The Australian Right's New Class Discourse and the Construction of the Political Community

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The recent publication of Michael Thompson's Labor Without Class and Katherine Betts' The Great Divide has re-focused attention upon claims that there exists a powerful "new class" in Australian society comprised of tertiary-educated, left-wing activist intellectuals, trade unionists, public servants and lobbyists. This paper provides a background to the thesis of the new class, arguing that it constitutes the central organising idea of a new class discourse, which encompasses such ideas as 'political correctness', 'special interests' and the 'guilt industry'. Both the thesis of the new class and new class discourse are key discursive and conceptual features of contemporary right-wing political thought in Australia. As rhetorical devices employed in the context of the hegemonic struggles within Australian society of the 1990s, new class discourse de-legitimates the interests of the labour movement and other social movements, thus working to exclude these groups from the sphere of public discourse and the legitimate political community.

From the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, the term "new class" has been used by many divergent writers and in many different contexts. Bakunin, for example predicted that a Marxist revolution would result in:

the reign of scientific intelligence... a new class, a new hierarchy of real and pretended scientists and scholars... of the State engineers who will constitute the new privileged scientific-political class.

John Kenneth Galbraith used the term to apply to the rise of a non-labouring educated knowledge class in America and in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s a number of left-wing Eastern European dissidents such as Milovan Djilas and Ivan Szelényi, used the term to refer to the domination of the European Communist states by a Communist Party-based bureaucratic elite. However, in order to understand the contemporary manifestation of the idea of the new class within the Australian Right, it is first necessary to examine its historical heritage amongst the American neo-conservative intellectuals during the early 1970s. The term neo-conservative refers to a specific group of American intellectuals - such as Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Norman Podhoretz and Daniel Patrick Moynihan - who, during the 1960s and 1970s, articulated a particular type of Cold War anti-communist conservatism. This motivated the neo-conservatives, on the one hand, to critique what was seen as a failure of American liberalism - which resulted in the radicalism of the 1960s and challenges to the authority of major institutions of American society - but on the other hand to defend the cultural and political institutions which, they perceived, formed the foundations of American liberal democracy.

The thesis of the new class became a central component of this neo-conservative project. In 1971 and 1972, a number of articles appeared in the journals Commentary and The Public Interest - which continue to be key sites for the articulation of neo-conservative thought - expounding the idea of the new class. The theme of these articles was that a "new class" of the former educated professional middle class had grown and was continuing to grow in the United States. This class was politically to the left, antagonistic towards the major and traditional institutions of American society and using its dominance within the public sphere to pursue its own interests at the expense of the national or public interests.

Even if members of the new class believed that they were working in the best interests of the public, it is argued that the general appeal of the new class to the public interest is a mask for sectional interests. The neo-conservative authors attribute to the new class a particularly "aggressive" and "self-righteous" style of political discourse and, importantly, stress the lack of empathy and cynicism displayed by the new class towards the common American worker. Although there were differences in accounting for precisely who belongs to this "new class" (the term is variously used to refer to "self-designated intellectuals", employees of the public welfare sector and their trade unions and "educated, prosperous people, members of the professional and technical intelligentsia, and their wives and children, academics and their students") all the authors demonstrated antipathy towards it.

These ideas recurred throughout the 1970s and 1980s not only in Commentary and The Public Interest, but also in neo-conservative books, anthologies and other publications. The new class thesis formed the basis for a critique of sixties radicalism as well as policy proposals aimed at promoting equality of outcome and opportunity within American society.

This thesis proved influential amongst Australian right wing intellectuals. The first major article by the Australian right that used the term new class appears to be Bob Browning's "Opposition business fails to see" printed in The Bulletin in November 1981. In it, Browning argues that a new class is developing in Australia, similar to that identified by the American neo-conservatives in the United States. Browning's new class is anti-capitalist in intent, highly organised and existing within public institutions; in this article, he attempts to ground the actions of the new class within the structures of "post-industrial capitalism", arguing that it is in the interests of the new class to attack private enterprise in order to legitimate their own positions within the public sphere. To Browning, the major site of anti-capitalist organisation in the late twentieth century has shifted from blue collar trade unions to the white collar professional publicly employed middle class:

...commercially non-productive white collar sections of the community which are the bastions of welfare agencies, tertiary education institutions and the more obscurely functioning sections of the Public service.

By 1983, it seems, the idea of the new class had gained a substantial following among the Australian Right, as is evidenced by Robert Manne's impromptu speech at the launch of The New Conservatism in Australia:

...by the mid-seventies another layer had been added [to Australian society]... the so-called "new class" of university graduates, the products of the rapidly expanded tertiary education of the 'sixties. They were now present throughout many of the key institutions of our society, and were dominant in those - like teaching and journalism - where moral and social values were defined and disseminated. Their enthusiasms, certainties and causes were everywhere to be found. Their hatreds - America, Capitalism, Moral Puritanism, Anti-Communism - were expressed rancorously and consensually.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the thesis of the new class
has been employed across the spectrum of right-wing thought; by conservatives such as Santamaria and Coleman, economic liberals such as McGuinness, from within the Labor Party by Peter Walsh and Michael Thompson as well as by the extreme-Right populist supporters of Pauline Hanson.

The thesis of the new class gave cohesion to ideas that had been fermenting amongst the Australian Right for a number of years. Firstly, it tapped into already existing sympathies and antagonisms and provided a structural explanation for some of the major changes that Australian society had experienced during the 1960s and 1970s, specifically the campus radicalism of the 1960s, the role of intellectuals in post-World War Two Western society. Secondly, it complemented core ideas of the growing economic liberal world view.

Like the American neo-conservatives, many within the Australian Right were concerned with providing an explanation for the campus radicalism of the 1960s. Conservatives were critical of what they perceived as an irrational and indulgent rejection of the traditional authority of Australia's individualistic, capitalist British heritage. The protest movement against the Vietnam War, the Springbok tour of Australia and campus radicalism in general were explained in these terms. John Carroll, for example, explains the radicalism of the sixties in terms of a failure of the traditional structures of authority, resulting in the middle class university students identifying with the "larger than life" New Left figures such as Mao Tse Tung and Che Guevara. As is evident from the earlier statement by Manne, the generation of campus radicals who graduated from universities around Australia in the 1960s and early 1970s, taking their radical ideologies with them into the institutions of the public service, the media, academia and trade unions, is viewed as the constituting the beginning of the new class. Lachlan Chipman's discussion of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation anticipates this new class thesis:

On a typically hot and humid Sydney evening late in 1980, the audience for the ABC's major television news service watched an angry group of unionists shouting, or more precisely swearing, at the latest salary recommendation of the new South Wales Industrial Relations Commission... viewed saw and heard a foul-mouthed rabble of sloppily dressed and grubbily obese unionists... its leadership currently is very much more to the left, and militantly so, than most of the others. It embodies the ideological divisions of the far left, and is increasingly under the control of the 'new left' generation which demonstrated, occupied, defied, confronted, and in many cases, cheated its way through Australian universities and colleges of higher education in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As the intellectual mentors to the generation of campus radicals, intellectuals too have been apportioned blame for the failure of traditional authority represented by the sixties. In 1974, John J. Ray put this position regarding intellectuals:

It is their students who go out and fill jobs in the public service and the media. Many business leaders and politicians who supposedly represent the worker are nowadays university graduates. So after three or more years indoctrination, it is no wonder that people who have been through university think that the only intellectually defensible opinions are radical ones.

This sentiment built upon earlier critiques of intellectuals as being sympathetic towards communism. During the Vietnam War, this resulted in the criticism being levelled at many left-wing academics that they were blind to the atrocities of communist regimes, yet were prepared to criticise vehemently the governments of their own countries.

The rise of economic liberalism within the Right also provided a space for the articulation of the new class thesis. Economic liberalism is concerned with critiquing the Keynesian state from a perspective of the primacy of the freedom of the individual. Its set of policy proposals have revolved around deregulation of government services, privatisation and an attack upon the power of trade unions. The underlying premises of the economic-liberal world view variously derive their inspiration, if not theoretical basis from such thinkers as Friedrich von Hayek, James Buchanan and the Public Choice School, and Milton Friedman. A brief examination of the work of these thinkers reveals that the thesis of the new class is complimentary to their arguments.

The project of the Public Choice School has been referred to by many of its adherents as the "politics of economics". It is an application of the principles of neo-classical economics to the field of political inquiry and relies upon a view of the individual as a utility maximizer, who pursues this utility maximization rationally. Tullock and Buchanan transpose this view of the individual onto governmental structures, such as governmental departments and regulatory authorities. Thus, bureaucratic activity is reduced to the self-interest of powerful bureaucrats. Mancur Olson also critiques group political activity, theorising that large groups are unable to represent the interests of their members, despite what claims may be made by them to the contrary. Similarly, von Hayek argues that, contrary to the pronouncements made by governments and supporters of Keynesian style state intervention, governments are unable to satisfy the multitude of demands and preferences of its citizens, and indeed are unable to ascertain what these preferences might be. Thus, these economic liberal theories echo the themes, later articulated within the new class thesis, of the growth of self-serving interest groups and bureaucracies, typically funded by public money. Milton and Rose Friedman, in fact, acknowledge their debt to the American neo-conservatives and use the term "new class" to refer to:

...government bureaucrats, academics whose research is supported by government funds or who are employed in government financed 'think-tanks', staffs of the many so-called 'general interest' or 'public policy' groups, journalists and others in the communications industry.

These approaches to economics and politics formed the intellectual core of the growing collection of adherents to economic-liberalism within Australia.

Thus the new class thesis was able to be accommodated within the intellectual milieu of the Australian Right in the early to mid eighties. It complemented both the conservative and the neo-liberal world view in Australia. For the neo-liberal, it provided a historical framework for the critique of the role of the state and interest groups in Australian society, for the conservative it offered an explanation for the changes and conflicts in Australian cultural attitudes and institutions that were occurring by the mid-1980s. During the 1980s and into the nineteen nineties, one of the defining features of right-wing political discourse in Australia has been the sometimes bitter conflict between, broadly, economic liberalism and liberal conservatism. Despite this conflict, the new class thesis, although predominantly employed by conservatives, has been accommodated within both world views.

New class discourse

The importance of the new class thesis lies beyond its specific articulation by various thinkers on the right. The concept of the new class informs a number of critiques of the state, intellectuals, new social movements and trade unions. Indeed, it forms the central organising concept of a new class discourse that includes such rhetorical devices as "political correctness", "special interests", the "guilt industry" and the "industrial relations
"Political correctness" is the most successful popular manifestation of new class discourse. Although originally formulated as an ironic term within the American new left, "political correctness" became a key rhetorical feature of the American Right's portrayal of a "crisis" on US university campuses which revolved around an ideological struggle, where radical left-wing, feminist, gay and minority academics (the former radicals of the sixties), having gained control of departments, faculties and administrations, disregarded the ideals of traditional American education and abused their power to foist their own ideology upon the young minds of America. As with the thesis of the new class, the rhetoric and associated concepts behind "political correctness" were translated into the context of the Australian Right. The terms "political correctness" and "PC" have come to be applied as a domination of public discourse by tertiary educated left-wing minorities whose opinions do not reflect those of mainstream Australia, and this theme has been popularised through the mass media.

In the concept of "special interests", also, is the underlying notion of the new class. The term has been used particularly with reference to those groups who are perceived to have had power in influencing the agenda of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments; groups such as non-profit or quasi non-government organisations promoting such interests as feminism, multiculturalism, Aboriginal rights and environmentalism. The term itself conveys the sense that these interests are distant from the concerns of mainstream Australia, that they have had a 'special' power with relation to policy makers and that those who promote such special interests, view theirs as deserving of more attention than other interests, rights or knowledge claims. Significantly, since forming government, John Howard has used the idea of "special interests" as a key concept in his rhetorical arsenal against the trade union movement. In the coalition government's ongoing process of industrial relations changes, the trade union leadership have been labelled as "special interests", and indeed, these special interests of the trade union leadership are equated with demands of the trade union movement (i.e. the demands, claims and campaigns of trade unions are reducible to the interests of the union leadership). Similarly, the concept of the "guilt industry" is one which was articulated within right-wing political culture during the 1980s, and currently forms a part of the rhetorical arsenal of the Coalition government. The term reflects the twin notions of middle class guilt and the economic self-interest of those employed on public money as advocates for Aboriginal people as being the primary motivating forces for contemporary advocacy of issues such as Aboriginal land rights.

As will be argued later, one of the strengths of the new class thesis is its lack of specificity, enabling it to be applied in a number of different contexts. This discursively strong and analytical weakness. Firstly, there is little agreement as to who precisely is a member of this new class. Is it, "... those commercially non- productive white collar sections of the community which are the bastions of welfare agencies, tertiary education institutions and the more obscurely functioning sections of the Public Service."? Is it "... teachers, social workers, reformist lawyers (including those working in, and on, indigenous communities), planners of various types, basically... those who are already on a government payroll"? Does it extend into the private sphere, as McGuinness suggests? The major analytical failing of the new class thesis is that the key determinant of new class membership is not to be found in social location, but rather in ideological orientation. Ironically, it this quasi-Marxist conception of class consciousness that is used to define the new class. As Daniel Bell concludes in his reflection upon the new class thesis:

In short, if there is any meaning to the idea of a "new class" it cannot be located in social structural terms; it must be found in cultural attitudes. It is a mentality, not a class. For the notion of class to have meaning requires that membership criterion of that class be applied universally within social strata. It is clear that across any particular strata that could come under the label of 'new class', there are many who do not share the key ideological characteristics ascribed to them (for example, across the public service, within teacher unions, within the trade union leadership or within the professional middle class).

Therefore, in the context of the new class thesis, the term "class", is, it seems, a convenient rather than descriptive label. It suggests collusion, individual self-interest and group self-interest; ideas that are also implicit in the terms "special interests" and "guilt industry". Thus, what are really at stake in terms of the new class thesis, and indeed the discourse of the new class, are not claims about a class, but rather claims about an elite, and crucially, an elite with a particular ideological character. The ideological character of these elites is left-wing and vehemently opposed to both traditional Australian values and the present values of mainstream Australia. Policies emanating from these elites are derived from the elites' interest in furthering their own privilege, and they are elites because they wield political power — relative to the power of the people they represent — through their organisational positions or by being agenda-setters within the public service, the media and government.

Although there is not the space within this article to offer a thorough critique of the claims of the new class discourse, a number of areas for further exploration can be suggested which, if correct, undermine its major contentions. Firstly, the discourse itself deserves attention. As a discourse, it is self-referential, and little empirical evidence is used to justify knowledge claims within the discourse. It is also inconsistent in that terms such as new class, political correctness and special interests are applied arbitrarily to many different and disparate individuals and ideas. Boris Frankel puts it succinctly when he writes:

Culturally, 'new class' is a synonym for class betrayal, hedonistic narcissism and nihilism. Structurally, it is a synonym for all that inhibits economic growth and the development of Australia as a market society. Politically it is a synonym for those social forces which, electorally, the major parties cannot afford to offend, despite the fact that they are supposedly subverting society.

In other words, 'new class' is a shorthand code for a range of right-wing attitudes towards the welfare state, contemporary culture, Australian history and national identity, Aboriginal rights, feminism, environmentalism and multiculturalism. The problems and inconsistencies with the term "political correctness" for example are well documented.

Secondly, the claims implicit within the discourse must be evaluated. There is a sense in which the underlying claims of new class discourse do have resonance, and that is in the make up of the leadership of the new social movements, Labor Party and trade unions — however the discourse obscures a thorough understanding of the phenomenon. Burgmann and Milner, for example, describe the ways in which the leadership of the new social movements are dominated by the middle class, and to a large extent, express middle class interests. Importantly, it is the material interests
of the middle class which Burgmann and Milner are referring to, rather than the radical anti-capitalist agenda ascribed to the new class. It is possible to take this analysis further and evaluate the new social movements as well as the labour movement in terms of radical agendas and radical policy outcomes. The appropriateness of the term special interests in relation to the environment movement, for example, deserves attention. For whilst this movement undoubtedly contains individuals and groups who profess a radical anti-capitalist and anti-materialist agenda, the concrete policy initiatives which reflect such an agenda are minimal. Further, like other social movements, it is a diverse movement accommodating vastly different ideologies and approaches to politics. Thus, as Christopher Lasch writes, it can be concluded that:

The hope that “new social movements” would take its place in the struggle against capitalism, which briefly sustained the left in the late seventies and early eighties, has come to nothing. Not only do the new social movements – feminism, gay rights, welfare rights, agitation against racial discrimination – have nothing in common, but their only coherent demand aims at inclusion in the dominant structures rather than at a revolutionary transformation of social relations. 46

Similarly, the role of the trade unions under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments can be evaluated against the claims about the power of the radical special interests of labour. As Matthews argues, major employer groups were successful in transforming the agenda of the Accord to one supportive of a shift towards enterprise bargaining.47 The Accord tied the trade union movement into a role of responsible consultant to government and thus into a period characterised by consensus rather than confrontation on the part of the unions.44 Such a strategy allowed the ALP to maintain its trade union base of financial and electoral support as well as shedding its socialist image in favour of an image as responsible and equitable managers of a capitalist economy.49 As Paul Kelly writes:

Australia’s political debate during the late 1980s saw Labor and Coalition, business and unions, opinion makers and economic institutions, agreed upon the direction – the need for a more competitive, flexible, high saving economy, less reliant upon state regulation, border protection and arbitral machinery. The real division was about the timing, income redistribution and methodology of the transformation.49

Rather than trade unions exerting their muscle over government, the Accord was an example of trade unions tying their fortunes to the maintenance of a Labor government. This led to concessions by both unions and government, and the results of the Accord owe more to the dominant economic structuring power of particular market relations than they do to the power of new class special interests.

**Constructing the political community – new class and public discourse**

The discourse of the new class is a discourse in the Foucauldian sense that it constitutes reality as well as reflecting upon it.48 Gramsci shows how power is exercised through cultural forms and that these cultural forms and the public sphere are sites of constant political struggle to construct hegemonies.49 When new class discourse is considered in its popular manifestations, it is apparent that it forms part of this political struggle. It constitutes reality in the sense that it creates its own objects and to a lesser extent, its own subjects; in this case, a set of left-wing elites [objects] who exist in contrast to the constructed image of the battler or mainstream Australia [subjects].53

“Special interests” and “political correctness” connote subjectivity, ideological bias and a removal from the ordinary.

The “new class” and the “guilt industry” connote the collusion and power of a minority at the expense of the majority. New class discourse thus re-works the classical Australian image of the “battlers versus the elites”.48 In doing this, it positions trade unions, new social movements, and others critical of conservative and neo-liberal agendas, outside of the mainstream. The effect is to de-legitimize the knowledge claims of these groups. What constitutes the legitimate political community then, is defined through a process of exclusion.

With the forums of public discourse increasingly monopolised by large corporate interests, the question of who speaks on behalf of the Australian community, and which communities’ voices and interests are represented is a pertinent one. For the labour movement, it is a particular immediacy. As Gramsci demonstrates, ideological leadership is a necessary element of any hegemonic process, and it is precisely this kind of leadership which is being pursued by John Howard and the Coalition government in the context of their industrial relations agenda.39 As the claims of trade unions are de-legitimated through the discourse of the new class, it is the image of the individual worker, who will be able to profit, free form the stifling interests of the trade union leadership under a system of Australian Workplace Agreements, that is promoted by the federal government. This hegemonic project undermines an identification of Australian workers with the labour movement in favour of individualism and an identification with the vague, but antithetical image of the battler.

The new class is an imprecise term at best; at worst it is arbitrary. But it is this imprecision which allows it to be mobilised in different contexts. As this discourse de-legitimates knowledge claims and the rights claims of labour, social movements and minority groups within Australian society, it narrows the scope of legitimate public discourse. In doing this it also narrows the scope of the political community, and contributes to an impoverished rather than a vibrant democratic society.

**Endnotes**


Although later embracing Cold-War anti-communism, a number of neo-conservatives, most notably Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, Seymour Martin Lipset and Nathan Glazer, began their intellectual life on the non-communist, anti-Stalinist left in America (see P. Steinfels, The Neo-Conservatives; the men who are changing America’s politics, Simon & Schuster, 1979, pp. 26-27, 81-83, 161). They thus shared an intellectual heritage with the likes of David Bazelon, a later proponent of the new class thesis from a left-liberal perspective (D. Bazelon, Power in America; the politics of the new class, Plume Books, 1971, New York), James Burnham, whose Managerial Revolution (J. Burnham, The Managerial Revolution, Penguin, London, 1962) echoed a number of themes of the neo-conservatives new class thesis as well as Max Schachtman, who in the 1940s described referred to the new class as a key element of the new bureaucratic collectivism of the Soviet Union (see Briggs, op. cit.).


Moynihan, op. cit., p. 84.


Kemp, for example, highlights the influence of neo-conservative ideas and journals upon the Australian Right (D. Kemp, ‘Liberalism & Conservatism in Australia since 1944’, in B. Head & J. Walter, Intellectual Movements and Australian Society, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 348-349).


45 V. Burgmann and A. Milner, 'Intellectuals and the new social movements', in R. Kuhn and T. O'Lincoln, Class and Class Conflict in Australia, Longman Australia, Melbourne, 1996.


48 See Kelly, The End of Certainty: power, politics & business in Australia, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1992, pp. 63-65. Indeed, where confrontation did occur, it was the Labor government that went on the offensive and prevailed. See Kelly, op. cit., p. 259.

49 ibid., p. 283.

50 ibid., p. 271.


