The downside of the social revolution that began in the 1960s is that it fundamentally altered what were once traditional social attitudes to things such as sex, marriage, divorce, single motherhood, drugs, and welfare so-called ‘rights’—as Theodore Dalrymple observes in the preceding pages.

We know that the changes in social values over the past 40 years have had an unequal social impact and have caused the biggest social problems on the lowest rungs of society. This has created what has been termed an underclass of citizens, whose dependent and chaotic circumstances can be attributed not to material deprivation but to behavioural poverty—the breakdown of social norms around things such as work, family and the raising of children.

It is the last issue—the welfare of underclass children—that will be examined here to bring the real topic into focus. This is not just about the fact that the social revolution has caused social problems. It is that the triumph of counter-cultural values, or what are known as so-called progressive social values, has created cultural and political barriers that prevent elites—in government, the media and academia—from even acknowledging the downside of the revolution.

Worse, the prevailing social ethics of permissiveness and non-judgmentalism in relation to personal behaviour prevents those in opinion-leading and policy-shaping positions of authority from summoning the will to try to address the resulting social problems.

In reflecting on how cultural politics play out in relation to my work on child protection and adoption in Australia, I wish to raise some broader issues about the current divisions on the centre-right over social values, and briefly canvass the implications for those who might not want to sign up to the stock standard left progressive view of the world on social and economic issues—even in the name of a unity ticket on the right.

Finally, I would like to try to reframe the issues around some deeper questions about the character of Australian society and our fabled commitment to giving everyone a fair and equal go in life. Hopefully, discovering some language and aspirations that may recast and move forward the debate about social values, social problems and the underclass will help to transcend the cultural politics that impedes national discussion of important social issues.

The adoption taboo
Because my research on child protection informs my views, I treat debates about such social problems not as a moral or religious issue but as a policy issue. What

I bring to bear is my formal training in history, which taught me to understand the social and intellectual forces that shape political and cultural systems and institutions.

This approach is evident in my recent book, *The Madness of Australian Child Protection: Why Adoption Will Rescue Australia’s Underclass Children*. The book has a very simple argument concerning the problems in the child protection system, but it provides much more than just a description of the problems. It also examines at length the cultural and political obstacles to changing the system, with the major obstacle being the preference among political and cultural elites to endorse fashionable progressive social values and reject what is perceived to be a traditionalist, throwback social policy like adoption.

The end of forced adoption has created the very problem that this practice was designed to prevent—the creation of a dependent underclass of single mother families in which child welfare and protection concerns are concentrated.

The argument about the systematic problems is straightforward. Australian child protection authorities fail to properly protect children because of an over-emphasis on ‘family preservation’ at almost all costs, which exposes children to prolonged abuse and neglect by dysfunctional underclass parents. When finally removed as a last resort, many children are further damaged by experiencing highly unstable foster care and repeat breakdowns of family reunifications.

Due to this cycle of maltreatment and instability, many damaged children end up spending most of their childhoods and adolescences in care and never find a safe home and permanent family for life. Many of these children could have and should have been removed earlier and permanently from their families, and many should have been adopted—except that adoption is almost non-existent in Australia.

There are lots of facts and statistics that back this argument and, in my view, they make the case against the current approach and in favour of adoption unanswerable. But having facts, logic and evidence on your side is not even half the battle in terms of achieving policy change. There is a reluctance among the political class to support adoption in part because of its bad reputation due to flawed past practices and the harm done to adopted people’s identities in the era when adoptions were closed.

These are not fatal objections because we have learned the lessons, and adoptions are open these days and we are much more aware of the need to promote children’s identity and heritages as part of good practice. We also, of course, need to judge the potential benefits of adoption against the real harm the lack of adoptions is doing.

### Policy paralysis and the forced adoption era

The other problem is that the reputation of adoption is inextricably associated with the era of forced adoptions—the practice of unwed, usually teenage, mothers having to give up their babies for adoption by married couples.

Forced adoption was the means by which traditional social values around sex, marriage and children were enforced in ways that we would consider harsh and punitive today. Hence as the social revolution took effect, the practice of forced adoption was scrapped and was replaced by what we like to think was a more enlightened approach of supporting single mothers through the welfare system.

Unfortunately, that is not the end of the story. Social change, or social progressivism, has led to social problems. The end of forced adoption has created the very problem that this practice was designed to prevent—the creation of a dependent underclass of single mother families in which child welfare and protection concerns are concentrated.

Herein lies one of the chief obstacles to more adoptions today. If we are to increase adoptions, this will inevitably mean telling single mothers they can’t keep their children. The circumstances are very different; we are talking about adoption due to demonstrable dysfunction and proven abuse and neglect not due to marital status. But the echo of forced adoptions, and of the so-called ‘conservative
values of the 1950s’, is enough to make many policymakers shy away from adoption.

The credit or rather blame for this can go to the anti-adoption movement, which plays the cultural politics very cleverly.

The anti-adoption movement is interesting. It is led by academics, usually social work academics, who have an ideological hatred of adoption. This is because it goes against their notion of social justice—that is, the belief that material poverty causes child abuse and that adoption therefore punishes poor parents.

But the rank and file of the movement is made up of mothers and children and some fathers who were subject to forced adoption. They argue based on their ‘lived experience’ that adoption is an inherently harmful practice, and demand that there be no adoptions at all. This demand seems to be about self-validation and ensuring that their own experience as victims is publicly affirmed by keeping adoption taboo. The way the taboo is enforced, however, is by linking any suggestion of greater use of adoption to a return to the bad old judgmental days of forced adoption.

The effect of this is to make adoption cultural poison for many elites who don’t want to be seen to be ‘judging’ ‘different’ families. This is documented in my book by looking at the state and national parliamentary apologies for forced adoptions, and by noting how politicians across the political spectrum used these occasions to endorse the sentiments of the anti-adoption movement. This meant endorsing family preservation over adoption, because the political and cultural risk of supporting adoption is that you will be tarred with the traditionalist or social conservative brush, and be likened to the ‘baby snatchers’ of the 1950s and 1960s.

It is not surprising that politicians are reluctant to out themselves as social conservatives, and fear even being perceived as socially conservative. Most people, being social animals and craving peer and group approval, prefer to endorse the social values that are culturally ascendant because that is what the culture rewards you for doing.

The reality is that in contemporary society there is a cultural price to pay—in condemnation and marginalisation, usually doled out by the ABC or Fairfax or Twitter—for even appearing socially conservative on a social issue such as marriage. This is because, thanks to the long march of the Left, the commanding heights of the key cultural institutions—including the universities—are bastions of counter-cultural, anti-traditionalist values.

What was particularly revealing and disheartening about the forced adoption apologies was the extent to which politicians on the right endorsed the idea of family diversity—namely, that all families are equal and equally good for children regardless of parents’ marital status. The apologies basically became an opportunity to signal virtue, and for individuals to self-congratulate themselves on how progressive they were, by saying, in effect, see, I am not like those horrible, conservatives of previous generations that judged and stigmatised single mothers.

Now it is fine if people have those social convictions. But the problem is that this is not enough if it prevents them from taking responsibility for the social consequences of the social revolution. And this is exactly what has happened regarding adoption of underclass children—those in positions of authority would rather not jeopardise their social status (and self-perception) as right-thinking social progressives, and thus they do not face up to social realities.

This brings me to local difficulties that are occurring on the centre-right. The social wets might say that banging on about social conservative issues is a distraction from the main game of prosecuting an economically dry agenda. And that fighting the culture war for traditional values against progressive values is a waste of time and effort that loses friends and influences nobody.

It is possible that my perception is distorted because of my work on child protection, but I...
understand the chaos and harm that so-called progressive values have wrought in society and continue to do so through the current child protection system. It is also questionable whether being socially wet and economically dry is even internally consistent, and whether this can actually be self-defeating.

If we are serious about tackling disadvantage, let alone reducing the size of government, we cannot avoid thinking and talking about so-called social conservative issues.

The costs of social dysfunction
The child protection system costs over $4 billion a year nationally and the cost has more than doubled since 2000. This is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the costs of the social revolution and its contribution to growth in government spending, not only in child welfare but also in health, education, homelessness, domestic violence, justice.

Figures from the UK suggest that the 500,000 most dysfunctional families in Britain cost taxpayers over $30 billion a year. There is no reason to think the costs are not similar here. This suggests that if you want to cut the size of government, you need to shrink the underclass.

Think about all the government programs—on top of the direct cost of the welfare system—designed to address social disadvantage, and how the constant push is to spend even more to ‘break the cycle of disadvantage.’ Think as well how all the debates about inequality rarely, if ever, trace social disadvantage back to the major social phenomenon of the 1960s—the breakdown of the family—despite the wealth of social science evidence that shows that family breakdown is a leading cause of social inequality.

My point simply is that if we are serious about tackling disadvantage, let alone reducing the size of government, we cannot avoid thinking and talking about so-called social conservative issues, otherwise we are just going to be chasing our tails.

This is why, in my view, the centre right needs to be, if not a broad church, then a double-sided movement. Yes, we need to stress the importance of individual freedom. But we also need to realise when liberty becomes license, which is when private behaviour has public consequences, especially when taxpayers pick up the bill for the collapse of social norms aka personal irresponsibility.

It is also worth pondering, perhaps, the deeper significance of the unwillingness to take up the issue of adoption. If centre-right politicians can’t make the case for adoption, and are unwilling to assume the cultural and political risks this entails, and then neutralise those risks as can be done with a bit of political nous, this begs a further question. Will they really have the political will and skills to tackle public education and public health reform that are central to budget repair, reducing the size of government, cutting tax, and boosting economic prosperity?

Or put another way: if taking on Safe Schools and the Roz Ward’s of the world is too tough a political challenge, then good luck taking on the Australian Medical Association or the education unions. (There is also little evidence that the moderates are making a serious effort to prosecute a dry agenda in these areas of huge government expenditure.)

So maybe the real battle on the centre right is not between the delusional conservatives and the trendies, but between those with some principles versus those with no principles who would rather curry favour with the cultural left for the sake of quiet and undistinguished life.

A way forward
On a more positive note, I want to canvass a potential way forward to counter the grip of the counter-culture on debates about the social and economic issues that should be central to the centre right’s agenda by suggesting a different paradigm within which these issues can be framed and discussed.

These thoughts have been prompted in part by reading Stan Grant’s much-feted book Talking to My Country (see my review in the June 2016 issue of Quadrant magazine). In his book Grant argues that Indigenous people have been denied the migrant dream in Australia—of freedom and opportunity—due to the persistent legacy of racism. My major problem with the book is that Grant's
account of Indigenous disadvantage is completely wrong-headed. What has trapped some Indigenous people in suffering and poverty is not racism but the political agenda of self-determination—as any serious analyst of indigenous ‘gaps’ simply has to acknowledge.

What offends me about Grant’s book is not only that he himself is proof that Indigenous people can live the Australian dream. As someone from migrant heritage who has enjoyed every advantage that this country gives to all comers, what also irritates me about Grant’s book is that it fails to perceive—and in an area of policy where this insight is crucial—exactly what the Australian achievement has been.

Why has this country managed to give so many people from so many backgrounds so much freedom and opportunity exceeding all but a few other places in the world? My answer is that compared to other nations with far less enviable records, we have not and do not in general make ordinary people the victims of political ideology.

The standout exception to this is Indigenous people in remote homeland communities where the results of Capital S, Capital D Self-Determination policies speak for themselves. The other exception is child protection policy, and more generally in relation to the lot of the permanent underclass that continues to live out the dire consequences of post-1960s social change and intergenerational dysfunction.

The fog of cultural politics
What do I mean by ideology? Ideology becomes a problem in a pejorative sense when it means we deal with the world the way we want it to be, rather than the way it is. Ideology becomes a problem when it stops us thinking clearly and critically about social problems—for example, if we want to keep believing that family diversity is an unadulterated positive social development, and there is not a downside to family breakdown that needs to be addressed, say, through adoption for child protection purposes.

From this historical perspective, this is what enrages me about the child protection debate—ideology trumps reality, and we leave festering a major social problem that perpetuates entrenched disadvantage. And for the sake of what? So that people can keep thinking bad thoughts about the social conservatism of 1950s and think good thoughts about themselves by affirming their progressive cultural status through endorsing politically correct ideas?

Ignoring social reality and substituting ideology for reality—and rendering people into victims of that ideology—should be called out for what it is: it’s un-Australian because it denies the freedoms and opportunities that the rest of us take for granted to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable Australians.

What this means perhaps is that those on the centre right need to have more cultural confidence. They should be bolder in asserting the importance of traditional social values as a necessary precondition for understanding and responding to the social problems that plague the underclass. (And why shouldn’t we have greater cultural confidence when social progressivism has led to dysfunction, maltreatment and gross inequality?)

This is also to say that traditional social values—including, dare it be said, the traditional meaning of marriage as a social institution crucial to the welfare of children—are not fringe moral issues, but are, or rather should be, mainstream policy issues.

If we are prepared to cut through the fog of the cultural politics, it might just be possible to prosecute a centre-right social policy agenda of which the clear and stated purpose is to advance Australia’s enviable record of improving the circumstances of its underclass underdogs.