The New Populism in Australia

Gregory Melleuish

Since the 1970s Australians have been living through an age of uncertainty or, perhaps more positively, an age of redefinition. Primarily what has been lost has been the faith in the identity that had sustained Modern Australia since the turn of the century. In Modern Australia the pluralist possibilities of Colonial Australia were reduced to a single cultural option in which the primary emphasis was placed on uniformity, conformity and homogeneity. Justice could be achieved and the desire for dignity and self-respect satisfied if corrupting foreign influences were excluded and institutions and laws were created to protect the Australian people. This desire found its expression in those policies of the early Commonwealth that Paul Kelly has termed the 'Australian Settlement' (Kelly 1992: 1-16).

For all its faults, that identity had satisfied the needs of Australians for dignity and self-worth. When the culture that had sustained that identity slowly began decaying and dissolving, and the policies that had provided its most tangible expression were renounced, many Australians found themselves forced to re-examine and reconsider the nature of their identity. Out of this uncertainty has come a desire to find something more secure and stable to replace the apparently shifting and changing world in which they are engulfed. This is why the 1990s have seen such a revival of the identity question in Australia. It is through their various identities that people attain their dignity and self-respect and establish who they are and where they belong.

One solution to the problem of uncertainty has been to adopt simple solutions in the form of what I call 'packages.' The problem with packages, however, is that they are essentially rationalist and future-oriented in nature – even if they owe much of their intellectual structure to the concerns of the past. Their rationalism gives them a somewhat abstract and bloodless quality that may be attractive to intellectuals, but is less appealing to the everyday concerns of ordinary people. Moreover, at the core of these packages has been the notion that the Australian identity needs to be re-made to fit in with the new Australia. It is ironic that republicans, even while spouting the rhetoric of active citizenship, viewed Australians as passive subjects to be fashioned into members of the new republican order.

The basis on which each package was constructed was the belief that there was a 'bad old' Australia from which people needed to escape so that they could become members of the new improved culturally transformed Australia. This was a constant theme in the speeches of Paul Keating during the 1990s, as he spoke of the cultural shifts and transformations that were creating a new Australian identity. This desire to remake the Australian identity according to these packages can be shown schematically, as follows:

Package	Faulty old Australia	New improved Australia
Economic Rationalism	protection, inward-looking, economic inefficiency	dynamic, outward-looking, individualistic, efficient
Clever country	anti-intellectual, unable to capitalise on inventions, lacking in self-confidence	intellectual, dynamic, able to use ideas to make Australia prosperous
Republic	colonial (British), lacking in self-confidence, lacking the capacity to act independently	independent, self-confident, assertive
Multiculturalism	monocultural, dreary, lack of cultural vitality	multicultural, diverse and exciting

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Along with packages, however, nostalgia has also exercised a great influence during the 1980s and 1990s. Packages promise a new set of Australian values that will restore the country's dignity and pride; nostalgia seeks to restore the values and culture of Modern Australia. It appeals to the uncluttered simplicity of Modern Australia – when times were good, unemployment almost unknown and a rosy future beckoned for all Australians. This was a time, too, when a well-defined Australian identity existed, to which ordinary Australians could readily attach themselves. It is this nostalgia that has provided the soil out of which resistance to the 'cultural transformations' (as embodied by the various packages) has emerged.

All of the packages have generated a large amount of opposition and, contrary to the expectations of Paul Keating, have not led to a 'renewed sense of national purpose and new levels of national cohesion' (Ryan 1995: 45). Instead, they have often been construed as attacks on the existing national identity in the name of a radical elitism that has little time for the existing beliefs and ideals of the Australian people.

In this regard it is interesting that many of the opponents of this attempt at 'cultural transformation' have invoked the last work of the American intellectual Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. In that book Lasch (1995) argues that American society has been split into a new cosmopolitan elite and a democratic mass, and he defends the ideal of populism. In this light it is possible to see, in resistance to the packages, the development of a new populism in Australia. For the opponents of 'cultural transformation' – those whom we may term the 'new populists' – the elite/democracy dichotomy is crucial. Democracy is important because it represents the solid values of everyman and everywoman seeking to preserve their traditional way of life against the corrupting influences of not only the new elitist bureaucracy but also the international forces of business and commerce.

Another way of considering the split between elites and democracy is to consider them as embodying two distinct varieties of nationalism. There has been the nationalism of Keating, on the one hand, devoted to creating a new competitive and efficient Australian nation able to survive in the harsh commercial world of the 1990s. On the other hand, there is what Les Murray has termed the 'vernacular republic' – an Australia that seeks its roots in its past and in the egalitarian traditions associated with that past. The 'vernacular republic' is the Australia of nostalgia just as certainly as Keating's Australia is the Australia of packages. This dichotomy between nostalgia and cultural transformation has thus become the major cultural battlefield of the 1990s in Australia.

Resisting packages

Every major package has managed to stir up a large swarm of critics who are motivated largely by a nostalgia for an Australia that they believe is under threat. Robert Manne and John Carroll, for example, have displayed a nostalgia for the Menzies years in their attacks on free trade and economic rationalism. In common with B.A. Santamaria, they would like to return to the protected world of the 1950s, when workers had secure jobs and lived happy lives in the suburbs or the country (Manne and Carroll 1992). Michael Pusey and Hugh Stretton, on the other hand, in their attacks on economic rationalism, display a nostalgia for the days when decent, honourable, public-minded bureaucrats ruled the land. Their preferred periods are those of Labor under Curtin and Chifley and during the Whitlam years. Their icon is 'Nugget' Coombs; their preferred system of government, benevolent bureaucracy.

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The remarkable thing about economic rationalism is the extent of the opposition that it has generated on both the left and the right in Australia, and the extent to which its critics view it as an attack of the combined forces of business and government on the Australian people. According to B.A.Santamaria, economic rationalism is a sell-out of Australia's economic sovereignty, by the government, to the forces of international capital; bondholders and foreign banks increasingly enjoy the capacity to determine Australia's future. He argues that 'globalisation' is the great evil of the day and that other evils, including unemployment, the growth of an underclass and the widening gap between rich and poor have followed in its wake. Mr Keating's new international Australia has, in Santamaria's view, increasingly led to the destruction of the real Australia of ordinary men and women.

Bob Browning (1995) has made similar connections between government, economic rationalism and the deteriorating circumstances of ordinary Australians. Browning combines this with an attack on the new elitism of the

bureaucracy as it seeks to enhance its power through the promotion of a progressive social agenda. In a similar vein Paddy O'Brien has attacked economic rationalism on the grounds that many of its proponents are not genuine adherents of the principles of constitutional democracy: 'They are not so much against the concentration of absolute powers as their placement in the wrong hands' (1995: 13). Each of these writers belongs to the 'right' in Australia, and all three are opposed to economic rationalism because they see it as an attack on democracy and the people.

Robert Manne has commented that 'ordinary Australians are more attracted to economic nationalism than economic rationalism.'

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s the nostalgia over Australia's lost identity found its expression in anti-multiculturalism. Multiculturalism was often viewed as the villain that had destroyed the well-ordered suburban Australia of earlier years. It threatened the unity and integrity of Australia's national identity. It is interesting that many of those who are most critical of economic rationalism have also attacked multiculturalism. Santamaria, for example has attacked ethnic separatism as well as economic rationalism (as well as feminism, *Mabo*, the republic and environmentalism). Bob Browning views multiculturalism as yet another example of 'bad government.' Graeme Campbell (1995) argues that multiculturalism is a 'deeply corrupt' policy that 'promotes a multiplicity of often mutually hostile, narrow, ethnic nationalisms.'

The real battle, however, between 'cultural transformation' and 'nostalgia' has been played out in the stout resistance that has been offered to the republic by the defenders of constitutional monarchy. It is equally true that the constitutional monarchists view themselves as populist defenders of democracy against an elitist push by 'New Class' republicans. Members of Australians for Constitutional Monarchy love to compare the grassroots nature of their organisation, and its estimated 17,000 members, with the glitterati who tend to provide the public face of the Australian Republican Movement. They can point to their 'people power,' moreover, which brought thousands of supporters into Sydney to defend Government House in response to a scheme to move out the governor and make the job part-time.

Alan Atkinson has commented on the extraordinary resilience of the monarchist movement. He argues that the monarchist cause has deep roots in Australian society, and he links it with a social democratic vision of the role and place of the state in Australia, with the state playing the role of a mother nurturing the family of the nation. For Atkinson the republican push is linked to the New Right, economic rationalism and an attempt to push everyone into a single rational mould. 'In this sense,' he claims, 'the republican movement is part of the softening up of the state, its abdication of old responsibilities, its privatisation and reshaping by market forces.' His defence of the monarchy is closely linked to a defence of traditional egalitarian Australia against the forces of globalisation (Atkinson 1993: 60, 64).

Atkinson's defence of monarchy may seem somewhat intellectual, and yet his populist view of the Crown as embodying many of the traditional virtues of the Australian nation is close to the beliefs of many monarchists. In an article in *Australian Constitutional Monarchy,* Alan Fitzgerald (1995) attacked the pro-republican bias of the ABC, berated Paul Keating for the way in which he manipulated the media, and attacked the way in which the Labor government had politicised 'just about every aspect of Australian life over the past twelve years.' This portrayal is pure populism: an evil government in pursuit of its own ends, and in concert with the media, trying to destroy all that is good and decent in Australia.

The new populism and political correctness

The new populism has coincided with the rise of attacks on what is referred to as 'political correctness.' Political correctness can be loosely defined as the ideological program of the new elite or New Class as they set out on their path of cultural transformation. The basic objection to political correctness is that it seeks to make a particular viewpoint or set of ideas dominant within public debate by suppressing those ideas that do not agree with it. It seeks to establish the 'hegemony' of a particular outlook – even though the ideas composing that outlook are only held by a minority of people – by attempting to control the flow of ideas and by pouring scorn on those who disagree with them.

Political correctness is thus easily connected to the new elite and to attempts to transform Australia culturally. Its opponents view themselves as 'voices from the resistance' seeking to defend liberal values and free speech against the 'soft totalitarianism' of the cultural establishment, who are seeking to impose their views on the

Australian community. Hence, Peter Coleman (1995; 1996: 1-7) claims that intellectuals in Australia have been more interested in power and self-interest than in culture and freedom, and that in the pursuit of that power they have happily 'defamed, boycotted and marginalised' those who have not conformed to their program. He calls that program the 'new diversity' and includes in it most of the major packages of the 1980s and 1990s: republicanism, multiculturalism, the Asian destiny. His objection to this program is not so much the content of its ideas but the illiberal way in which its supporters seek to propagate them.

Marlene Goldsmith sees herself as 'defying the thought police.' She argues that there are attempts in contemporary Australian culture to prevent certain things being said, and that 'to criticise multiculturalism or feminism is to court ostracism.' Goldsmith refers not only to Lasch and the new elite but also to the modern tendency of interest groups to gain advantages for themselves 'at the expense of society as a whole' (1996: 5, 215). It is in this connection that the critics of political correctness link up with the new populism. Bob Browning and B.A. Santamaria both focus their criticisms of Australian government on the symbiosis between New Class bureaucrats, interest groups and the media. Graeme Campbell argues that not only the media but also many academics and artists have become the 'intellectually corrupt hirelings' of the new elite and their politically correct agenda (Campbell and Uhlmann 1995: vii).

It is now possible to sum up some of the fundamental features of the new populism, considered as resistance to the recent attempts to culturally transform Australia. The first is a belief that the New Class has captured the bureaucracy and that in its quest for power it is attempting to put into place programs that will transform the nature of Australian culture. Allied with this belief is a fear that the New Class bureaucrats are acting in concert with the interest movements who advocate these various causes and that in this way the common good of the Australian nation is being subverted by particular interests.

The second aspect of the new populism is a fear that the opening up of Australia to the world – what is sometimes termed 'internationalisation' – is undermining both Australian sovereignty and the social fabric that the 'Australian Settlement' had helped to create. There is an emphasis by proponents of the new populism on what they believe to be the growing inequality in Australian society, on the loss of control by Australians of their capacity to determine the economic direction of the country, and on the growth of an unemployed underclass. They are strenuously opposed to the sale of Australian brand name companies to overseas buyers. Robert Manne (1996) has perceptively commented that 'ordinary Australians are more attracted to economic nationalism than economic rationalism.' Other new populists, including Campbell and Atkinson, see the major conflict in Contemporary Australia as being between an internationally minded elite and ordinary Australians who wish to affirm their national identity so that they might feel, in John Howard's words, comfortable and relaxed in that identity.

The third aspect of this populist resistance to cultural transformation is an affirmation of the positive qualities of the Australian past. Examples of this position can be found in the writings of John Hirst and in Robert Birrell's *A Nation of our Own*, in which Birrell strenuously defends the 'Australian Settlement' and Australian nationalism on the grounds that they embody an egalitarianism founded on progressive social values. Indeed, Birrell views the federation era as characterised by 'a populist approach built around ideas of creating a new and better national community' (1995: 279). For the new populists Australian nationalism is not a negative force seeking to repress women, Aborigines and migrants; it is a moral force that has allowed Australians to create a society founded on principles of justice and equality. In general, this also means that most of the new populists have a positive view of the role of the state in Australian history, as something that has helped to make Australia a more just society. The New Right is to be distrusted as much as the New Class.

The final aspect of the new populism is an affirmation of democracy and the Australian people as against the New Class elite. The strongest expression of this view is to be found in John Carroll's defence of democracy and his advocacy of popular culture as a source of morality in a world corrupted by the nihilist values of the high-culture elite. Similar views can be found in Santamaria and his defence of the Catholicism of the people as opposed to that of the hierarchy. The new populists believe that the programs of the New Class elite are being put into practice regardless of the feelings of the majority of Australians, even though such programs have the capacity to undermine the way of life of that majority. Graeme Campbell has attacked what he terms the 'city-based econocrats,'

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who, he claims, 'adopt a very narrow perspective, not a truly national vision' (Campbell and Uhlmann 1995: 198). In its opposition to the state and to international commerce (the two being considered as working together), the new populism demonstrates its affinity with American populist conservatism, even down to the tendency to see the actions of government in conspiratorial terms – witness the popularity in both countries of the television program *X-Files*.

The 1996 federal election

Up to this point I have discussed the new populism largely in terms of writers who have espoused its principles. It might well be asked whether it has wider significance. The 1996 federal election proves that this is indeed the case. The basic fact about the 1996 election is that the Labor Party was wiped off the electoral map outside what has been described as the 'triangle' of Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra. It won only two seats in Queensland. Terry McCrann (1996) has pointed out that Labor won the triangle winning 51·4 per cent of the two-party preferred vote, while outside of the triangle it could manage only 43·1 per cent and a pathetic 18 out of 94 seats. Provincial Australia voted massively against Labor. Furthermore, being tagged as politically incorrect in provincial Australia proved to be more of an asset than a liability – as shown in the cases of Graeme Campbell, Pauline Hanson and Bob Katter.

There have been a number of interpretations of this phenomenon. The first sees the election as a revolt against political correctness by the Australian people. The second sees a resurgence of those 'nasty' racist values of Modern Australia that the New Class had been working so hard to eradicate. Both are really only two versions of the same explanation: that the Australian electorate could only tolerate so much change, and that in an age of uncertainty those who were not benefiting by it wanted, at the very least, a slowing down of the process of cultural transformation.

Robert Manne (1996) has also pointed to the electoral success of Katter, Hanson, and Campbell; he notes that they succeeded despite claims in the 'quality' press that their 'politically incorrect' views would harm the Coalition. Manne points out that McCrann's triangle is not something new but can be traced back to the mid 1970s – 'where Whitlam pioneered Keating followed.' Manne believes that Keating's attempt to marry economic rationalism and the contemporary social movements of the left appealed to the city-based Australian elites and intelligentsia. While it did not affect Labor's working-class supporters in traditional working-class areas, it alienated what he describes as a new working class that has grown up in the economically dynamic parts of Australia, including Queensland and Western Australia, and whose culture is quite distinct from that of the Labor traditionalists (Manne 1996).

What the election result demonstrates is that the dynamic of uncertainty followed by package has indeed brought about a third moment in the process: resistance and nostalgia. This resistance may well be the result of the fracturing of traditional political allegiances and the creation of a more complex social structure in Australia. There was, however, another aspect of the election that appears to have been forgotten in all the discussion regarding political correctness: in order to achieve power, the Coalition had to affirm many of the Labor policies in such areas as welfare and health. It recognised that to achieve power it would have to disavow many of the radical reform measures that had been included in *Fightback!*

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This leads to an apparent contradiction. At one level the 1996 election indicated that there is a convergence in Australian politics, seeing that a consensus has developed in such areas as welfare and health. At another level the election would seem to be proof that there is a growing divergence in Australia between the two Australias: the triangle versus the rest. This division can also be seen as related to another division – between the New Class and their reforming program of cultural transformation, and the populists with their desire to defend the values of Modern Australia.

This contradiction becomes more explicable when we reconsider the 1993 election and Keating's ability, at that time, to win over the emerging populist vote by painting the effects of *Fightback!* in the darkest possible colours. At that stage Keating managed to achieve a remarkable balancing act by combining an advocacy for cultural transformation with populism. It is worth considering the extraordinary capacity of Keating to combine nostalgia and packages in a single political style. On the one hand, he fed Australians the promise of redemption through packages. During the 1980s it was the package of free trade and

economic rationalism: Australia deregulated would be a new, vibrant society, able to conquer the world. In the 1990s it was the (Asian) republic and then that variant on the 'clever country,' the information superhighway. Again these were packages that promised to throw off the shackles of Australia's past.

On the other hand, Keating played the nostalgia card with finesse. At one level this involved an appeal to his Irish roots and the simple ethnic tribalism of the 1950s – updated to become the republicanism of the 1990s. At another level, as was the case in the 1993 election, it involved a capacity to tap into the values that had helped maintain Modern Australia and make it seem that they still had a place in the 1990s. And so Keating moved from rationalist package to nostalgia and back again, in a sort of ongoing conjuring show. A succession of images and ideas were wheeled out according to circumstances and portrayed to the public as if they were the reality of the 1990s. Above all, it was this capacity that made Keating the representative figure of what may be termed the postmodern Australia of the 1980s and 1990s.

Keating's demise, however, has left an important legacy to all future Australia governments. In the final analysis we are living in an age of uncertainty created by the collapse of the culture of Modern Australia. The conditions that upheld that culture no longer exist. Attempts at reform are a response to real problems facing Australia as she is forced to survive in an increasingly difficult world. It is often not so much the content as the form of these packages that makes them offensive. Many ordinary Australians have perceived these packages as an attack on their sense of self-worth, for they seem to tell them that much of their past and their identity is worthless and in need of being totally transformed.

These packages, and the people who have attempted to put them into practice, have generated a great deal of resistance in many parts of Australia, which has found expression in the new populism. Any government, and any political leader, must face up to the problem of how to reconcile the need for reform with an appreciation of the cultural sensitivities of a large part of the Australian people. In other words, a leader must devise some way of reconciling past and present, the need for reform and change with the necessity of conserving those elements of the past that have proven that they provide a solid foundation for the future.

Since its election in March 1996 the Howard government has had to grapple with maintaining a balance between liberal reform and the need to satisfy the conservative instincts of its populist supporters. On the one hand, it has pursued a tough program of liberal and economic rationalist reform, based on cutting government expenditure and changing the nature of the industrial relations system. On the other hand, Howard has attempted to project a populist image into the Australian community, but with only mixed success. His first attempt at populism – his reform of Australian gun laws, following the Port Arthur massacre – was popular, as judged by the opinion polls. It did, however, stir up the gun lobby, many of whom were members of that rural populist constituency that had helped to put Howard into power.

At the same time Howard's pursuit of liberal reform has also threatened his support in regional Australia, since the rationalisation of government activities has led to the closure of government services. These cutbacks may make perfect sense in economic terms but do little to restore faith in government amongst the citizens of rural Australia. The Pauline Hanson phenomenon is an interesting comment on the situation facing any government that becomes too obsessed with the logic of rational reform. Hanson's high public profile following her maiden speech in parliament indicates that there is an element of the Australian people looking for simple, populist solutions.

What Hanson stands for are the simple truths of Modern Australia: racial and cultural homogeneity, national development based on a sense of national purpose. Just as Hanson praises Arthur Calwell, so she, like Graeme Campbell, stands for many of the values of traditional Labor in Australia. This does not just mean racism, and the fear and loathing of those who are different. It also means economic nationalism, and includes the introduction of a form of national service, opposition to the privatisation of Telstra, and an end to 'kowtowing to financial markets, international organisations, world bankers, investment companies and big business people' (Hanson 1996: 24). At the hands of Campbell and Hanson the new populism becomes just another package promising quick and simple solutions to difficult and

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complex problems. Just follow Pauline's *Truth* and Australia will once again be the unified and harmonious place it was in the good old days.

Having played the populist card, Howard must now face up to the fact that his populist supporters actually expect some action.

And yet it is wrong to condemn these more traditionally-oriented Australians and to castigate them as rednecks. They feel left behind by all the changes that have taken place in Australia, including the liberal reforms introduced by Hawke, Keating and Howard. Howard has been aware of the strength of the support that has fuelled the Hanson phenomenon, and has been slow to criticise her. He would appear to be aware of the significance of this populist support for the continuation of his government, but his apparent reluctance to engage with it has drawn considerable criticism from those who view him as indulging racism.

It could be said that Howard has pursued a path of economic liberal practices and populist rhetoric. One wonders, though, whether the populists who supported him in 1996 will remain satisfied with words while government policies, such as the closing of services, are continuing to impact on their daily lives. In this regard Howard is in danger of going down the track that Keating went down between 1993 and 1996. Having played the populist card, he must now face up to the fact that his populist supporters actually expect some action.

For Howard, as for Keating before him, the key question in Australian politics in the 1990s remains whether it is possible to bring together liberal reform and conservative populism. *Policy*

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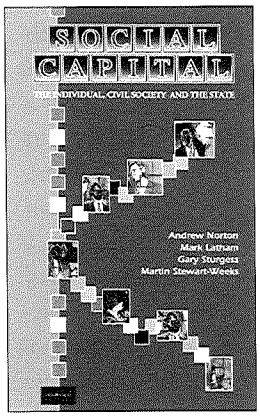

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