured by a series of conservative governments, regardless of their rhetoric.

The labour market is another case in point. Not so long ago, the whole Left regularly denounced the system of conciliation and arbitration which was (rightly for the most part) seen as a thin veil covering the employers' interests. It was "a bosses' court", pure and simple.

But today it is the New Right and a growing number of employers who support the New Right who call for the abolition of the arbitration system.
These changes in attitude stem from a number of sources, but one of the long-term reasons has been the gradually increasing strength of trade unionism, particularly in the conditions of the long boom. Unionism has become a force which employers, and particularly governments, have had to come to terms with in the long term, even though there might be day-to-day skirmishes. (In the New Right's language, "coming to terms with" means capitulation.)

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The highest expression of this has been the Accord and the greatest sin of the arbitration system, in the eyes of the New Right, was to fall in with the Accord and its principle of inflation-adjusted wages.

Another element of "newness" in the New Right is their carefully cultivated populism. This means both a "rabble rousing" style, with extravagant emotional appeals, and a more carefully planned campaign to win hearts and minds.

Of the latter, most prominent have been the rightwing think-tanks which attempt to "theorise" the ideas of the New Right, make an impact in the media and shape the political agenda. As they themselves admit, the need for such think-tanks arises because the universities, the traditional conservative think-tanks, have been "taken over" by the left.

Think-tanks such as the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) have played this role for decades, but a new element of populism is shown for example by the IPA's revamping of its magazine, *IPA Review*, which four months ago went on sale in newsagents around Australia. *Quadrant*, probably the main public organ of the traditional intellectual right, is already distributed in this way.

The populist style is conveyed well in an article by Jim Carlton in *The Bulletin* (7 May). (In retrospect, this article was an important part of the dry take-over of the Liberal Party which culminated in Howard's election. The selection of Carlton as Shadow Treasurer shows what store is set on his ideas.)

"The market is the ultimate in democracy and every consumer votes with their dollars (if they have them) for what they want."

In answer to his own question: "How do we recast the political agenda?" Carlton says:

*Ideas are important. Without ideas, nothing can happen. We paint a vivid picture of a more competitive open economy and free society we want to achieve. We describe its benefits for ordinary people. We create a sense of excitement and expectation about this better world — not only its material benefits but also its humane and civilised aspects, its fairness and effective redress of wrongs."

That kind of talk naturally leaves most of the Left cold and leads political commentators to talk of the "revival style" of the Right. (These markets are usually economic, but the idea is extended to the "market in ideas", and fields of education and health being regarded merely as markets in which the public sector competes with the private.)

The market will determine whether this factory succeeds or fails, the New Right argues; the market will decide whether this industry is efficient or not, whether this person is employed or not, whether these goods and services are priced at one dollar or one thousand dollars. Thus, the market is distorted by job creation projects, state subsidies to the arts, or to research, or to industry; by state intervention in wage determination, or in job atmosphere" inside the Liberal Party. But the significance of this populist style is that the Right-Left battle is now going to be fought publicly in a more ideological way as a battle between different philosophies.

I chose the word "philosophies" because what is at stake, and what can motivate and mobilise ordinary people on the right or left, is much more than policies. What motivates people is an appeal to their deeply held beliefs about the nature of the world, of a better world (utopias), of their place in the world, of notions of right and wrong — all of which crystallises around certain questions and policies. In this respect, Carlton's article is instructive, protection or equal opportunity laws. The market must be allowed to decide whether public schools and hospitals or public enterprises like Telecom and Australia Post, succeed or fail. The market is the ultimate in democracy and every consumer votes with their dollars (if they have them) for what they want."

In short, by constant reference to the market, the world...
The emergence of John Howard, personifying the grass roots strength of the New Right with conservatism, stems directly from Fraser's failure to 'go far enough'.

Greiner went on to add that the Liberals must not be seen as union bashers nor as anti-public servant. "Our beef is not with the unionists, it is not with unionism itself, but with the leaders of those trade unions which have shown themselves to be undisciplined ...." Greiner told the Herald on 12 August. (Just how he reconciles this with blanket bans on strikes in essential services and the arrest of pickets too shadowed by his industrial relations spokesperson, Peter Collins, is hard to fathom.)

This kind of approach parallels that made by British PM Margaret Thatcher in her attempts to appeal to trade union members over the heads of their officials. In her case, such appeals have been successful to some degree, since she has been elected twice, the last time with a large majority that included a substantial vote from blue collar workers.

In NSW politics, this strategy was also successful for Robin Askin in 1965 when he successfully appealed to traditional ALP voters.

Such a position of being "dry and warm" and striving not to appear as blindly anti-union and anti-public servant is certainly sophisticated and is also a swipe at hard-line ideologues within the New Right. Though he is not a member of the Liberal Party, Hugh Morgan must have been stung by this view. In mid-October, he took the occasion of a public speech to attack those who talk in terms of being "dry and warm".

Morgan's views on politicians generally are often scornful, as he made clear in a significant interview with the Herald's Paul Sheehan (2 March):

"You won't get change through politicians," Hugh Morgan says. "I can't think of a major political leader in the last 20 years who hasn't been crucified. Politicians can only accept what is accepted in public opinion polls. So you have to change public opinion?"

The area of social issues (the family, women, civil liberties, etc.) has also been divisive for the Right. At the federal council of the Liberal Party in July, a move by two reactionary West Australian Senators, Wilson Tuckey and Sue Knowles, to commit the Liberals to repeal the Sex Discrimination Act was defeated by a large majority which included (again) Nick Greiner, who argued strongly against "neanderthal thinking" on
women’s issues.

For some on the New Right, usually a loony minority, there is no natural or necessary link between free-market ideas and social conservatism, because one of the ideological sources of the New Right is libertarianism, which has included notions of sexual freedom and individualism, and which has led to an "anti-family" position.

In the case of Liberal leader John Howard, social conservatism goes hand-in-hand with his New Right economics, as he confirmed just after his election. In particular, Howard aims to jump on the bandwagon of the widespread male backlash against the Family Law Act to promote himself. Other measures Howard supports are income splitting for taxation purposes (which, in effect, discourages women from working); taxation deductions for child care (which could well have widespread support though it creates no more child care places and favours the rich disproportionately); and a maintenance enforcement bureau (to allow a decrease in payments to single mothers).

Even on that touchstone of the New Right, privatisation of profitable public sector enterprises, there is no unanimity. When Howard first floated this seriously in a public way, South Australian Liberal Steele Hall said he would refuse to vote for such legislation. Even heavier guns have been aimed at it, such as Queensland Racing Minister Russ Hinze, who pointed to the cross-subsidisation policy of Telecom which benefited his constituents in the bush. His views have been echoed by the nondescript leader of the NSW Nationals, Wal Murray, who called it a "mad stampede to sell off everything".

Divisions between the Liberal and National (Country) parties have always existed and there is contradictory evidence about which way the Nationals and their country constituency will jump on the free market New Right economic policies. Hinze and Murray (above) are not about to jump on the privatisation bandwagon but, by the same token, represent extreme right views on unionism and social issues. Objectively, there are many reasons why farmers and other country people should support fairly extensive government intervention, but what part rational self-interest plays, as opposed to a rag bag of racism and union-bashing in the small business/country mentality is not always straightforward.

But perhaps the most damaging division, or disagreement, is on the key issue of trade unionism and the Accord. A number of political commentators have been disappointed by the performance of the new industrial relations spokesperson Neil Brown, a Howard man.

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More significantly, business is not wholly behind the Liberals’ policies. No doubt they would like a much more compliant labour force, but achieving it involves a gamble which may prove expensive.

Again, Greiner pointed this out at the NSW Liberal conference: "Big business, despite a lot of what you hear, is really fairly comfortable with the present (wages) system." This was contrasted to the attitude of small business, for whom the Liberals have held out the possibility of their employees "opting out" of the present system. (That is, so the boss can say, "opt out of unionism and your award, or face the sack").
The attitude of big business to the Accord was reported in a major study by Professors John Niland and Dennis Turner from the University of NSW. According to the Financial Review’s Michael Stutchbury: “The study of 219 top executives concludes that Australian corporate leaders prefer the predictability and stability of the co-operative approach to industrial relations adopted by the Hawke government rather than the confrontationism of the Fraser years.”

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Many business leaders are "unenthusiastic about experimenting with alternatives (to the arbitration system) such as collective bargaining", even though they are critical of the arbitration system. As against this, there is the response of big business leaders like Robert Holmes a’Court who was "lavish in his praise" of Howard (The Australian) and Westpac’s Sir Noel Foley who threatened to withdraw finance from the Liberal Party if Howard was rebuffed in the crucial deputy leadership ballot. (The Australian, 6.9.85.)

It would be foolish, however, to become complacent about the Liberals’ inability to win immediate support on their Thatcherite industrial relations policy. They have potent allies in their struggle: small business, which represents a numerically large section of employers, and part of big business, appear fully behind them and have a great deal to benefit. As well, there is a growing and deeply rooted cynicism and dislike of unionism among a great many people, including union members. This is fed not only by a constant biased barrage from the mass media, but also from actions of sections of the union movement itself, the most notorious being the BLF and its corrupt leader Norm Gallagher.

With these allies, and with the certain support of all business as soon as they see that the Hawke government and/or the Accord is crumbling, it would be foolish to expect the short-term setbacks of Howard and Brown to become the pattern for the next two years.

**Labor, the Left and the New Right**

While the origins of the New Right spring from long term pressures mentioned earlier, their current ascendancy in the Liberal Party is also related to the direction of the ALP under Hawke and Keating.

Briefly, the Hawke-Keating faction, though their economic policies are nowhere as severe as Howard’s, talk the same language of spending restraint, deregulation and the supremacy of market forces as the New Right. In the short-term electoral sense, they have been very clever, capturing ground from the Liberals in a style reminiscent of the heyday of NSW’s Neville Wran. This has helped shift the Liberals to the right, not in the simplistic sense often assumed in the press, but by shifting the whole basis of "debate, and the political agenda, to the Right. In this more profound sense, the Hawke-Keating forces have outsmarted themselves and helped pave the way for the New Right resurgence. (By the same token, but with less impact, the left, by default, has conceded ground to the New Right and to the Hawke-Keating forces by hardly ever talking in terms of market rationality. Thus the left is more easily portrayed, with some justice, as airy-fairy idealists unable to project an alternative, and as defenders of inefficiencies in the public sector.)

Third, by discrediting policies which are deeply imbued in Laborism, such as redistribution of wealth, the Hawke-Keating forces are slowly undermining the distinct identity of Laborism and thus the core of their own support. Underlying all these attitudes is a belief that ideology can never play a role in hard-nosed politics and that people are easily conned by appeals to the "hip pocket nerve" (hence the Fraser-style pre-election tax cuts).

The hard-headed election strategists behind Hawke and Keating have reacted with glees to the new "ideological turn" in the Liberal Party. In their eyes, Howard is breaking every rule in the political book.

He is, for example, on record as saying that, in politics, "it is more important to be right than popular", and that the key to winning office is not in tailoring policies to suit the middle ground, but in winning the middle ground to your policies.

In many ways, Howard wants to develop the same kind of strategy as the Left, in form, though obviously not in content: realising he is in a minority, he sees his best chance for office coming from an extra-parliamentary campaign which aims to turn the political agenda around to the concerns of the New Right. (This sets Howard apart from other politicians because he seems to be consciously planning things this way. But, even in Australia’s recent past, parties have been brought to office as part of a tidal change in politics and culture — the 1972 and 1974 elections being examples.)

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But Labor, especially the Hawke-Keating right wing, rarely think consciously in terms of extra-parliamentary activity as part of their strategy. In this, we can measure how far the Labor Party and its leaders have travelled from the Labor Party which saw itself as part of a labour movement, in fact, as only its political wing.

It’s not easy to envisage how a left Labor Party might begin to build stronger links with the unions and social
among the Labor left and Left-supporting trade unionists, to the NSW surgeons who tried to wreck Medicare.)

"example" is the bold support which leading Liberals gave movements in a way that would benefit both. (One "example" is the bold support which leading Liberals gave to the NSW surgeons who tried to wreck Medicare.)

A refreshing view on this question came in a recent speech, the 1985 Arthur Calwell Memorial Lecture, by Brian Howe, the Minister for Social Security. He argued: Mobilisation of the broad labour movement is essential if we are to keep reforming Labor governments in power. Governments have to be kept honest. We cannot allow our Government to fall into static responses which lead to the inevitable decline and defeat of socialist governments around the world.

A Labor government needs the underlying tension between pressure and support from its constituency. Pressure to continue to involve and reform society. Support to protect those reforms against the attack from vested interests...

Partly, this mobilisation fails to occur because, even among the Labor left and Left-supporting trade unionists, there is simply not an agreed strategy for achieving major social changes in this country. When one considers that the forces for social change extend far beyond these two categories, there is even less agreement on strategy.

For this reason, the forthcoming broad left conference next Easter could play a crucial role if it simply began a real debate across the left spectrum about these questions.

The New Right itself is also forcing the left to examine its philosophies, goal and methods. This is occurring partly at an ideological level, since it is plain that the New Right is having far greater impact now than ever before, i.e. it is undermining left gains made in the progressive upsurge in the 'seventies.

But it is also happening in the field of practice, the most ominous warning being the success of Bjelke-Petersen's sacking of the SEQEB linesmen and the inability of the union movement to force their reinstatement. The debate which was recently opened by the Building Workers Industrial Union^ is painful but necessary. Faced with defeat on the SEQEB issue, a BWIU delegates meeting urged:

There is an urgent need for the unions to stop, think, regroup and plan a long term strategy based on a scientific analysis of the political and industrial situation rather than on gut reactions which we believe have influenced past strategies and tactics.

This view was backed by a statement of Communist Party activists meeting in Brisbane in response to the BWIU's statement. The CPA meeting said: "Any understanding of the SEQEB struggle must be seen in the light of Queensland as a testing ground for the New Right in Australia. The results of this struggle will have profound effects nationally in the future. In this context, the retreat by many state unions to federal awards should be seen as, at best, the attainment of a temporary sanctuary — as buying time to prepare for the continuing onslaught."

The ascendancy of the New Right within the Liberal Party and the strengthening mobilisation of the "Broad Right" in society at large must be met by a Left which is also prepared to transform itself.

This means, for instance, trying to understand why the ideas of the New Right strike a chord in the experience of ordinary people. It's just not good enough, in my view, to argue that essentially this boils down to lies and/or manipulation by the media. When the New Right rails against the bureaucracy of the state, this can accord with the experience of many people through their schooling, their travel on public transport, dealing with government departments. Something similar exists with trade unions.

"This means .... trying to understand why the ideas of the New Right strike a chord in the experience of ordinary people. It's just not good enough .... to argue that essentially this boils down to lies and/or manipulation by the media."

To defend such institutions as they are, without acknowledging the need for improvements, simply means that the left will become a stationary target for the Right.

I argued previously that the changing nature of the state and of the trade union movement and the emergence of the social movements caused a crisis, then forced a renewal for the Right.

The same changing reality is presently causing a crisis for the Left."

The renewal of the Right has seen them reach for the classic eighteenth century liberalism of Adam Smith. But the left cannot solve its crisis by a similar retreat to dogmatic "fundamentals" of Marxism, but by doing what Marx, in his day, did. That is, drawing from the existing movement of utopian socialism and fashioning a new scientific socialism appropriate for his times."

That, in the end, is one of the major long term tasks of the Left in fighting the New Right.

Footnotes on page 41.
Wilfred Burchett continued from page 15.

Mr. Manne may believe that he can dismiss McCormack's work by hurling at him the pejorative but meaningless phrase "neo-Stalinist reading of post-war Asian history". I have never met Gavan McCormack and know only of his book Cold War Hot War and his co-authorship of a book on Japan, but even this small acquaintance with his work suggests that the task of demolishing his historical work is far beyond Mr. Manne's capacities. That is obviously why he shirks the task of trying to demolish McCormack's historical work by making, for example, a serious critique of his opponent's most impressive book about the Korean War, instead choosing to spend months on a futile attempt to blacken Wilfred Burchett's name, using the same weapons of character assassination and abuse against McCormack in the process.

The choice of such ignoble means in controversy is forced by his abject inability to make such a critique of McCormack's interpretation. This would require an explanation of why American policy has failed so lamentably in Asia ever since the original decision to support the corrupt Chiang Kai Shek regime in China. It would require explanation for the absurdities of America's China policy in keeping that country out of the United Nations for almost a quarter-century, for its reverses in Korea and Viet Nam. Equally, it would be necessary to explain some of the US "successes" in Asia; for example, its CIA-inspired overthrow of Sihanouk in Cambodia and the million or more victims of the Suharto coup in Indonesia.

Above all, it would require rationalisation of the irrational. Australia's slavish support for American policies throughout the barren years of foreign policy under Menzies, Holt, Gorton and McMahon. Manne found this task too daunting; it seemed easier to attack a dead man.

But he fails miserably in this also. It is safe to say that Wilfred Burchett will be remembered long after Manne's diatribe against him is forgotten. It is not necessary to claim that Burchett was invariably correct in his reportage on every occasion or from every place to prove that his body of work, including both on-the-spot reportage and his many books, will prove invaluable for future historians and for those who seek to understand Asia's role in the second half of the 20th Century, especially those historical events in Asia which the *Quadrant* school finds impossible to explain and gallling to accept.

**FOOTNOTES**

1. Had Mr. Manne not been so one-eyed in perusing ASIO's records to sift out the traitor Burchett, he could have read the Australian Security Report detailing the bitter conflict between Black and white American servicemen during the Second World War, precisely because of racial persecution. This appears in the ASIO papers (e.g., A373, item 2837).

2. Alan Winnington was a British leftwing journalist also covering Korea. Winnington and Burchett jointly wrote several pamphlets at this time.


Laurie Aarons is a former national secretary of the Communist Party of Australia who has concentrated on research and writing since retiring from that position in 1976.

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**Footnotes for John Howard and the Reborn Right.**

1. Of course, if the New Right was not basically different from traditional conservatism, it would be hard to explain why its emergence in Australia (and Britain) has been preceded by savage fights within the Liberal (and Tory) parties.

2. The question of a parallel development, the growth of narrow self-interest based on locality, craft, grading and so on, which profoundly subverts class solidarity is a related phenomenon given too little attention on the left. The days when the words "left" and "militant" were synonymous in the trade union movement are long gone, and this is an indication of this shift.

3. A market obviously does have a kind of (ruthless) efficiency and few would want to completely shield public enterprises from its operation. Such a shield can mean that, to a degree, ordinary consumers' views and freedom to choose can easily be disregarded. This is most obvious in the economies of the USSR and Eastern Europe in which the market plays no appreciable role (except in Hungary and Yugoslavia) and its place is taken by bureaucratic planning.

4. A "wet" Liberal, Senator Chris Puplick, who replied to Carlton, characterised the debate as that between "mechanists and moralists"—too much of Jim Carlton's analysis is preoccupied with a commitment to *systems*: systems management and systems efficiency. There is a belief that, provided we have the mechanics of the system right, then the outcomes, however they are, will be satisfactory and acceptable. Liberalism to me requires a far higher moral content and purpose.

5. "The market is not an end in itself," he argues. "At all times the ultimate test must be whether or not systems, policies or practices actually contribute to or restrict the development of individual growth and freedom." (Bulletin, 4 June.) Economic growth and increasing personal deprivation can occur at the same time, he argues, despite the free marketeers' blithe assertions to the contrary.

6. The alternative to the New Right renewal is, of course, the clearer emergence of a liberal-democratic strand within the establishment, on social issues at least. In a neat way this is symbolised by the politics of the Australian, which consciously propagandises for the New Right day after day; and The Age/Sydney Morning Herald axis which represents a more liberal, relaxed attitude.

7. See *Quadrant*, March 1985 for an example of the clashes within the Right. Robert Manne virtually accuses Blainey of racism; another *Quadrant* writer, Patrick O'Brien, challenges some of the looser attitudes of "Mad Dog" Morgan to Australian history and to the environment. John Stone attacks traditionalist economist Colin Clark for being soft on wage cutting and deficit slashing.


9. Craig McGregor had this to say in the *SMH* (7 September): "Extremist positions are not generally popular in the pragmatic desert of Aussie politics. But what the Hawke-Keating axis has done, for all its electoral success, has been to detach the ALP somewhat from its traditional union-reformist-Left base. In the United States a similar process has been the emergence of a hardhat, working-class conservativism which has detached itself from its traditional party (the Democrats) and swung over to the Reagan brand of the New Right."

10. See *Tribune*, 23 October, 1985 for the BWU delegates statement; see 6 November for interview with John Devereaux, ETU president, taking a different view, and also the CPA activists statement.

11. For a fuller development, see my recent booklet *Socialism in Australia — Toward Renewal?* (From PO Box A716, Sydney South 2000 for $3.)

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