

UNDERSTANDING AUSTRALIAN CONSERVATISM

Modern Australian conservatism reworks old conservative themes, says **Greg Melleuish**

Now that John Howard's term as prime minister has come to an end, the race is on to create *the* version of the Howard years that will become the basis of future historical accounts of that period. Although an obvious way to view Howard's tenure is to see it as a continuation of the Hawke-Keating years, beginning with the developments set in motion by the floating of the dollar and the deregulation of the financial system, there are many, especially among Howard haters, who have a vested interest in making Howard appear as an aberration in the story of Australia.

Mainstream political culture

If Howard is to be made to appear as not really being part of the Australian story, then it is also necessary to establish that the values that drove Howard are also outside of the mainstream traditions of Australian political culture. In asserting that the liberal tradition in Australia was derived from the Deakinites and social liberals, Judith Brett began this process in her book *Australian Liberalism and the Moral Middle Classes*.¹ The effect of Brett's argument was to withdraw any legitimacy from the free trade and classical liberal elements within Australian liberalism and to deny that there are a variety of competing ideas and traditions in the Australian liberal tradition.

Norman Abjorensen engages in a similar sort of exercise in his new book, *John Howard and the Conservative Tradition*, by defining the Australian

liberal tradition in terms of the Deakinite tradition so that free trade liberalism becomes an aberration or what he calls 'New South Wales exceptionalism.'² George Reid and John Howard can thus be made to stand outside of the Australian liberal mainstream.

Abjorensen also puts conservatives outside the democratic mainstream, claiming that conservatism began in opposition to democracy, and that conservatives have never been entirely comfortable with democracy as a concept. From his 'democratic perspective,' conservatism and liberalism are both limiting factors in the growth of popular sovereignty.

The meaning of conservatism

Along with Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe in their recent *The Times Suit Them: Postmodern Conservatism in Australia*, Abjorensen's book claims to be providing a discussion of the nature of Australian conservatism.³ Yet neither book demonstrates any real understanding of the traditions of Australian conservatism. They attempt to make up for their lack of knowledge of Australian political culture by giving the German-American political philosopher Leo Strauss and

Associate Professor **Greg Melleuish** teaches at the School of History and Politics at the University of Wollongong.

the American neo-cons an influence in Australia that they never enjoyed. They do not tell us what positions Australian conservatives have held, nor do they provide any evidence that they appreciate the existence of a variety of conservative traditions in Australia. One simply cannot make a judgment about Howard's conservatism if one does not have any knowledge of the traditions against which he is being measured.

Conservatism is perhaps the most difficult set of political beliefs to categorise because it places a powerful emphasis on practices and habits—or what Edmund Burke termed 'prejudices.' Conservatives value ideas because they *work* and are embedded in institutions and ways of life. It is not a criticism of a conservative to describe him or her as pragmatic; workable ideas are attractive to conservatives because they are less likely than abstract ones to upset the established order.

The point is that there are no platonic ideas that embody the true essence of conservatism or, for that matter, liberalism or democracy. As with liberalism and democracy, there are a variety of positions that conservatives espouse according to circumstance and the issues that they want to address. There are common principles that conservatives share, such as a respect for tradition, but the devil is always in the detail and conservatives recognise that principles must be applied with regard to the case under consideration.

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While there have been 'conservative' critics of democracy in Australia, they invariably criticised what they considered to be the excesses of democracy, which they saw as the protection of special interests at the expense of the public good or the values of humanity. It is interesting that two of the greatest defenders of liberal values in Australian history, John West and Bruce Smith, both of whom made these sorts of criticism of democratic practice, and who also stood firm against the racist tendencies of Australian 'democracy,' have been condemned by the Left as 'conservatives.' Needless to say, Abjorensen does

not like Bruce Smith very much.⁴

The great democrat Henry Parkes argued for democracy in an essentially conservative fashion, believing it to be the natural form of the British Constitution. Moreover he believed that in a democracy men would, and should, vote for their betters especially if those betters were gentlemen.⁵ Even the great radical David Syme couched his argument in favour of a delegate model of political representation in terms of returning to the original form of the British Constitution.⁶ In general, support for the British Constitution or the British form of government was for a long time a major bulwark of Australian conservatism, as can be seen in the loving way that Australian legislatures attempted to mimic their Westminster counterpart.

It is rare to find a 'pure' conservative, in the old world sense, in the Australian setting. As early as the 1860s, the term liberal-conservative had come into being in Australia to describe liberals of a conservative tendency in recognition of the fact that the colonies really did not have 'Tories' on the English model. In the 1880s the Deakinite or social liberals attempted to stigmatise classical liberals as 'conservatives' in order to highlight their own 'progressive' credentials. Since that time those who advocate liberal and free market principles have often not been sure if they should call themselves liberals or conservatives. This became more complex with the revival of the values of classical liberalism in the 1970s and 1980s, not as a conservative doctrine, but as a set of principles that would guide reform and transform the country.

This relationship with classical liberalism is complicated by the fact that there have always been a significant number of conservatives in Australia who have been less than enamoured with the virtues of the free market. The most famous of these was BA Santamaria and it has included a number of Catholics and cultural conservatives, especially in the years before Vatican II when it refused to compromise with many aspects of the modern world.⁷ In particular the Church advocated a classical understanding of the universe, claiming that there was a set of God ordained natural principles that governed the working of the universe. It was an alliance between Catholic

and secular classicists, including many followers of Sydney philosopher John Anderson, which allowed *Quadrant* to be such a success.

Classicists opposed the focus on change and mutability that seemed to them to be central to both Romanticism and progressive politics. They saw that the 'new' and transformed humanity, which the Romantics and Communists and fascists believed could be created through an exertion of the human will, led only to the denial of order and ultimately nihilism. There is also an overlap between classicism and certain elements of liberalism as liberals generally adhere to the idea that there is an economic order founded on laws.

In the 1950s James McAuley, the founding editor of *Quadrant* was able to argue that there is 'a natural order, in the sense that it is an order appropriate to man's natural constitution.'⁸ The problem for McAuley was that modern society was moving away from that order based on classical principles. It was this perceived erosion of classical and religious principles that led BA Santamaria to proclaim the imminent death of western civilisation and to see the current age as one of crisis.⁹

The twin events of the entry of Britain into the EEC and Vatican II have had an enormous impact on those Australian conservatives who drew their inspiration from either an idealised Britain or an eternal Rome. It was as if the firm principles of civilisation and order had turned into quicksand. The situation was compounded by the growth of a set of values that is often summed up under the term the 'sixties.' McAuley saw such developments as a rebirth of Gnosticism, a contemporary version of Romanticism based on individual self-expression and the capacity of the individual to reshape his or her nature through an act of the will.¹⁰

The crisis of Australian conservatism?

What does conservatism now mean in Australia? The sources of both its principles and its institutional models appear to have dried up. It is no wonder that over the past thirty years, many of those of a conservative disposition in Australia have had to re-evaluate what conservatism means. The conservatism of the Howard years does not make sense without an appreciation of what

might best be termed the 'crisis' of Australian conservatism. The idea that the changes in Australian conservatism represent some sort of aberration fuelled by the insidious influence of American neo-cons and religious fundamentalists, as Boucher and Sharpe suggest, is a fantasy that does no justice to the capacity of Australians to behave as independent agents in shaping their own culture.

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One popular move amongst conservatives was to seek a source of order and stability in the way of life of the middle class and lower middle class. The logic was that this group had been least affected by the changes of the contemporary world and so had best preserved traditional values. Although the argument mirrors that of American writer Christopher Lasch, in the Australian context it was used initially by Santamaria in the context of the Catholic Church and found its finest expression in John Carroll's article on the lower middle class.¹¹

The roots of this argument lie in the belief that the source of disorder in the world are those members of the urban commercial classes who speculate on money and stocks rather than producing real goods that people need. This group was extended to include those individuals who work with ideas and abstract concepts, such as academics, teachers and journalists. Like the commercial classes they deal with things that are fanciful rather than those that are real. This argument has a long history. In the English speaking world it goes back at least to the years after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 when the traditional middle level country landowners, both Whig and Tory, sought to combat what they saw as the excessive influence of the new moneyed classes. To this group, in his analysis of the French Revolution one hundred years later, Edmund Burke added lawyers and Enlightenment intellectuals. The notion that one will find the backbone of any country among the productive

workers and those who have solid connections with the soil is nothing new.

The conservatism of the past twenty years should be seen as essentially a reworking of these sorts of traditional conservative themes as appropriate to contemporary circumstances. The primary concern of conservatives, as always, has been to conserve those aspects of their society that, they believe, contain the principles and practices on which they can build a good and satisfying life, and to reform those that do not seem to be working with an eye to what is practicable and achievable.

In this sense John Howard is not really all that different from many other conservative figures before him. By and large he eschewed bold and abstract schemes that would change the nature of humanity, placed primary faith in pragmatic principles, and sought to preserve those things that he believed were valuable, ranging from the family to cricket. He was also concerned, perhaps belatedly, with those areas, such as education, where ideas emanating from the new intellectual classes embodying Romantic notions of self expression had seemed to erode the order and stability of tradition. He had, I believe, imbibed some of the crisis mentality that can be found in Santamaria's writings, which is not surprising as his biography states that he spoke often to Santamaria.¹² What is astonishing is that neither Abjorensen nor Boucher and Sharpe mentions Santamaria in books purporting to be about Australian conservatism.

Postmodern conservatism?

It is nonsense to suggest, as Boucher and Sharpe do, that somehow Howard put into practice some new sort of conservatism that can be called 'postmodern conservatism.' Both conservatives and postmodernists oppose ideologies such as liberalism and conservatism, which claim to set out universal principles applicable to all societies. But conservatism has always emphasised the particular and the local as opposed to the universal and the abstract. This was certainly the case with Burke whose major complaint about the French Revolution was that it failed to build on the established traditions of France and European civilisation.¹³ In Burke's eyes it was seeking to destroy those foundations and to create new ones

out of a set of fanciful ideas. As well, Burke saw that the evils of the new order were being put into place by a particular group of men, lawyers, philosophers and the like—men whom we would now call the new class. These were men who under the old order, as described by Augustin Cochin, had 'chattered' about ideas in debating societies rather than taking an active role in their society.¹⁴ In fact the idea that individuals who merely deal with ideas are the destroyers of tradition is a very old idea. The sophists were regarded with great suspicion in ancient Athens for exactly this reason; perhaps they were the first post modernists.

Using the criteria of Boucher and Sharpe, the first Roman emperor Augustus could be described as a 'post modern conservative' because he tried to restore traditional Roman values. Augustus sponsored poets such as Horace and Virgil to extol both the glories of the Roman past and the virtues of a simple rural life. He attempted, through legislation, to restore the Roman family to its central place in Roman society. In fact, there is much about John Howard that reminds one of Augustus.

Howard's conservatism

What was central to Howard's project was his desire both to conserve what he saw as being the valuable aspects of Australia and to continue the reform process of the Hawke and Keating years. It has been argued that there was a great contradiction between Howard's advocacy of aspects of economic rationalism and his desire to preserve traditional institutions such as the family. Critics, including Boucher and Sharpe, argue that the forces of liberalism have been the greatest enemy of conservatism in recent years because they dissolve the bonds that tie traditional units together.

Such a view, however, rests on a rather sentimental and Romantic view of traditional institutions that assumes such institutions can only survive if they have the state constantly propping them up. This is like the French idea that the state has a responsibility to preserve an idealised version of the peasantry.

There is an alternative view that if traditional institutions are to survive, then they should rest on the voluntary principle and be the outcome of genuine cooperation among their members resting

on the affection that their members have for those institutions. If the institutions can only survive through state intervention then they are already walking corpses. The principle of cooperation and the active involvement of individuals can be seen as a particular strength of American conservatism. It is conservatism founded on liberal principles. It can also be argued that Australian conservatism, like Australian society more generally, has long drawn on both American and English and European models for guidance.

It would seem to me that the most controversial policy of the Howard agenda, Work Choices, similarly rested on the idea that the principles on which Australian society rested—the principles that form the basis of the habits of Australians and their conservative principles—should be founded on voluntary cooperation and not state coercion. The industrial system should rest on the good sense and common decency of the Australian people. Such a view would be to overturn the ideal enunciated by H. B. Higgins, the first judge of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court, that one can only have a ‘province of law and order’ if the state is involved as some sort of controller, a controller from the educated classes to regulate lesser mortals.

Santamaria idealised the local neighbourhood (including the local church and football team) as the foundation of his conservative vision. But Santamaria also placed too much faith in the state. With a little imagination one can see that the Earlwood of the 1950s left its imprint on Howard’s practical understanding of what conservative Australia looks like. (In the 1966 Australian comedy show *My Name’s McGooley—What’s Yours*, set in Balmain, it is Bexley North, neighbouring Earlwood, that the working class character Wally Stiller looks towards as the social ideal). It is a practical model of a neighbourhood of decent people who happily work together for the common good. Although this may sound idealised, it does make sense in terms of the move in the last couple of decades of the twentieth century to make the middle/lower middle class the basis of those traditions that form the backbone of order in society.

In this sense Howard’s love of cricket, his enunciation of the ANZAC ideal, and

commitment to the commonsense of ordinary Australians are expressions of a conservative ideal—an ideal that grew out of experience rather than a set of intellectual concepts. What differentiated Howard’s conservatism from that of Santamaria was that Howard did not consider that state intervention was needed to preserve what was best about Australia. As he was the child of a Methodist small businessman, his instincts told him that it was the ordinary people who were the best guardians of their own traditions. They did not need the state to do what they could do for themselves.

Howard’s love of cricket, his enunciation of the ANZAC ideal, and commitment to the commonsense of ordinary Australians are expressions of a conservative ideal.

Such a belief was not the consequence of some sort of aberration, of ‘New South Wales exceptionalism,’ but forms part of a tradition of individual self-reliance that has always been part of Australian conservatism. It is a tradition that is linked to saving, building societies, and other forms of self help, and to the belief that there is a certain shame attached to accepting money from the state.

As Britishness faded and the Church decided to try and do what it could to emasculate its traditions, it was natural that those of a conservative disposition should seek a new foundation for order in the practices and habits of the ordinary people. And it was natural that some of those habits should involve doing things for oneself rather than relying on the state. Many conservatives would agree that this instinct was correct and that the Abjorensens and Sharpes and Bouchers of this world are wrong. It is not individualism that destroys the fabric of society because the good society is one of individuals voluntarily cooperating with each other. The destructive agent is the state and its reliance on abstract ideas. Conservatives have long recognised that the biggest problem of the modern age is the way in which the state, with its mechanical processes, has sought to replace the natural organic processes of everyday life.

As I have argued elsewhere one of the problems with conservatism is that it can be used to defend practices and patterns of behaviour that have a destructive rather than a positive effect on the well-being of a society.¹⁵ The liberal reforms of the 1980s, begun by Hawke and Keating and continued by Howard, were implemented in part because of the recognition that many of the established practices of Australian life were harmful and required reform. Howard's contribution to this process was to bring together the liberal reform process with a conservatism based on Australian liberal traditions that emphasised individuals doing things for themselves. One can legitimately criticise him for being too conservative and not liberal enough, or for following a centralist solution to problems that was destructive of liberalism. Nevertheless, for all his faults Howard is much to be preferred to what appears to be the path of his successor, which is to forget all that has happened in the past 25 years and to return to a form of statism that flourished under Whitlam and Fraser. We need to remember that that course of action took Australia to the brink of disaster.

Endnotes

- 1 Judith Brett, *The Australian liberals and the moral middle class: from Alfred Deakin to John Howard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 2 Norman Abjorensen, *John Howard and the Conservative Tradition* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008), 63.
- 3 Abjorensen, *John Howard and the Conservative Tradition* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008), 28; and Geoff Boucher & Matthew Sharpe, *The Times Will Suit Them: Postmodern Conservatism in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008), 69–77.
- 4 Abjorensen, as above, 156–158.
- 5 Henry Parkes, 'Speech at Public Dinner at Kiama,' in his *Speeches on Various Occasions connected with the Public Affairs of New South Wales 1848–1874* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1876), 176.
- 6 David Syme, *Representative Government in England: Its Faults and Failures* (London: Kegan, Paul Trench & Co, 1881).
- 7 On Santamaria see BA Santamaria, *Santamaria: A Memoir* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 8 James McAuley, *The End of Modernity* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1959), 3.

- 9 BA Santamaria, *Australia at the Crossroads: Reflections of an Outsider* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1987), 211–29.
- 10 James McAuley, 'Culture and counter-culture: a personal view,' *Quadrant*, 20:9 (1976), 12–20.
- 11 Santamaria, as above, 101, and John Carroll, 'In praise of the lower middle class,' *Quadrant*, 36:11 (November 1992), 34–39.
- 12 Wayne Errington & Peter Van Onselen, *John Winston Howard: The Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 104.
- 13 See especially Edmund Burke, 'Reflections on the revolution in France,' in *Works V* (London: Rivington, 1815).
- 14 See François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 173–190.
- 15 Greg Melleuish, 'What is conservatism?' *Debate*, 3 (2008), 11.