

Michael in a Muddle

Michael Pusey's bungled attack on economic reform

Andrew Norton

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In his new book, *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform*, Michael Pusey argues that the economic reforms carried out since the early 1980s have had significant detrimental effects on Australian society. Major newspapers have reported his argument, but there has been little discussion of numerous serious errors of fact and logic.

- Many of Pusey's economic claims are incorrect—unemployment has not increased, job turnover is not higher, job security is not lower, small business is not in decline, and real wages have not been held down.
- Even when Pusey gets his facts right, he wrongly assumes that economic reform caused certain outcomes, and does not consider alternative explanations such as technological advances, social change affecting work participation, varying international trading conditions and increasing levels of education.
- Pusey misinterprets his own survey data to suit the argument he wants to make. The polling results are often inconsistent with Pusey's hostility to economic reform.
- Pusey quotes or cites very few economic reformers, and shows little sign of understanding why economic reform took place.
- Instead of real explanations, Pusey offers conspiracy theories about ideology and corporate interests. More likely reasons, such as the mostly Labor reforming governments trying to increase employment and maintain social services despite resistance to higher tax, are not considered.

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Pusey's argument against the reform agenda cannot simply rest on public opinion.

Introduction

For an academic sociologist, Michael Pusey has a talent for publicity. His 1991 book *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*, on its author's account, netted him 23 'dedicated' articles in the metropolitan press and 50 radio interviews. Unlike most books by academics it received many, if mixed, reviews. Reportedly, no other book commissioned by Cambridge University Press's Australian arm has sold so well. Given this success, Cambridge University Press commissioned another book from Pusey, and in April released *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform*.

As with *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*, a survey is central to the new book, but this time not of the bureaucrats who implemented economic reform, but the middle Australians who experienced it. Pusey changed the subjects of his survey, but his message remains the same. This is that the economic reform programme of the last twenty years has been very bad indeed. Among other things, it has increased unemployment including 'deliberately' reducing full-time employment, caused overwork to invade private time, made intimacy 'contingent', delayed and reduced fertility, lifted mortgage payments, eroded public schools and public transport, put small business in decline, led to the breakdown of community ('consuming civil society itself as a fuel for the furnace of the new capitalism'), fostered social paranoia and racism, created an unfair distribution of wealth, instigated more unhappiness and depression and generally made people 'angry'.

The publisher's publicity team has worked hard to sell *The Experience of Middle Australia* and its gloomy diagnosis. The first edition comes with a page of 'advance praise'. Robert Manne—whose co-edited collection on economic reform's dark side, *Shutdown: The Failure of Economic Rationalism*, was published in 1992—calls it 'one of the most important contributions to Australian self-understanding of recent years'. Leading Green Bob Brown describes it as a 'fascinating insight into the hidden Middle Earth of Australian thinking'. Will Hutton and Noam Chomsky provide endorsements from the UK and the US respectively.

Though *The Experience of Middle Australia* has to date received less extensive mass media coverage than its predecessor, it has been widely reported. Broadsheet papers like *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The Australian* all gave it a good run. Unusually for an academic book, the tabloids were also interested and sympathetic. *The Daily Telegraph* ran two pages of entirely uncritical reporting. The Sydney *Sun-Herald* printed a four page profile of Pusey, entitled 'Michael in the Middle', with only one paragraph of negative comment.

Like *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*, *The Experience of Middle Australia* is well on its way to being a standard citation on the subject, the book people mention when they want academic authority for a point about economic reform they don't have space to argue. As this *Issue Analysis* will show, the book is not worthy of standard citation status. If the *Sun-Herald* had read it more carefully, their title would have been not 'Michael in the Middle' but 'Michael in a Muddle'.

Pusey's economics

Pusey's main form of evidence in *The Experience of Middle Australia* is opinion polls. While these can demonstrate discontent with economic reform, Pusey's argument against the reform agenda cannot simply rest on public opinion. He needs to show both that particular economic conditions exist, and that these conditions were caused by the economic reform programme of the last twenty or so years. Otherwise, his economic and moral case against the economic reform programme collapses, since it cannot be blamed for things that did not happen or that economic reform did not cause, even if large numbers of people believe otherwise.

Unfortunately for his argument, Pusey struggles unsuccessfully with economics. Several times Pusey claims that economic reform increased unemployment. Yet Pusey's own data at the back of the book shows that unemployment went up and down during the era of economic reform, peaking above the worst of the immediate pre-

reform period, but finishing well below it (Pusey wobbles on dates, but apart from the July 1973 tariff cuts no reform of consequence occurred before the dollar's float in December 1983). He says that many small Western European nations enjoy prosperity without the unemployment costs of the free market 'le modèle américain'. Little countries like Denmark and the Netherlands do have, by European standards, enviable employment records. But what about large Western European nations like France, Germany, Spain and Italy, none of which follow 'le modèle américain', but all of which have higher unemployment than countries that do—like Australia or the US? Pusey needs to explain why these large West European nations do so badly despite seemingly following his economic advice, but he doesn't even try.

Pusey repeatedly claims that economic reform reduced job security, and that job turnover is at record levels. Job turnover statistics are an objective measure of job security, as they show what proportion of people change jobs each year, and how many of those have lost their jobs. The Australian Bureau of Statistics figures on job turnover are left out of Pusey's table of 'key' economic indicators, and for good reason, because they do not show a systematic pattern but normal fluctuations with the business cycle. It is useful here to compare 1976 and 1996, because in 1996 the people in Pusey's survey were asked whether there is more insecurity now than twenty years ago (job security was not mentioned specifically, but the question was in a section on incomes and jobs). In 1976, 15.7% of workers changed jobs, and in 1996 the proportion was 15%, so no significant change there. The proportion of workers who ceased their job involuntarily dropped from 22.8% to 19.9%. The equivalent 2002 figures were 14.9% changing jobs, 18.1% leaving employment involuntarily.

Subjective data on job security does not help Pusey. Most years Roy Morgan Research surveys people on their perceptions of job security and their prospects of getting a job if they lost their current position. In 1976, 78% thought that their present job was safe, and 57% thought they could find a new job quickly if they lost their job. In November 1995 (there was no 1996 poll), 74% thought their job was safe, and 58% thought they could get a new job quickly. At both times, the vast majority of workers felt secure. In December 2002 the figures were 79% thinking their job was safe, and 54% confident of getting another quickly. Notice too, by comparing figures in this paragraph with the last, that workers are actually much less likely to lose their jobs than to worry about being out of work. Pusey cites the high proportion of casual workers as evidence of insecurity, but this confuses their formal contractual status with actual practice. Nearly two-thirds of casual workers in the first wave of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics (HILDA) survey rated their probability of job loss in the next year as zero or less than 10%. While the people in Pusey's survey may genuinely believe they are less secure, most of them (and Pusey) are wrong.

Big business is one of Pusey's pet hates, and he reports on what people in focus groups think it is doing to small business. This includes driving them out of business and creating unemployment, swallowing them up, and damaging local community, when small retailers whose staff 'have a chat with the lonely and single pensioner' are replaced by big supermarkets and shopping malls. While these things can happen, by simply repeating uncritically what people tell him, without cross-checking against real data, Pusey misses the bigger picture. Between 1983-84 and 1999-2000, nearly the whole period of economic reform, the number of small businesses with fewer than twenty employees went from 620,700 to 1,075,000. In 1990 there were 2.33 small business employees for every old age pensioner and in 2002 there were still 2.15, down slightly only because the pensioner population grew more quickly than the staff of small business.

Pusey believes that economic reform occurred at the expense of ordinary wage and salary earners, and his survey suggests that this view is also held in 'middle Australia'. Several times Pusey asserts that wages have been held down. In one

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paragraph, however, he casually notes that 'there *may* have been some improvement in the latter half of the 1990s' (emphasis added), but a table buried in the appendix *definitely* shows real wages rose during that period. Instead of accounting for evidence contradicting his theory, Pusey drops this partial admission into a discussion of increased income inequality in the 1980s. Since most market-oriented economic reform was implemented in the 1990s, 1980s income distribution patterns are just a diversion.

Causes and effects

Even where Pusey gets his facts more or less right, he refuses to follow the old social science maxim 'correlation is not causation'. Simply because things happened at around the same time or in sequence does not mean that one caused the other. While he recognises this possibility, his response is inadequate: 'it's all economic reform unless and insofar as others can demonstrate that it is something else'. Pusey reverses the academic burden of proof, and declares economic reform guilty until proven innocent.

Any balanced assessment would acknowledge that the economic reform programme was one of many things affecting the economy over the last twenty years. Technological advances, social change affecting workforce participation, entrepreneurial activity, shifts in consumer demand, increasing levels of education, varying international trading conditions, and natural disasters also occurred during this time. Economic reform accelerated some of these factors, but a policy status quo would not have stopped them.

For instance, in 1998 the Industry Commission tried to estimate the causes of employment change in various manufacturing industries, and in many cases the major reform, a reduction in tariffs and other industry assistance, was not the most important cause of falling employment. In the textile and motor vehicle industries, technical change had a greater effect. In the clothing and footwear industry, it was consumer preferences. I don't expect Pusey to give us precise figures on the relative effects of various economic factors. Economists will disagree on these matters. The reader is entitled to expect, though, a greater acknowledgement of the complex chains of economic cause and effect.

At times, Pusey seems quite naïve. In a section about the hollowing out of the middle class he notes that the 'winners' in the economic reform period include 'two-income families'. Most readers, I expect, would find it less than surprising that two-income families tend to earn more than one-income families. What is surprising, though, is that Pusey does not seem to realise that this complicates his story, since while economic reform may have encouraged women to take jobs, it certainly wasn't the only factor at work. He tells us elsewhere in the book that labour force participation by women aged 25 to 34 increased by nearly three-quarters in one generation, between 1970 and 1996. As these dates suggest, the process was well under way before economic reform commenced. Also well under way was rising university education for women, who achieved majority status on Australia's largely state-funded and controlled campuses in 1987, early in the reform process. More than half of university educated women's male partners also have university degrees, so the potential for households with two high incomes is obvious. Even if no economic reform had occurred, social and educational changes meant that large numbers of highly affluent two-income households, and the 'inequality' they create, were near inevitable.

As a sociologist Pusey should be more familiar with these social trends than with economic trends, but because they don't fit with the tale he wants to tell, he ignores them. In Pusey's book, the problem is not just that correlation is causation, but that convenient correlation is causation. In a book from an academic publisher, this isn't good enough. If Pusey wants us to believe that economic reform has negative effects, he must show both the causal connection and account for other factors that might plausibly affect outcomes.

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Pusey's survey

The core of this book is survey work Pusey and his colleagues did of areas classified as 'middle Australia'. There were two surveys, one of around 400 people in 1996, and then a follow-up on about 200 of the original group in 1999/2000, along with some focus groups. This information is sometimes supplemented by polls carried out by other organisations. There are problems with Pusey's survey instruments. The sample size is small, particularly for measuring opinion among sub-groups within it, and is skewed towards people living in Sydney. Compared to the general population, it has twice as many people with university degrees or working in the public sector. Pusey nevertheless describes the surveys as 'more than adequate for modest inferential purposes that are ultimately more heuristic than scientific'.

Pusey does not keep his promise of 'modest inferential purposes', since his conclusions go well beyond what the data tells us. One question asked 'How would you rate economic reform (things like deregulation of business, privatisation, job restructuring, more competition etc.)?' The results, using a feeling thermometer that pollsters sometimes use to measure grades of opinion, were 29% 'warm', 45% 'neutral' and 26% 'cold'. Pusey rates this as 'not a very sanguine endorsement of reform'. True enough, it is not very sanguine—but nor is it consistent with the near catastrophic picture he paints of Australian society. How could 74% of those he polled be neutral or in favour of economic reform if they seriously believe it has been as harmful as Pusey maintains?

Selectivity also helps Pusey paint a more negative picture than his own poll evidence warrants. For example, he dwells on 59% support for national wage indexation, but leaves unexplained minority opposition to enterprise bargaining and individual contracts, and instead simply quotes a focus group participant who was unhappy with his enterprise bargain. Other polls, less affected by the public sector bias in Pusey's sample, point to different results on this issue. In 2001 the Saulwick Poll asked employed people which kind of industrial coverage would make them better off. 38% said an award, 21% a workplace agreement, and 37% an individual contract. Saulwick's analysis was that people tend to believe that they are better off under whatever arrangement they have already. There is no great desire to return to the old centralised wage fixing system.

Repeatedly through the book Pusey tells us that people are 'angry' about economic reform. But his actual survey results, discreetly placed in an endnote where few will notice them, show that only 10% of his sample described themselves as 'angry and resentful'. Another 54% were 'a bit unhappy'. There's a large gap between being 'angry and resentful' and 'a bit unhappy', but Pusey blurs the two, and so overstates public discontent with economic reform.

Sometimes Pusey recognises contradictions between his argument and the data and attempts to explain them. He routinely denounces corporations and the way work is creating more stress and invading other spheres of life (he seems particularly upset about people being rung on their mobile phones out of hours, which he mentions several times). Yet he admits that only a quarter of private sector workers complain of bad relations between management and workers. He rationalises this as workers having sympathy for their line managers, who are also overworked. The more obvious conclusion is that most private sector workers are happy enough with their work circumstances. More awkwardly, dissatisfaction with management is much greater in the public sector that is shielded from the market. Pusey puts this down to Australia having a relatively small public sector. But equally it shows that his beloved public sector gives workers no guarantees of an easy time, and he offers no comparative evidence, either with Australia at an earlier time or overseas, to suggest that a large public sector improves satisfaction with management.

Why did economic reform happen?

Though Pusey exaggerates his findings, the raw data minus Pusey's spin usually tells a story that is roughly consistent with other and better surveys. Specific economic

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reform policies, where we have polls on them, often show minority support. This is most obvious on the issue of tariffs and protection, with around two-thirds of voters supporting protection over a long period of time. Privatisation of highly visible publicly owned companies rarely receives majority support, though a 1997 Morgan Poll found 55% of respondents supported at least one privatisation. Before the shift from awards most people did not want to change, but after the event, as we've seen, there is little evidence of widespread dissatisfaction. The 2001 International Social Science Survey, like Pusey's sample, shows lukewarm feelings about the current economic system, with 31% saying it has brought the majority of Australians more benefit than harm, 33% as much benefit as harm, and 36% more harm than benefits.

Given the lack of demand for reform policies, why did politicians, so often accused of being poll-driven, take no notice of them? Pusey never gives a convincing answer, and instead provides us with various conspiracy theories. Consistent with his earlier book, *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*, he believes that policymaking has been captured by 'narrowly trained neo-classical economists' in the bureaucracy and the senior ministers they advise. They were aided and abetted by 'New Right business-funded think-tanks', including the CIS, and by Arthur Andersen, the now defunct firm of accountants, which Pusey fancifully describes as the 'thought police for institutional and other large shareholdings'.

The major villains responsible for Australia's woes, however, are 'corporations' and their representatives, such as the Business Council of Australia. Here Pusey offers at least some evidence, himself, that economic reform triggers 'social paranoia'. Pusey thinks the economic reform agenda has been all about increasing corporate profits. Indeed, the people driving economic reform in Australia 'believe the central purpose of politics should be to confer the greatest possible advantage on large business enterprises that electoral tolerances will allow'. If Pusey is to be believed, in the 1980s the BCA was writing national budgets 'almost line by line'.

These conspiracy theories are very unsatisfactory. Even if like Pusey you believe the leftist cliché that the Liberal Party is 'little more than the front desk for the Business Council of Australia, for CEOs and vested interests', why were two successive Labor governments the main economic reformers? The explanation is complex, but there are two main reasons. First, Labor wanted to reduce unemployment. The Accord moderated wage increases to make keeping existing employees or taking on new employees more affordable for business (Pusey complains about wages being held down, but ignores the fact that wage growth was slowest under the last phase of the centralised system of wage fixing he believes should be resurrected). In the 1980s there was a strong link between a growing economy and increased demand for labour, so economic growth was also a key policy objective of the reformist Labor governments.

Second, Labor knew that rising demand for welfare and social services was very difficult to control over the long term, but that there was resistance to paying extra tax. The only way out of this dilemma was to target spending more tightly on areas of greatest need and to ensure the economy grew quickly enough to generate more tax revenue on the same tax rates. In its goals, if not its means, Labor's reform agenda was 'middle-of-the-road social democrat', as Pusey unconvincingly describes his own political beliefs (the back cover blurb from leftist polemicist Noam Chomsky that the book 'should become a central component of public debate on the radical reconstruction of Australian society' is closer to the mark).

Labor's objectives were well within the mainstream of public opinion. The Morgan Poll measure of most important issues for the federal government shows that throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s people rated economic issues as most important, with welfare and social service issues becoming increasingly important as time went on. Labor's leaders presumably calculated that they would be judged more on the results of their policies than the details of how they achieved them. With a record five consecutive ALP federal election victories, this was a very successful gamble.

The impossibility of debate

Pusey can barely contemplate the idea that economic reformers acted in good faith, doing the best they could within the constraints they faced. In Pusey's mind, when reform wasn't motivated by a desire to further enrich big business, it came from ideology. He says that 'our own economic rationalist prescription proceeds from the extreme assumption that economies, markets, money and prices can always, at least in principle, deliver better outcomes than states, governments, and the law'. Aside from a few anarchists with no influence on Australian government, nobody believes this, and no policy proceeds on its basis. If Pusey read in detail what actual economic rationalists say—only four are cited or quoted, and even then only in passing—he would know that the limits of markets are well-known and widely discussed. Preferring a larger role for markets does not mean there is no room for other organisational mechanisms.

At one of the few points that Pusey seems willing to accept that any reformer might have good intentions, he remarks that to the 'greater detriment of the national conversation, people of goodwill on both sides of the fence never talk to each other'. Speaking personally, but confident that it applies to other 'economic rationalists', in principle I am happy to talk with people who disagree with me. But Pusey's book shows that talking to him is likely to be a waste of time. Pusey has been criticised for his nonsense definition of economic rationalism since he started using it in 1991, but he will neither accept assurances that nobody believes that markets are fit for all purposes, nor provide evidence that anybody believes it in principle or has followed it in practice. There have been dozens if not hundreds of reviews and articles pointing out errors of economic fact and reasoning by anti-economic rationalists, including many specifically correcting Pusey, but the hint that economic impressions should be checked against economic facts is never taken.

Instead of seriously engaging with his critics, Pusey poses as a David slinging stones at the neoliberal Goliath. Despite all the people prepared to plug his book before it was published, and despite Cambridge University Press releasing two books with similar arguments only last year (by Pusey's UNSW colleague Peter Saunders and by Lindy Edwards), Pusey says to a journalist that he is sad to feel that he is a lone voice. But he is brave in the face of adversity. 'There is an army of hit men ready to knock and discredit these ideas' he tells the *Sun-Herald*, before adding that he doesn't lose any sleep over it. This remark helps explain why Pusey can get things so wrong. If you assume that everyone against you is a stooge of corporate interests or a far-out ideologue then they can just be dismissed as 'hit men'. Presumably, this is why Pusey feels he can write about economic reformers with minimal reference to what they actually say, and disregard critiques of his previous work. Books like this one, with its errors of fact, logic and omission, are the regrettable consequence of this self-imposed intellectual isolation.

With serious debate between Pusey and his critics impossible, all that can be done is to issue consumer warnings about books like *The Experience of Middle Australia*. Its appearance under the prestigious Cambridge University Press brand, its endorsement by prominent people, and its positive reception in the mass media all give it a credibility it does not deserve. Robert Manne described the book as a contribution to 'Australian self-understanding', but in reality it is a contribution to Australian self-misunderstanding. The reasons for economic reform, its consequences, and the public's reaction to it are all, to varying degrees, inaccurately portrayed in this book. Readers should not bother with books that will leave them less well-informed at the end than they were at the start.

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