Joh's March on Canberra?

Early in February the Murdoch press was first to herald signs of a drive on federal politics by Queensland's seventeen-year premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen. One "exclusive" phone-in poll in the Sydney Telegraph claimed that 70 percent of Australians wanted Joh in Canberra; later in the month, more reputable polling methods reduced this figure to only 60 percent.

It was one of the great symbolic moments of media reporting: soon enough it was impossible to tell whether the media was leading Joh on, or Joh was leading the media on. Not since the Philippines state television station had formed the strategic battleground of Cory's "revolution" twelve months earlier had the inter-relationship of the media and mass politics been so evocatively represented. Some on the left chose to interpret this in conspiratorial terms: we were being "brainwashed" yet again. Rather, it was a case of the electronic media in particular, with its instinctive populist touch, coming to embrace with Australia's greatest populist politician.

By mid-February, Joh's campaign which, at first, the "quality" press had treated with amused contempt, was definitely to be taken seriously. The leaders of the official Opposition responded with escalating threats (federal National Party leader Ian Sinclair recalled Germany in 1933). Then federal National MPs met and appeared to endorse Joh's crusade against (among other things) their leader. Thereafter Sinclair, as if stricken by some dreadful irrational disease, was treated by the media as a doomed man. Soon, Queensland National MPs were coerced into putting a unilateral end to the Coalition: at the time of writing (early March) control of the National Party, and thus of the future prospects of the Coalition, hung in the balance.

Of course, it still remains unlikely that the entire structure of the party system will split asunder to provide Joh with the Prime Ministership — although it is far from an impossibility. Indeed, were Joh's "impossible dream" to begin to take more tangible form, his popularity as a "maverick" might suffer in consequence. But in his primary objective — the refashioning of the climate of politics at the conservative end of the spectrum, in the run-up to the next election — he has been spectacularly successful. And, in the process, the whole arena of political debate has taken another great lurch to the right.

There are two distinct aspects of the current political situation which have helped to create this astonishing political phenomenon. One we could call a "crisis of representation"; the other a crisis of popular appeal, or of mass politics — which follows from the first.

In early February the ABC television program Four Corners ran a detailed report on the Bankstown by-election in Sydney, where support for the ALP (and, interestingly, for the coalition too) ran at an historic low. The camera crew interviewed suburban families, groups of young people, and pensioners: the overwhelming message was that the Labor Party and, in fact, parties in general, no longer represented its electorate; the ties of appeal between party and passive supporter had become unprecedentedly slim.

This is hardly a uniquely Australian phenomenon: indeed, it has been noted by social observers abroad for some years now. But, in the Australian case, it was concealed for quite some time by apparently undisturbed "traditional" conservatism during the Fraser years. The impetus has rather been the Hawke government's restless search for a role as a "natural government" of the crisis, arbitrating between the various social actors but actively representing none. As we all know, this has now led to the ALP's "traditional" constituencies becoming perilously unstuck. It is by no means clear any longer to the government itself, let alone its electorate, exactly what it "stands for". But the official opposition has proved itself singularly incapable of fashioning itself a constituency or constituencies on this alienated ground. Where the "New Right" in Britain articulated popular discontents around the welfare state, and the American New Right has manoeuvred on the ground of the crisis of the family and traditional values with aplomb, their Australian cousins have talked of market forces and the sovereign right to manage: hardly inspiring stuff.
Into both of these historic vacuums Joh has leapt as into the breach. On the one hand he demonstrates his disdain for all of the traditional parties — including his own. He has set about single-mindedly breaking up the forces of representation on which the conventions of parliamentary sovereignty are supposed to rest. He talks of the Coalition as of a passing phantasm, or as an obstacle rather than a vehicle to mass appeal. And, most strangely of all (particularly for the “quality” press), the public opinion of the fragmented parties rises with every blow.

On the other hand, he brushes aside the purported “responsibility” of the political slogans of the orthodox right. Where Howard speaks the impoverished rhetoric of economic “rationalism” (a telling phrase), Joh has amassed a potent repertoire of populist images — strong-man politician and father-figure, a commitment to a “traditionalist” morality, a vivid portrayal of the average taxpayer as the put-upon “little man” (sic), and a deep reservoir of implicit racism. This is all the more effective precisely because it is an unarticulated (and thus apparently inarticulate) ideological appeal: Joh’s popularity lies in fact in the very ambiguity of his political appeals, in the true populist tradition. In the same way, Joh’s notorious inability “to talk clear English” is, in itself, a part of the contradictory, unformed character of populist rhetoric.

The precise nature of populism (if that is not a contradiction in terms) is something which has always been something of a worry to the left. Movements like fascism, which genuinely articulate popular currents, but in extreme reactionary directions, have always seemed difficult to reconcile to our conceptions of their class basis. Joh’s particular brand of populism is, in addition, something rather new to this country. We have had our populist “charismatics” before — Jack Lang is the prime example, and perhaps the closest but rarely in such a transparently anti-rational guise. If the Joh phenomenon demonstrates anything, it is that we are dramatically lacking in empathy and imagination about how what we think of as “ideology” actually works. The only problem is that Joh may not lie down in time to become a convenient case study.

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