THE MORAL MEETS THE NEW: Alliances on the radical right

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Up until the last few months it might almost have seemed that Australia was going to remain free of any concerted mobilisation of New Right forces, unlike the UK or USA. There, since the elections of Thatcher and Reagan, the rhetoric and politics of what has variously been called neo-liberalism, libertarianism, neo-conservatism, monetarism, supply-side economics or just plain Thacherism or Reaganomics have virtually dominated economic debate and provided the rationale for rightwing assaults on Keynesianism, "big government" and the welfare state. Similarly, the backlash against the legacy of the "permissive" sixties has thrown into prominence the likes of Mary Whitehouse and Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority. Their crusades against pornography, abortion and homosexuality have been the moral arm of the movement, fighting to protect the family from the ravages of feminism and sexual liberation and to restore authority, discipline and decency.

Recently, however, the Australian media have given extensive coverage to a group of business leaders belonging to the H.R. Nicholls Society who have been dubbed the New Right. Prominent among them are Andrew Hay, Chairman of the Australian Federation of Employers, Charles Copeman of Peko-Wallsend, Hugh Morgan of Western Mining, and ex-head of Treasury, John Stone. The focus of their attack is union power and particularly the arbitration system, and their aim is the complete dismantling of the present industrial relations system and a free and deregulated labour market. Already they have achieved considerable successes — most of the major union defeats suffered during the past year or so have been credited to the efforts of various H.R. Nicholls members — Mudginberri, the Queensland power dispute, the Dollar Sweets and Seymour abattoir disputes in Victoria, and the recent sackings by Peko-Wallsend at Robe River.

Union-busting, though, is not the only purpose of these economic "drys". In 1984, Hugh Morgan argued that miners have divine right to any resources on Aboriginal land and that this, being conferred by God, had automatic precedence over any Aboriginal claims to land. They echo their British counterparts in
advocating deregulation of the private sector and privatisation of government-owned enterprise such as Telecom, Australia Post, OTC and TAA. These policies, of course, are coupled with demands for a reduction in the size of state bureaucracies which would enable taxation to be minimised.

There are very substantial gains in terms of economic efficiency to be had from the development of a competitive environment, with privatisation acting as a supplementary weapon designed to engineer further competitive gains and to wind back the size of the bloated public sector.

Andrew Hay

Public attention to the New Right, then, has focused on this small but very powerful group and its activities and aims in the economic sphere. This is hardly surprising, given their prominence in the business sector and the potential economic and political clout afforded by their positions. Likewise, media current affairs coverage over recent years has centred increasingly on "hard" economic issues as if this is the "real stuff" of public debate. It would be very easy to assume that New Right activity in Australia is limited to those questions of government intervention in the market and free enterprise.

In fact, a number of groups and organisations have been energetically mobilising for some years over the same moral issues which have preoccupied their counterparts in the UK and USA. If trends there are anything to go by, we could anticipate that issues connected with the family, sexuality and law and order will be introduced squarely onto the public agenda in the future. Very likely, a Liberal-NCP victory at the next federal election would see a resurgence of demands for laws to control things like abortion, pornography, homosexuality and drugs, and for the repeal of the ALP's Sex Discrimination and Affirmative Action legislation.

Just as union bashing has been in the vanguard of the New Right economic offensive partly because it appeals to the "commonsense" beliefs of most Australians that unions have too much power, the sort of issues pursued by the moral authoritarian arm of the New Right have the potential to attach to some deep-seated fears and anxieties in people. This is precisely the sort of strategy that moral campaigners pursue: obviously, fears of an AIDS epidemic could very easily be whipped up and manipulated by scare tactics to justify repressive anti-homosexual laws; concern about corruption in the police and justice system and about drugs could lead to a punitive law and order campaign.

The Moral Right attempts to link the fears which people have about economic issues to their anxieties about their children, family breakdown and sexual promiscuity. The linch-pin in their two-pronged attack is the women's movement, which they have scapegoated as the arch enemy of both the free enterprise system and the family. They argue that feminism is, on a fundamental level, opposed to democracy, freedom and liberty because it wants to engineer a society in which men and women would be the "same". By naming the enemy as feminism, an identifiable and relatively powerless group can be shown as responsible for the moral and even economic problems besetting society. So, unemployment, the size of the deficit, marital breakdown, problems in the education system, promiscuity, pornography and a host of other social ills can be perceived not as endemic to the structure and functioning of capitalism and/or patriarchy, but as actually curable by a free enterprise system allowed to operate unilaterally by the demands of feminists and their allies.

A coalition of interests between those groups which have been labelled "social authoritarianism" and economic libertarians has operated successfully in the United States and much New Right philosophy and politicking there incorporates both strands into a cohesive (if somewhat contradictory) platform. Those successes inspired groups here, groups such as Women Who Want to be Women and Festival of Light, to sponsor visits to Australia by Phyllis Schlafly and Michael Levin. Schlafly achieved considerable fame in the United States by her campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment to the American Constitution. She founded a national organisation called Eagle Forum which succeeded in her campaign to prevent ratification of the amendment in 1982 despite its seemingly assured passage in the late seventies. Schlafly came out to Australia in April 1983 to address the Women for the Family Conference held at Macquarie University and sponsored by F.O.L. and W.W.W.

Whereas Schlafly's public speaking engagements were confined mainly to the already converted, with Michael Levin's visit we saw a determined effort to convince both social authoritarians and economic liberals (loosely speaking) that the wellbeing of the economy and democracy is inseparable from the moral health of society. Levin is a professor of philosophy at New York City College of some academic repute, he is also author of numerous articles on feminism which have been published in libertarian journals. His itinerary showed twenty-nine public speaking engagements. There were also press, radio and television interviews and he was invited to address a full meeting of National Party federal MPs at Parliament House just days prior to the party coming out in opposition to the Labor government's Sex Discrimination Bill.

His public speaking engagements included straight academic papers, papers delivered in academic settings on feminism and freedom, addresses on university campuses organised by conservative student bodies, fund-raising dinners for Women Who Want to be Women, addresses to traditional rightwing organisations including the National Civic Council and the Knights of the Southern Cross, addresses to business groups (Australian Confederation of Industry who subsequently came out against affirmative action programs), and Melbourne Jaycees, addresses to economic liberals (Australians for Commonsense, Freedom and Responsibility), and a variety of social authoritarians groups (Festival of Light, Australian Family Association and pro-life organisations).

Basic to both Schlafly's and Levin's position is the proposition...
which they claim to be indisputable, that males and females are born biologically, psychologically and aptitudinally different. For Schlafly, the difference is God-given; for Levin it evolves in terms of sociobiology and is absolutely essential to social order, cohesion and survival. They define feminism as the belief that there are no differences between men and women and that any observed differences are the results of artificial sex roles imposed by sexist education, social conditioning and a conspiracy of male chauvinist pigs. Apart from narrowing feminism down to a caricature and ignoring the diversity of the women’s movement, this definition of feminism serves their purposes well. To any “sensible” person, the notion is immediately and obviously “wrong” and flies in the face of commonsense. Having “established” the irrefutable and irreducible nature of the sexes, both argue that feminist attempts to achieve equality in or out of the workforce, to force girls and boys into what they call “unisex” behaviour by non-sexist indoctrination will result in appalling damage.

Interestingly, the groups or institutions that they see as threatened are not the same. Schlafly fought the Equal Rights Amendment in the states on the grounds that it would take away the rights of marriage, adoption and spousal benefits, mandated tax funding for abortion, and given enormous power to the federal courts and bureaucracies to impose a gender-free society on people by denying them the right to discriminate between men and women.

In coalition with the feminists against traditional values and lifestyles, according to Schlafly homosexuals and lesbians, the “profiteers of promiscuity” and the socialist spenders. The latter two are interesting, but for different reasons. The profiteers of promiscuity are the people who make money out of the promiscuous lifestyle associated with feminism — abortionists and contraceptive manufacturers, for example, and all those who profit through pornography on TV, cable television and video cassettes and magazines like Playboy and Penthouse. By sleight of hand, Schlafly thus includes as allies of feminism some of the very groups to whom they are most opposed. The socialist spenders are those people or groups who have a vested interest in big government so that they can use taxpayers’ money to carry out their political programs.

She claims that attempts by Ronald Reagan to cut out fraud in government, to be more efficient and fulfill his mandate are seen by these people as attacks on women. They talk about the feminisation of poverty, but the main reason why women are poor, she claims, is because they get divorced — and that’s their problem, not that of the government of the taxpayers. The

socialist spenders are working for affirmative action in jobs, which, on her definition, means giving a job to the less qualified woman in preference to the more qualified man in order to achieve a female quota in various levels of job category. This constitutes a direct attack on the family, she argues, because when a man loses out on a job to a woman it is his wife and children who suffer. The women’s movement has undermined the self-esteem of the homemaker/wife and belittled the role. Its message is that every woman should put her own self-fulfilment before every other goal. And, she says,

... that attitude to life is not compatible with a happy marriage and it is not compatible with motherhood. A woman has to be self-sacrificing and put her child’s welfare ahead of her own comfort, convenience and career.

But feminists, full as they are of envy, bitterness and hate, refuse to do this. They want to eliminate the role of wife and homemaker and force all women into the workforce. This also serves their purposes as it means a windfall of taxes to increase the power of government over people’s lives, as many other duties and activities — such as cooking and cleaning — which women traditionally do would be mediated by the market and thus subject to taxes. By changing the tax system to disadvantage single income families, they push women out to work and hence their children into feminist-run, government-funded child care centres, where they can be indoctrinated with pro-feminist ideology at the taxpayers’ expense.
To neglect the obligation to take whatever action is necessary to safeguard the moral, social and economic integrity of the family is to abandon the future to a bunch of marital misfits who are seeking their identity as Ms, mistaken about morals, misinformed about history, motivated by the axiom “misery loves company”, and who want to remake our laws, revise the marriage contract, restructure society, remold our children to conform to lofty values instead of God's values, and replace the image of woman as virtue and mother with the image of prostitute, swinger and lesbian.

While Schlafly may be anti-feminist, she is not anti-woman. She argues that American women are privileged and, if you are white and middle class, you undoubtedly are. The privileges she has fought to retain are clearly those of a minority of women — those with husbands able and willing to support them. Her wholehearted support for the free enterprise system, for small government and decreased taxes derives from her class position.

On the other hand, Levin is clearly misogynist. He argues that feminism threatens the institution of democracy and the values of liberty and freedom. Moreover, it constitutes an obnoxious affront to masculinity and to the proper development of little boys into men. He makes much of supposed innate differences between the sexes, all of which reflect pejoratively on women, but reserves his fullest enthusiasm for the instinct of aggression on which males have a premium. He refers to it as that “fantastic anarchical destructive energy” and uses it to explain and justify the totality of social structure, the inevitability of hierarchies and the dominance of men in the family and the workplace. Natural male aggression is so powerful, even in little boys, that if it is not properly curbed and channelled in the family via the mother's unconditional love and strong dominant father, we would have a “Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all”.

If the family is broken up by the welfare state, as he claims feminists advocate, that “fantastic destructive aggression” is unleashed and the “result is eighteen year old sociopaths”. So, the preservation of the traditional patriarchal family is the only thing standing between us and social chaos and anarchy. It exists to socialise little boys. (Little girls don't seem to need socialising — presumably, they are closer to nature.) Properly channelled, male aggression is transformed into the basic ingredient of the free enterprise system — the competitive spirit. The only form of social organisation compatible with male nature is pure capitalism which will arise spontaneously from that nature if feminists don't interfere with the natural order of male/female relations in the family.

So, what's this got to do with freedom, liberty and democracy? Having “established” what is “given” in nature, Levin can argue that feminist efforts to create what they consider as a more equitable distribution of power must be fundamentally coercive, because only by coercion can men be artificially prevented from naturally rising to positions of power. In libertarian philosophy, coercion is an illegitimate incursion on liberty and only the bare minimum is justifiable — to prevent the thwarting of other people's freedom. For example, police can justifiably stop criminals from coercing others, while the state can use the military for the defence of a nation's freedom.

In Levin's interpretation, feminists have been most successful in using state coercion in two areas — education and employment. In this, he caters to the two strands of the New Right: the social authoritarians who fear what is being done to their children by non-sexist indoctrination and the thwarting of the “natural” development of femininity and masculinity; and to the economic liberals who fear that employers will be forced to hire inferior women in preference to men. What infuriates him most is that feminists have won governmental support for the implementation of their programs. Anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action programs constitute government intervention in the free enterprise system and all such intervention is against liberty and freedom.

Indeed, those who endorse anti-discrimination legislation, endorse slavery.

When you've got a situation where the powers of the state can be used to make
people, resources and their money at the disposition of others against their will, that's slavery. That's what anti-discrimination laws are.

By nature, women would prefer to stay at home and look after their children, he says. They are not biologically equipped to compete in the open marketplace, and so they will have to be forced to work and forced into positions of power — and this deprives men of jobs that should be rightfully and naturally theirs. Because of the high taxes needed for the excesses of the welfare state, a male breadwinner's income is no longer sufficient to support their family, so women who prefer to stay at home are pushed out to work. If the government chopped the welfare state and hence the need for high taxes, according to Levin, it could reduce the deficit and inflation would go down so that a single breadwinner could support a family, women would get out of the workforce and there would be no unemployment.

Unfettered by regulation, the internal dynamics of free enterprise would ensure that all people who wanted jobs had them, and had the job for which they were most suited. All this gross interference in the free market is anti-democratic as it is carried out by the unelected bureaucracy and via the courts who impose hiring quotas on employers to achieve equality of outcome regardless of qualifications. This, according to Levin, will result in permanent discrimination against men since 50/50 equality will never be achieved because those women who can manage to do so will remain at home.

Every time you pass over a man to favour a woman you are actually penalising not only the man but also the wife and family. You make it that much harder for a working man to make ends meet, that much harder to raise a family on a single income. And of course it makes it that much harder to raise a family on a single income. And of course it makes the driving motor of the system the entrepreneurial spirit derived from masculine aggression. Taxation, regulation and feminist charges of male oppression have dampened and stifled the free and economically productive expression of the masculine ethos, thus leading to stagnation of economic security.

They fought the Equal Rights Amendment in the States on the grounds that it would take away from women privileges which they already enjoyed at law.

How can feminism be combated? It can only be crushed if men cease being embarrassed by feminists and stand up to them. He says:

Even feminists ... deep down inside each feminist if there is a shred of femininity left, will respond to some sort of masculine dominance ... Men are going to have to start taking feminism seriously. And I just have a vision that ... suddenly a bunch of big, commanding, virile, masculine, dominant males are going to get up and say "Whoa! Now let's start talking sense" and then the whole feminist superstructure is going to come apart. At least that's my dream.

I don't think it's necessary to point out the flaws in Schlafly's or Levin's claims — they are abundantly clear. What I do want to emphasise is the concerted effort to marry the concerns of the two arms of the New Right and I think this is clear from their arguments, and the organisational linkages they are forging. This alliance has proved successful in the United States, but in Australia neither group can muster the support they need to effect change — despite some successes. I think that the social authoritarians are acutely aware of the need to widen their appeal and have looked to the American example. As it now stands, their constituency seems limited mainly to those people who pursue a fundamentalist form of christianity, and this is much less predominant here than in the States. Indeed, in the Australian context, this itself may be a limiting factor.

Nevertheless, I think that they have the potential to appeal to a far wider group of people, especially if they do succeed in publicly linking moral issues with economic ones. The family is the central focus of concern to both Schlafly and Levin and, indeed, it is to social authoritarians generally. It is the social institution which mediates between the public sphere of life (the economy, production and consumption) and the private sphere of personal relations, emotionality and childbearing and rearing. Their view of the family is a "common-sense" version of that held by the American structural functionalist school of sociology. For the latter, the institution of the family has two functions indispensable to general social order. Firstly, it socialises children so that they develop into "autonomous" individuals who can appropriately perform their adult social roles. Second, it provides an emotional haven from the public world where its members (particularly men) can withdraw to be rejuvenated so that they are better able to return and perform their public roles in the economic sphere.

For all this to operate smoothly it is necessary that men and women conform to their appropriate sex roles. Such conformity ensures harmony and balance both in the wider social system and in the family itself. With such a view of the family and its functional relation to society, it is not surprising that social authoritarians see feminism as constituting a malignant threat to social and familial organisation. A pervasive theme in much of their anti-feminist rhetoric is the claim that feminist social engineering will spell the downfall of western civilisation as we know it. They point meaningfully to the Roman Empire, indicating that the causes of its demise can be found in the sexual depravity consequent to a breakdown in "proper" relations between the sexes.

What should not be overlooked in trying to understand the motivations of the moral right is the strength of emotional attachment to the family
and "family values". After all, most people are reared in families and it is the locus of a ferment of passions and desires. Family relations conjure up in most people deep emotions of love and hate, security and anxiety. For women who have experienced fulfilment as mothers, and love and the security of dependency as wife, for men who have their masculinity confirmed as providers and patriarchs, feminism does constitute an ignominious and devastating challenge to a way of life that they find rewarding and affirming. For the moral right, this is what the family represents to them and what it should represent to all people. A stable and sex-role divided family unit they see as ensuring happiness for its members and contributing to general social stability.

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From observing at some length those groups to which Schlafly and Levin spoke, I gained the very strong impression that fear is one of the primary factors which motivates them and makes them believe what these people tell them. Economic recession and unemployment make them fearful of impending social chaos and disaster which has replaced the comfortable security of the long boom. They are concerned about failings in the education system, about the lack of discipline in youth, about promiscuity and immorality. They want a return to a social order which is stable, to a hierarchical order in which everyone knows their role, status and position, where social control is embedded in the internal organisation of the system in a rigid morality which excludes the possibility of behaviour and values changing.

What they see as the traditional family is, of course, the fundamental unit of such a social system. Consequently, feminist critiques of the family and feminist efforts to change it are particularly feared and resented. The notion of a unisex society appals them — they see the division between the sexes as fundamental to social order: rigid sex roles, a fixed division of labour, a sexual hierarchy seem natural or God given. Any questioning of these essential "givens" is therefore alarming and frightening. Simplistic explanations like those offered by Schlafly and Levin hold considerable appeal:

- Firstly, they reassure them of the "natural" order of things and, by offering them answers to what they are experiencing as social disorder, restore a sense of certainty and "knowing" which, despite the successes of feminism gives them some sense of security.
- Second, they scapegoat an identifiable group as the source of many of their anxieties.
- And third, by doing this, attention is totally deflected from the structural and systemic nature of the rapid and anxiety-provoking social changes confronting us.

The sorts of things that disturb them most profoundly, and for which they blame feminism, arise from a patriarchal capitalist system which relentlessly pursues the creation of new markets by tapping into desires and transforming them into demands. So we are witnessing the emergence of a multi-billion dollar industry which trades on the commodification of sexuality — of which pornography is the most graphic, but not the only example.

The mass media, particularly television, in both programming and advertising, has become a primary agent of socialisation, interjecting itself between parents and children. Schlafly, for example, abhors violence and sex on TV, and enjoins people to switch off or to complain to the advertisers. What neither she nor the right generally can countenance or dare grapple with, is the fact that mass marketing and mass advertising of the kind they despise, is an integral part of the free enterprise component of capitalism which they so wholeheartedly endorse, and are so eager to save from governmental interference. This sort of structural blindness permeates much of the New Right thinking.

In similar vein, they cannot comprehend that the technological and structural changes required by capitalism stem from its own internal dynamic. To maintain growth when market expansion is no longer a sufficient means to secure the continued accumulation of capital, technology replaces labour to maintain profitability by cutting costs. In the words of the Myer Committee: "a situation of jobless growth". Again, it's the system which they support, rather than feminism or any other scapegoat, e.g. Asian immigrants or leftwing unions — which produces the consequences.

The conditions which have provoked the formation of many of these groups won't go away and will more likely deteriorate. Therefore, the potential for support for the sorts of ideas which they espouse could well grow. Their focus on issues connected with the family and sexuality can tap deep emotional responses in many people. In the past, groups like F.O.L. and W.W.W. have tended to be dismissed by the left as mere fascists or lunatics and hence beyond serious political consideration. The success of social authoritarians in the United States of America and the United Kingdom indicates that such an attitude may be short-sighted and even dangerous.

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