

The Labelling Game

Michael Warby

The use and misuse of political labels such as 'right-wing' or 'conservative' point to a broader problem—the corruption of public debate.

Labels can be useful things. Correctly used, they greatly improve thought and debate by allowing crucial distinctions to be made. Alas, this role is so useful it can be misused to considerable advantage, such as to consign disapproved opinions to the twilight world of marginality and illegitimacy. For the use of labels for strategic advantage has an inherent tendency to empty said labels of real content—since expediency, not truth, becomes their key criteria—thus rendering them useless for anything resembling clarity of thought.

Some Left, which Right?

The moment when it became clear that the term 'Right' had become more or less meaningless in any positive sense was when the old-style Soviet apparatchiks resisting Gorbachev's reform process were labelled 'right-wingers' by media commentators. People who believed in complete state control of society, world revolution in the name of equality, and who railed against the irredeemable evil of capitalism were, we were being told, 'right-wing', while the pro-market liberal reformers were labelled 'left-wing' by the Russian media.

This surreal absurdity demonstrated how empty the 'Right' label had become. Both Adolf Hitler and Milton Friedman are regularly labelled as 'extreme right-wingers'. Yet there is no major normative political precept that they both believe in. Indeed, the political precepts of each have more in common with those of people on the Left than they do with each other. Hitler was a collectivist, a socialist (on the modern 'nationalise the household' rather than the more traditional 'seize the means of production' model) and a welfarist who

despised individualism. Friedman believes in racial equality, democracy, personal liberty (including sexual and narcotic liberty) and is a pioneer of individualistic welfare. To call them both 'extreme right-wingers' is worse than wrong, it is toxic of intelligent discourse. But it is a useful move in the labelling game.

Matters are complicated by the fact that the term 'Left' retains more real content than 'Right', as there is a unifying value on the Left. It is equality. You can rank how far Left someone is by (1) how complete their commitment to equality is, and (2) what measures they are prepared to undertake to achieve and enforce equality. Thus, an extreme left-winger advocates as near complete material equality as is practicable, is prepared to engage in any level of state control to create it and is willing to use revolutionary violence to achieve that level of state control. The more one resiles from completeness of equality, the level of state control one deems acceptable and the use of extra-parliamentary means of achieving that control, the less Left one is. This pattern also helps explain the problem of 'no enemies on the Left', which has bedevilled Left politics at various times, since the extreme Left has always been able to parade its greater public commitment to the central Left value of equality.

The decline and collapse of socialism as a practical ideal has pushed the commitment to equality into new forms, such as identity politics. But equality is still recognisably the core value of the Left. Where

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individuals with characteristics such as being black, female or homosexual may have once been discriminated against or marginalised, they now enjoy equal treatment before the law. This campaign for equal status, however, has fed into the desire among progressivist intellectuals for mascots—public patronage of whom is used to buttress claims of moral superiority, as Thomas Sowell has pointed out in *The Vision of the Anointed*—and has led to *special* rather than *equal* treatment for such groups. Nonetheless, the original egalitarian underpinnings of identity politics remain clear enough.

By contrast, there is no such unifying value on the alleged Right and never has been. All ‘Right’ means is ‘not of the Left and has strong political opinions’. It is divided most obviously between the partisans of liberty, of authority and of fraternity, often in an uneasy alliance against a common Left opponent.

You’re ideological, I’m mainstream

That the strategic use of labelling tends to empty labels of real content is clear. Organisations and people who have advocated major changes in Australia’s policy and institutional structure on classical liberal grounds—and whose advocacy fed into the most radical policy programmes in recent Australian history, the *Fightback!* manifesto of the Hewson Opposition and the policies of the Kennett Government in Victoria—get labelled ‘conservative’. The actual content of what people believe and say is not relevant, in any meaningful sense, to how they get labelled: the propagandistic use of labels is clearly trumping their descriptive use.

The question of political labelling has become highly topical in the United States, with the release of former senior CBS journalist Bernard Goldberg’s book on the US media, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*.¹ One of the key points Goldberg raises is about the use of labels. He argues that the mainstream American media regularly labels people as ‘conservative’ but is far less likely to label people as ‘liberal’ (meaning left/social democrat in the American context), thereby marking conservatives as unusual (hence the labelling) and liberals as mainstream (so needing no labels).

What the word ‘conservative’ is code for is ‘not mainstream’, with people who are not labelled being considered mainstream. This is a useful tactic as

majoritarian tendencies in our democratic culture create an immediate patina of suspicion over whatever is not mainstream. That something rather perverse is going on in the culture of public debate is evident when one consults opinion polls showing clear liberal-conservative tendencies in public opinion. At least one study identified people with ‘Right’ (that is, non-Left) ideological leanings as being twice as numerous in the Australian populace as those with Left ideological leanings. Of course, those without ideological leanings strongly outnumbered everyone else,² thus maximising the advantage of ‘mainstream’ positioning.

The propaganda of status and the economics of clubs

We normally conceive of propaganda as something centrally directed. The great achievement of Soviet propagandists—particularly the master of fellow-traveller manipulation Willi Münzenberg—was to realise that, if you tapped into enduring motives, propaganda could be self-replicating. This achievement has lived on long past the demise of the Soviet Union as an object of admiration. The key motive for self-replicating propaganda amongst the Western intelligentsia is status-seeking—what in this context I have labelled *moral vanity*. While the self-serving nature of much moral posturing has long been clear, and is much commented on, it was Katharine Betts, particularly in her book *The Great Divide*,³ who first made clear some of

the operating mechanisms. Variant opinions are associated with negative qualities—notably racism and parochialism—showing unworthiness. Approved opinions express people’s identity as internationalist cosmopolitans, as worthy people. People have no reason to seek censure from their peers by expressing deviant opinions. Betts grounds current patterns in the massive expansion of higher education in the 1960s, which propelled people into a new and greatly expanded elite of university graduates, creating a demand for markers of status and (new) identity.

Betts, a sociologist, was unfortunately not aware of an analytical structure that could have given her analysis more bite—the economics of clubs. Clubs provide goods all members share but from which non-members can be excluded. The benefits of being seen to be a member of what I call Club Virtue are clear enough—a feeling

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of higher moral status buttressed by the mutual self-congratulation of peers, and the avoidance of the costs of non-conformity. Greater leeway for error is also possible. Club members tend to forgive or ignore mistakes if made in the name of a cause that protects the status of Club members (or if exposure of such lapses would undermine said status).

The mechanism of exclusion is also clear enough, for it is standard in the contemporary current culture of Australian public debate to deal with dissent by attacking the moral character of a dissenter. For example, to vote No in the republic referendum was to be unpatriotic, to demur on various pieties about Aboriginal history and policy is to be racist, to criticise a female politician of the Left (but not of the Right) is to be sexist, to support labour market deregulation is to be heartless and anti-worker, to be sceptical about environmental claims is to support trashing the planet, to support economic liberalisation is to be heartless and anti-poor, not to support a high immigration and an open door refugee policy is to be racist or xenophobic, to criticise the ABC is to be offended by journalistic integrity, and so on. To publicly dissent from such public pieties is to be subject to constant, widespread public assaults on one's moral character; assaults backed up by a genuine, intolerant contempt—what I call the lone poppy syndrome.⁴ This mechanism maximises the gap in status between members of Club Virtue and non-

members. It is a method of enforcement and exclusion, which adds value to club membership. It represents the self-replication of the style of propagandistic politics that Muhzenberg pioneered and his biographer Stephen Koch called 'righteous politics'.

Hand-in-hand with such denigration is misrepresentation of both the opinions of dissenters and the facts of the case. Not only is such misrepresentation tolerated, because to do otherwise would undermine the value of membership of the Club Virtue, but it is required—since facts cannot sustain the alleged gap. Moreover, because opinions and beliefs are substantially selected on the basis of their ability to confer and confirm status, such status markers have a natural tendency to part from reality.

Except for a brief outbreak during the Howard

Government's welfare reform push, it is, for instance, an article of faith that the Australian welfare state has shrunk since the economic reforms began in the early 1980s, when it has continued to expand. The history of debates over the implications of being an immigration society, the modernity problems of indigenous Australians, and environmental issues (such as the level of certainty granted to the causes, extent and costs of global warming) are littered with similar examples.

New mascots for old

The demands of status-through-approved opinion lead to a process of adopting various groups as mascots. Being seen to care about such groups becomes a marker of status. Because status is a positional good, the need for new markers of moral superiority is constant. The result is a turnover in mascots. In recent decades, these have included workers, women (but not homemakers), Irish Catholics, people from Indochina (preferably when being taken over by Leninism, not when fleeing it), indigenous Australians, and now the latest wave of boat people. The pattern of concerns amongst the bulk of media commentators shows this shifting of mascots. Thus, mandatory sentencing and the failure to issue a Commonwealth apology for indigenous Australians—previous markers of Australia's shame—have been dropped as concerns in favour of mandatory detention of illegal immigration, the new marker of Australia's shame.

One of the effects of the collapse of socialism as a serious locus of belief has been the snowballing reversion to the historically much more normal pattern of intellectuals despising the general populace. The terminology has been updated—rednecks, xenophobes, racists, etc. instead of the mob, the rabble or whatever—but the return to an age-old pattern is very clear. By adopting the Middle Eastern and Afghan boat people as mascots, members of Club Virtue are able to claim superior status over both the public and those minority members of the Australian intelligentsia who dare to publicly disagree with them.

The closing down of debate about mascots, in the cause of protecting status-marker opinions, is not necessarily in the mascots' interests. Arguably, the worst thing to have happened to indigenous Australians over

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the last 30 years has been to become mascots for the progressivist intelligentsia. As a result, policies have been driven, not by the real interests of indigenous Australians, but by what has best provided a sense of moral superiority to the members of Club Virtue. The disastrous effects of policies driven by such concerns have been largely isolated from debate, and thus correction—at least until Noel Pearson finessed the delegitimisation of dissent, as he is not subject to the normal closing down of debate through the denigration of dissenters as racist.

Intent over practicality

In an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (8 December 2001), Paddy McGuinness made the point that the media are largely blind to their own biases. This is plausible enough. I have become convinced that people on the ABC genuinely believe they are unbiased, in part because everyone they know thinks much the same as they do. They merely label as different those who do not share those opinions—something they find perfectly reasonable and no sign of bias.

Another sign of how the status games operate is the way so many of debates about totemic issues juxtapose concern with practicality against parading of intent. Dissenters typically raise concerns about how things are working in practice, while the response typically draws attention to intentions. For intentions are what mark moral superiority; concern for practical effects can only undermine such status-markers. Hence members of Club Virtue talk about intent, dissenters about practicality. It is revealing, for example, that members of Club Virtue have shown little enthusiasm for directly

addressing the issues Noel Pearson raises. But the point about the role of mascots is being *seen* to care—a very different thing from actually doing so.

The genius of such status-games is that they appropriate the public good of open debate for the private good of status-seeking. What was once common—and so owned by no-one—becomes fenced off, and legitimacy in public debate becomes the shared property of Club members.

Conclusion

A public debate that is pervasively corrupted by this culture of status-through-paraded-virtue is a major problem for any democracy. It is even more of a problem for Australia, which is a small country and so can even less afford an intelligentsia that sacrifices open debate to its own status games. The group I have labelled Club Virtue has systematically failed in the proper role of an intelligentsia—to make sense of ourselves, our society, our place in the world, and the wider world. And the use of labels in the cause of self-serving status games is a fundamental part of that failure.

Endnotes

- 1 Bernard Goldberg, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2001).
- 2 David W. Lovell, Ian McAllister, William Maley and Chandran Kukathas, *The Australian Political System*, (Sydney: Longman, 1998), 142.
- 3 Katherine. Betts, *The Great Divide* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1999).
- 4 Michael. Warby, *Ellis Unplugged* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2001).

BLOWING THE WHISTLE ON MEDIA BIAS

Conservatives are always labelled and identified as conservative, because reporters think viewers need to know. But for some strange reason, they don't think viewers should know who the liberals [meaning Left/social democrat in the American context] are. Conservatives are often called 'right-wing', but the only time the news media utter the words 'left-wing' is when they're talking about an airplane.

[This is a mindset] . . . that says, conservatives are out of the mainstream and need to be identified, whereas liberals are the mainstream and don't require explanation. It's just like in the bad days when journalists were doing crime stories, and the only time they'd identify a suspect by race was if he was black. Blacks were alien. Dangerous. That was part of the times.

Conservatives are identified today for the same reason. The view of most people in the news business is that conservatives aren't in the mainstream—just the way black people weren't.

Bernard Goldberg, author of *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*, in an interview with John Meroney, "'Live" with TAE' (*The American Enterprise*, March 2002), 13.