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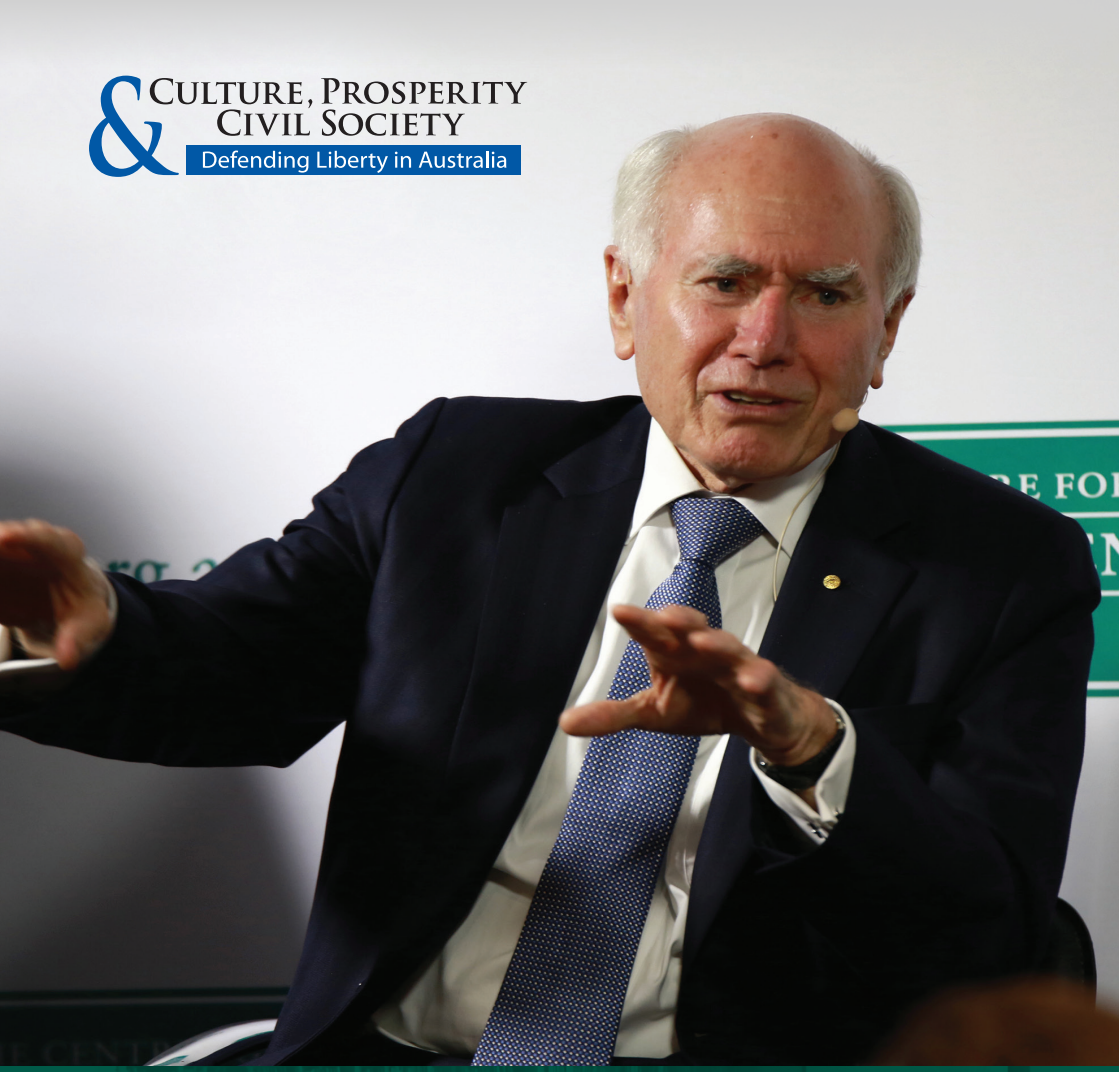

John Howard: A Conversation on Culture

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FOREWORD

This publication is an edited transcript featuring the remarks made by John Howard at the launch of The Centre for Independent Studies' Culture, Prosperity and Civil Society Program on 10 July 2018.

This 'Conversation About Culture' with Australia's second-longest serving former Prime Minister ranged over many important topics. Mr Howard delivered many characteristically penetrating and common sense insights into questions about identity politics, political correctness, civility, religious freedom, parental choice, immigration and the 'history wars'.

At the heart of the discussion was the cultural malaise evident in many Western countries, including — unfortunately — Australia.

Australia is still a free country. But in these politically correct times, many serious subjects cannot be openly discussed without prompting condemnation from what Mr Howard once called "self-appointed cultural dieticians."

The reality is that the proponents of re-making society in the approved, 'progressive' form are loud, strident, well-organised, and determined to suppress dissenting opinions to advance their agenda.

This is just the start of a wider illiberal agenda that threatens our core institutions and beliefs, and endangers fundamental freedoms — from speech to thought to conscience — that have long been taken for granted.

At the same time, the prophets of doom tell us we have never been worse off economically; undermining belief in the tenets of capitalism and the free market reforms that since the 1980s have delivered rising living standards and an unprecedented era of prosperity for Australians.

There is no simple answer to these problems. But as Mr Howard's remarks suggest, what is presently lacking in too many social and economic debates is the sensible, informed, and brave leadership

needed to challenge political correctness and win the support of the public.

The importance of this kind of leadership was illustrated and exemplified when the discussion turned to the question of immigration — and by Mr Howard's riposte to the politically-correct argument that it's somehow racist to debate this issue.

Mr Howard seized the opportunity to restate the lessons of how his government handled border protection: stopping illegal arrivals boosted public confidence in, and support for, a controlled, large-scale immigration and generous humanitarian refugee program, and set the scene for the record immigration intakes into Australia since the early 2000s.

The bigger lesson here — that full and frank debate about contentious issues is not just legitimate but essential to build public confidence and support — was apiece with the broader point canvassed during the conversation about the desperate need for more people to speak out and provide cultural leadership on the contentious issues that are of concern to many ordinary Australians.

It is this crucial need that led the CIS to develop the Culture, Prosperity and Civil Society Program, which will spearhead our engagement in the vital cultural battles of our time, and defend the values and principles of liberal democracy and open economy that have seen modern Australia become one of the freest, most prosperous, and tolerant nations in the world.

It was an honour to have Mr Howard at the launch of an initiative that will fight back against those who would — to paraphrase another of his most famous statements — divide, instead of unite, Australians around the values, principles, and beliefs that will protect our future as a free, civil, and prosperous society.

Tom Switzer
Executive Director
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Dr Jeremy Sammut
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John Howard:
A Conversation on Culture

Tom Switzer: It's all happening right now in Britain, and the reason why John Howard is here tonight and not on June 19 is because he had to go to Britain to do an event with the Prime Minister Theresa May. Given the shenanigans and the dramas in Westminster this week, do you think that the British people are having second thoughts about leaving the European Union?

John Howard: No I don't, I don't think there's any doubt that they still want to leave the European Union, and I would suggest based on polls that have been taken recently and just intuition, that if anything, they are angry that it has taken so long to get to the point of final departure.

Tom Switzer: Okay, but Theresa May made a spectacular miscalculation when she called an early election last year. Majorities dwindled dramatically, it's now a minority government. The conventional wisdom now at Westminster is that she is probably on political life support. Whom do you think is likely to replace her?

John Howard: Well I don't think any alternative has emerged and although she has lost an enormous amount of authority because she called an election to give herself a landslide win and didn't get it. The most important commodity that any political leader has is authority, authority is more important than popularity. She has certainly lost an enormous amount of authority.

However, don't underestimate the absolute distaste and hostility of the Ulster Unionists who are providing her with a majority in the House of Commons towards Jeremy Corbyn. Jeremy Corbyn of course flirted with the IRA and he has a long record of anti-Semitism. It's the level of anti-Semitism that he has embraced that is something of a scandal in the British Labor Party, amongst its more sensible elements. Even with all the difficulties that Theresa May has, the most recent polls still put the Tories in a reasonably strong position. But time is running out, I'll be fascinated to see what the reaction of the European Union is to the Chequers deal.

Tom Switzer: This was mapped out last Friday.

John Howard: Last Friday. Fundamental to what that deal represents is the rejection of free movement of people within the European Union, and I can't see how the European Union can agree to Britain rejecting free movement of people.

Tom Switzer: Before talking about culture, I want to just ask you one other question about Westminster politics. The betting markets say that Boris Johnson would be the likely successor to Theresa May and Max Hastings, who is Boris' former boss at the Daily Telegraph in Britain for the best part of a decade, He's taken to the London Times today and he says, "Johnson's glittering intelligence is not matched by self-knowledge. He sees his place in the nation's history in Churchillian terms whereas others, including most of the parliamentary conservative party, would cast him as a Blackadder in a blond wig."

Max Hastings goes on to say, "Should he ever achieve his towering ambition to become prime minister, a signal would go forth to the world that Britain had abandoned any residual aspiration to be viewed as a serious nation."

John Howard: Well I don't want to draw a comparison but I've read about language of that type that was used about Winston Churchill by Tory grandees, so I just dismiss that.

Max Hastings is a seriously good military historian and a very good writer and I've read a lot of his books and he's worth listening

to. I don't think there is any plot afoot at the moment to remove Theresa May, but she did run a very bad election campaign. She, I suppose, dumped on top of many of her own strongest supporters an ill thought-out retirement policy, and she is probably regarded as not a very good campaigner, but I don't think there is any consensus around an alternative at the present time. I think Johnson would be very popular in the Tory shires, he would be very popular amongst the rank and file … the grassroots, the conservative movement, but there would be doubts about his ability to lead the parliamentary party within sections of the parliamentary party, and there would be implacable hostility to him amongst those who in the conservative party wanted to remain in the European Union.

Let me put it this way, speaking from some experience in these matters, when you have leadership changes you've got to have them occurring in circumstances where they are broadly acceptable to the people who are going to be governed by the changes, and I think we've seen plenty of evidence in the past several years, in the past several decades, of that not being the case.

Tom Switzer: Now, the Australian people retired you from public life ten and a half years ago… and in your preface to Peter Kurti's book you say that the quality of public debate in Australia has taken a dramatic turn for the worst. You go on to say, "Ignorance and bigotry have been displayed towards people expressing traditional views on social issues. This has occurred incredibly enough in the name of greater tolerance and acceptance of alternative points of view." How do you account for these trends since you left office?

John Howard: Well, I think it's a worldwide trend, it's not confined to Australia. But I think we have coarsened – not only coarsened the political debate, but we have lost the capacity to have a civilized discussion absent accusations of bigotry and racism and discrimination on important issues.

A very good example is immigration. Now this country has benefited enormously from immigration and there remains a broad level of support for immigration in this country. But, there is an argument that the current level could well be too high and there is an

argument it is having an adverse effect on things like housing prices and urban congestion in the bigger cities. We ought to be able to have a serious debate about this without people who are involved in the debate being accused of being bigoted or racist. But it seems that there's nothing in the middle anymore, that you either have people who are in favour of a big Australia where you just endlessly add to our numbers by migration or alternatively you are a racist. Now, there is somewhere in the middle.

When we first came into office a long time ago in 1996, we actually cut immigration in our first term, we did. Incidentally some of the advice we had from our bureaucrats at the time was that it wasn't costly to cut immigration, in fact it was the reverse. Now that seems not to be the case, it seems that the advice that's coming now from our bureaucrats is that actually having more migrants boosts our economy. I'm a little confused about that, but just leave that aside.

But we cut it. But then later on when our economy was in a different condition we had very high levels of immigration, and the big take out I took on immigration, particularly fury over our border protection policy in 2001.

Tom Switzer: The Tampa asylum-seeker standoff.

John Howard: Yeah**, e**xactly. The Australian people will always support a high level of immigration provided they believe the government is controlling it and the government is choosing people on the basis of the contribution they make to the country. Now that's been our happy experience and the Australia you see today is a product of that, but it ought also to be a product of an environment in which you can seriously debate whether or not you can cut it without it being accused of being a racist, without being accused of being intolerant or whatever.

Jeremy Sammut: Well on that question, one of your most famous statements was that the things that unite Australians are more important than the things that divide them. However, you are also probably the first politician in the western word to identify

the threat of identity politics when you coined the term 'minority fundamentalism' in 1994.

Do you think that the divisions and polarisations that we're seeing today are different to the divisions and polarizations we saw in the past? For instance, after the Whitlam government, after the dismissal?

John Howard: Look, I think what has happened is that identity politics has fragmented the political debate. I think increasingly political parties appeal to groups in the community according to what they have in common as distinct from the rest of the community, and I think that is a thoroughly bad development.

I grew up in politics believing that what a political party should do is develop a program built around a philosophy. You didn't appeal to particular groups of small business operators, you appealed to small business, whether the small business was run by an Anglo-Celtic Australian or by a Chinese Australian or by an Italian Australian or a Czech or whatever. But I think we have progressively over the years embraced an approach which is based on appealing to individual groups in the community.

Now, I think part of it came out of the obsession with ethnic political advantage amongst different migrant groups with an obsession for what I would call zealous multiculturalism. In order to gain political advantage, you identified yourself as being more pro a particular ethnic group. In other words, this party was for all the Greeks or this party was for all the Italians and this party was anti-something else. Now I think that's a thoroughly bad development, but of course it's progressed from that not only here but in the United States.

I think Hillary Clinton largely lost the election because of identity politics. She believed that if you accumulated a sufficient level of support amongst women, amongst gays, amongst blacks, amongst different groups, you would get to 50%+1 and to hell with the social consequences of dividing people according to whether they were black or white or Jewish or whatever. Now that, I think, is thoroughly bad.

You see it now with the composition of parliamentary parties. I often amuse myself by reading the occupational backgrounds of the

last Chifley cabinet. Now the last Chifley cabinet,, famously you had an ex-engine driver as prime minister, sure you had in Bert Evatt a lawyer and eminent former judge and so forth, not possessed of very good judgment, but certainly legally very well qualified. You had two farmers, you had a publican in John Armstrong, you had a tobacconist, I mean that's practically a criminal offense now, but he was from Bathurst so that made him acceptable.

My point is that it was a more diverse sort of group, and I think we have narrowed the gene pool and we have this terrible development where an increasingly large number of members of parliament on both sides have life's experience entirely working in politics. You go to the university, you go to the union office, and then you go onto a member of parliament's staff, or if you're on the Liberal side you skip the union office and you go straight on to the staff.

There is a place for those sort of people. I mean, my political mentor John Carrick who died at the age of just short of a hundred years only a few weeks ago, he spent his whole working life — after he came back from being a prisoner of war of the Japanese — working for the Liberal Party before going into the Senate. Now, he was an outstanding political tactician and a wonderful man. And I can think of others, but it's over done and I think it's a reflection of the problem I think.

Tom Switzer: Back to identity politics: I think there's no question that identity politics is more entrenched in the American scene than it is here, at this stage at least. You might recall a book that was published in the early 1990s by a left liberal of all people, the distinguished historian Arthur Schlesinger, The Disuniting of America, right?

John Howard: Arthur Schlesinger was one of John Kennedy's senior advisors and he was a speechwriter. He wrote The Disuniting of America in 1992 and he attacked what he called zealous multiculturalism and he also attacked identity politics. He was a great fan of the old melting pot which built the American identity. You draw a people from everywhere, but once they arrive they are part of a common group. And they don't lose the love of their country, they don't lose

their separate religious attitudes if they are religious — of course not — but the idea is you unite them behind a common civic ethos.

I think what identity politics is doing is destroying a common civic ethos that you are encouraging people to think of themselves increasingly in identity terms. It's really quite amusing, so much of this is done in the name of tolerance, particularly racial tolerance, yet what is happening is that people are being encouraged to think of themselves more than they did years ago as being a Chinese Australian or Greek Australian or Anglo-Celtic, and I think it is an extremely bad development.

But worst of all it defies the capacity of a political party to develop a program that has universal appeal. Speaking as a Liberal, obviously I want the Liberal Party to appeal to all Australians in relation to lower taxation and free enterprise and a freer labor market and a more dynamic economy. I don't care what the ethnic background is. I don't care what their occupational background is, but I do care whether they are willing to embrace a common program.

Jeremy Sammut: These issues matter on that political level, but they also matter in terms of how our law operates and how our institutions operate as well. Because one of the big things about identity politics is that in the context of anti-discrimination law and laws like Section 18c, they effectively turn identity politics into a weapon that attacks the fundamental freedoms that many Australians have accepted as a part of liberal democracy for as long as we've been a federation.

John Howard: Yes… I know it's a dangerous thing to say, but in some respects anti- discrimination laws have added to the problem. You have this situation where there is a legitimate nervousness about whether the exemptions granted to faith-based schools, whether they be Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim whatever, whether those exemptions are going to be taken away or watered down by state governments.

Now, the common sense thing is that if you are running a Catholic school, you ought to be able to employ people who give general assent to the doctrines of the Catholic Church. They don't have to

be particularly zealous. They don't have to be people who go to mass every Sunday, but surely you are entitled to say, "Well look we are running a Catholic school and we want to have people who give general assent." Now, that to me makes sense. In fact that sort of doctrine made sense to the Victorian parliament 10 years ago when John Brumby was Premier, and they passed an equality act which dealt with discrimination in the work place and it said that this act will not apply to the employment of people by political parties.

In other words, they were encouraged to the view that if you are the Labor Party you shouldn't have to employ somebody who is hostile to the Labor philosophy. Now I think that's right. I mean I don't expect the ACTU headquarters in Melbourne to have its switchboard operated by a member of the HR Nicholls Society, I don't expect that. I think it's a perfectly legitimate thing.

Now I think that we're in this situation where 'oh you know, maybe yes…' Now okay, some people hearing me say this will say, "Well what's he talking about? Nobody is talking about taking away these exemptions", but yes they are. They are talking about taking them away in Western Australia, talking about taking them away in the Northern Territory, and you will have agitation at the state government level.

Now, how we get our heads around what is a fundamentally common sense approach, and what is distressing about this whole identity politics is that the average Australian would nod their head hearing somebody say, "Well if you are running a Catholic school, you shouldn't be forced to employ somebody who is hostile to the Catholic religion. Or if you're the Labor Party you shouldn't have to employ somebody who is a member of the Liberal Party, who is hostile to its philosophy" and that's common sense. Yet we live now in a society where those common sense rules are suspended and I would like to see a bipartisan calling out of that and you would solve a lot of these difficulties if you had common sense statements from both sides of politics about the absurdity of the way in which we've really made anti-discrimination legislation the new black.

Tom Switzer: When we talk about identity politics, just to be clear, we're talking about dividing people by race, religion, gender,

ethnicity and what not. Here's a classic case in point that happened in this country. Earlier this year we had the Nurses and the Midwives Association being told that there was a Code of Conduct, and I will just read you out the code: Nurses and midwives should uphold "culturally safe and respectful practices for indigenous patients and this should involve the acknowledgment of white privilege as a part of cultural safe practice." The Wall Street Journal editorial page, which is admittedly a centre-right paper …

John Howard: Don't be apologetic.

Tom Switzer: No I'm not, well I am, probably in the sense of that on Radio National I need to make that disclaimer, but nevertheless this is what the Wall Street Journal said. The implication is that nurses must confess their sins of being born white and having learned how to care for patients as a kind of political expatiation before they can treat someone. What do you make of that?

John Howard: Well, I agree with the Wall Street Journal. It's self evident …

Tom Switzer: What does it tell you about the country's cultural landscape in 2018?

John Howard: I think those things should be more vigorously denounced. The Australian public will take a lead on these sorts of things and I think that this thing should be more vigorous denounced by both sides of politics, not just one but both.

Tom Switzer: Okay but what about the move to crack down on Qantas employees what they can and cannot say? This was the edict, "(Qantas) staff should avoid using words such as mum and dad, husband and wife, in order to avoid offending some hypothetical passenger." Where was the political leadership condemning that?

John Howard: Well, unfortunately nobody did attack it. A lot of passengers did — which really makes my point.

Jeremy Sammut: Back on to identity politics and anti-discrimination laws; one of the great achievements of liberal democracy is that it's allowed us to live together peacefully despite our differences, by respecting the rights and freedoms of everybody. Identity politics tries to, as you pointed out in the foreword to Peter's book, ironically in the name of diversity, try and force people to think, act and speak the same way around issues, around race and gender and sexuality.

Now, one of the organizations that's been very prominent in promoting this in Australia in recent years is the Human Rights Commission. You opposed its creation in the Fraser cabinet?

John Howard: Yes, I did.

Jeremy Sammut: Why?

John Howard: I didn't think it was necessary. I think there are three things that are necessary for a free a society given our civilization and background and culture. The first is you need a robust parliamentary system, and I'll come back to that in a moment, the first thing. The second thing is you need an incorruptible judiciary and thirdly, you need a free and skeptical press.

I know a lot of politicians on both sides have found a free and skeptical press very uncomfortable, but you need it. I was reminded last night when I got this flash on my iPad at about five to twelve that Boris Johnson had resigned. My wife and I turned on Sky UK, which you can now get on full screen, and your Foxtel and of course they were covering it. Within a half an hour Theresa May was on her feet in the House of Commons making a statement about Brexit and mentioning that Johnson and Gove had resigned. She was immediately accountable and Jeremy Corbyn got up and gave a speech and then there were a whole lot of questions.

Now, she was exposing — I mean I am skeptical about creating a parallel legal adjudication system. We have laws, we have a judiciary that in this county has had a record, impeccable record, of not being corrupt — they might have made mistakes, delivered wrong decisions, but nobody has accused our judiciary of being corrupt. And we do have a free and skeptical media and I'm all for it. It's painful on

occasions but it's part of it. So I did oppose it, yes I did, but it was a commitment that had been made by the Fraser government in the 1980 election campaign.

When I was leader of the opposition, not very successfully in the 1980s, it was part of our policy to abolish the Human Rights Commission. We didn't try to abolish it when we got into government —I suppose that was negligent of us, we were probably preoccupied with other things and we probably thought we wouldn't get it through a Democrat-Labor controlled senate, and we probably certainly wouldn't have because it was a Democrat-Labor plus some of the Greens that enacted 18C, which we opposed when we were in opposition. It wasn't until the Andrew Bolt case was delivered, that the potency — the malignant potency — of 18C became apparent.

Tom Switzer: You mentioned the media. I remember when you ran for office in '95-'96 and you lamented the state of the public broadcaster, that there was a left-wing bias… to what extent has that bias become more entrenched at the public broadcaster?

John Howard: Well I think the media now is far more polarized than it was 20 years ago. I mean there's no doubt about that. But the issue with the ABC — and I don't think you'll find on the record any statement by me that I was in favour of privatizing the ABC. I actually do support having a publicly funded broadcaster.

Tom Switzer: Should tax payers be subsidising left-wing comedy for example?

John Howard: Well, I think the ABC needs greater balance, but I don't think the solution is to abolish or to privatize the ABC. Now that might be an unpopular statement to make to some people in this audience.

Tom Switzer: Well let me raise something here from Kerry O'Brien, your old nemesis, on the 7:30 Report program. This is what he said just a couple of days ago. He said, "The ABC is the most scrutinized institution in this country and yet somehow with its unique reach

across the nation from its radio, its television, and online presence it manages to please most of the nation most of the time. Independent survey after independent survey over many years now has measured a far higher degree of trust and regard for the ABC than any other institution in the country, public or private by a country mile."

John Howard: Yeah, what else would you expect Kerry to say, I mean really.

Tom Switzer: Before you impugn someone's motives, answer their argument.

John Howard: No, I'm aware of that argument but it's not accurate. The ABC has admitted that its news bulletins in the evening, their audiences have declined. I think the main reason their audiences have declined is that they are no longer doing what they did even five or ten years ago — and that is reporting national affairs.

Let me give you an example that just comes to mind. A couple of weeks ago we had some extremely good economic figures, the Quarterly Accounts. They were very, very good figures, low unemployment. Now five or ten years ago that would have led the news bulletin in New South Wales for the ABC. Instead of that we had, the first story was about a data breach and the second story was about containers falling off a ship at Newcastle

Then the third item was the economic figures. Now, you might think that I'm being pedantic; but I'm not being pedantic. The proper role of the ABC — and it's a role that irrespective of politics a lot of people used to respect, is that they give real prominence to national political stories. They used to be a leader in that, but now I think the 7:30 Report now is absolutely drenched with 'gotcha' media exposes.

Now, I think the commercials do those things [gotcha exposes] far better. And the other thing you have to remember is that in the last twenty years, the last ten years, there is certainly a lot more fragmentation of the media. When I first got into office everybody was obsessed with the false belief that Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch owned everything and dominated everything and something had to be done about these two terrible people.

The fact is now you've got, with the proliferation of Sky, you've got enormous alternative coverage and I think a lot of people who used to watch the ABC news at 7 o'clock are now watching Sky news program. I'm sure that's happening and who is to blame for that?

Jeremy Sammut: A lot of what you're talking about is this decline in what we might call a common culture, a common set of values, a common set of expectations. However, one of the reactions that has been suggested to political correctness is to dispense with civility and be overtly politically incorrect.

Now, for some individuals I think of Donald Trump, I think of people like Milo Yiannopoulos who's become a business model and a political model. I think we're seeing some people in Australia who are also trying to emulate that model as well. Do you think that's the only way to respond to political correctness to say nasty things about your opponent?

John Howard: No, I am totally opposed to reducing civility in public debate. I don't agree with it. I think Donald Trump has done more good things on the international scene than he is being given credit for, but I think one of the reasons he's not being given credit is that I think he sometimes underestimates the importance of maintaining a level of civility.

Maybe it's a reflection of my age, I find the decline in reasoned civil debate quite appalling, it's not something that I would recommend to anybody and if anybody sought my political advice about how they should conduct themselves with a view to achieving preferment or promotion, I certainly would counsel them very strongly against that.

Tom Switzer: It seems very hard these days to have a debate or a discussion on politics without mentioning Donald Trump, you just mentioned the US president. I remember in February 2016, at the height of the Republican presidential primaries, you were on Sky News with Paul Kelly and you made the point that you would tremble, that you tremble at the thought of a Donald Trump presidency; "There is an instability about him that bothers me." He's been president for 18 months, any second thoughts?

John Howard: No, I did say that and that's how I felt at the time. The American people who had the final say in this matter decided to make him president. I think he could well get reelected, I do. I think the behaviour of the democrats and the commentariat establishment in America has just been appalling. We've just had one long uninterrupted dummy spit since he won the election.

I think one of the things that he was not being given credit for is that he ran tactically a very astute campaign. He focused on those parts of America where he knew he could get support. Now there was an element of identity politics in what he did. I mean he appealed to the sense of grievance amongst white males in rust belt states. He probably exaggerated the extent of their plight, which is probably demonstrated by the fact that unemployment in the United States now has a three in front of it. Now, I don't think even he would claim that he's responsible for everything since he took office in January of last year.

Tom Switzer: It's intriguing, 90% of Republicans support Trump, but a lot of high profile conservatives have come out against him and they want people to vote against the Republican Party at the midterm elections. I think of people like George Will, the distinguished conservative columnist, Charles Krauthammer, who died recently… he made it very clear that he opposed Donald Trump.

John Howard: He was opposed to Trump being the Republican candidate. Who did he vote for?

Tom Switzer: He didn't vote for anyone, that's my understanding at least.

But there are other people like P. J. O'Rourke, who is a prominent libertarian, who has been a past guest here at CIS, Bret Stevens from the New York Times editorial page, John McCain, the Bush family who have deep reservations about Donald Trump.

Don't you think this told you something? I mean about the broader conservative movement. These guys are principled free marketeers, they support smaller government, they believe the party of Reagan should be about internationalism, interventionist foreign policy, free

trade, and they feel that Donald Trump is upending that Reagan tradition. How would you respond to that?

John Howard: I think it's an over simplification of what Reagan stood for. I mean, Reagan's principal raison d'être internationally was to bring down the Soviet Union, and he succeeded brilliantly in doing that along with a bit of help from Pope John Paul II and Margaret Thatcher.

Tom Switzer: Great book on that …

John Howard: By John O'Sullivan, it's The Pope, The President and The Prime Minister...

Jeremy Sammut: Can I just bring you back to the questions you raised before about political leadership on some of these contentious cultural issues?

Now during the same sex marriage postal plebiscite campaign last year, both Bill Shorten and Malcolm Turnbull were basically forced to backtrack on their claims that the legalization of same sex marriage wouldn't have any implications for religious freedom and they both promised that religious freedom would be protected. That wasn't subsequently achieved when the marriage amendment act was passed in November.

On the weekend we had Social Services Minister Dan Tehan speak out and say that he supports a federal religious discrimination act which will have implications for the Turnbull government as it awaits the review into religious freedom by former Howard government minister, Philip Ruddock. How do you think the federal parliament should deal with the question of religious freedom and what might be the consequences if the parliament doesn't take the concerns that religious believers and religious organizations have for the protection of their religious freedoms going forward?

John Howard: Well in fairness to both Bill Shorten and Malcolm Turnbull, I don't know that it was back tracking, I think both of them said that protecting religious freedom was very important to them

and I think the prime minister said that he felt even more strongly about that than he did about changing the law in relation to same sex marriage.

I'd like to see the outcome of the Ruddock inquiry. My view was this issue should have been addressed at the time of the survey. My fear was if it wasn't addressed then it would be kicked down the road and that nothing would come out of it and it would get too hard, so we wait and see.

I think the problem, the most serious problem here is in relation to education. I talked earlier about the right of faith based schools to employ people who give general assent to the doctrines of the school, not excessively zealous but general assent. In other words, I don't want people who are trying to undermine what the ethos of the school is. Also, there is a very important role in relation to parental rights when it comes to the moral education of children — and this arose in the context of the Safe Schools program, where I thought there was extraordinary timidity. Once the nature of that program was revealed, there was extraordinary timidity on the part of state governments — including some of my own persuasion.

I think they were just altogether too slow to denounce and it should never have been allowed to get into the bloodstream, that program, because it was obviously doctrinaire and it was trying to run a particular line that most parents, religious or otherwise, had strong views about.

Tom Switzer: One of the achievements of your government of course was to support parental choice in education and in your memoirs and in your book on Robert Menzies you talk a lot about this issue. You make the point that — and this gets missed by a lot of revisionist historians — that when Menzies introduced state aid, I think it was 1963, he ended 100 years of discrimination against the Catholic church. This was the direct federal policy funding. When we reflect on Menzies' legacy, what are the lessons learnt here for parental choice and issues such as Safe Schools?

John Howard: Well, I think Menzies was right in what he did. He was also politically astute because he introduced his policy at a time

when there was a steady erosion of the historic predisposition of the Catholic community in Australia to vote Labor. He certainly took advantage of that, he took advantage of it by introducing a principled policy. But the real benefit of this approach, and we certainly added to it, is that Australia in many ways has the most pluralist education system in the world. 34% of all Australian children are educated in non-government schools and you compare that with the United States where it's a tiny fraction, because they have this obsessive constitutional view about not funding religious schools.

But it meant that particular act of Menzies — and it's a long time ago —did end a lot of discrimination and it helped end a lot of the sectarianism. It wasn't the only thing, there were other developments that were ending sectarianism.

Sectarianism was — a reminder particularly for the younger people in the audience who haven't lived through it —very poisonous in the 30s and the 40s and into the 50s. It was very desirable that it be brought to an end and it was a reminder to the Christian community that the things that united Catholics and Protestants were infinitely more important than the things that divided them.

Tom Switzer: What about higher education today. Do you think that parents are placing too much emphasis on their children going to university and not doing, say, trades?

John Howard: Well, I think society has done that yes. I think the decline in trades education is very regrettable. I'm not sure that the balance between university education and trades education is right, I think we desperately need more skilled tradesmen but I do think we went through a period where a lot of parents for understandable aspirational reasons wanted their children to go to university because that was seen as a pathway to greater affluence.

You can't blame people for wanting the best for their children, but I think once again there is a role here for governments to argue the case for a soundly based trades education system. We used to have a different school structure that aided that, but that's a long time ago.

Jeremy Sammut: Speaking of universities, your long-term interest in the cultural and political importance of history, which your government actually pursued through the National Civics Education Program has led you to believe that it's important for Australians to study the history of western civilization.

You are now the chairman of the Ramsay Centre and I think you see this institution as an important way to promote the values obviously of western civilization.

What happened when ANU rejected the Ramsay bid for a degree in Western Civilization and two, should you have anticipated the left wing's staff capture of ANU's position?

John Howard: Well, what you have got to remember is that the board of which I'm chairman are trustees to carry out the wishes of Mr. Ramsay. This is not public money and it's not our money, this is Paul Ramsay's money and he left it on a certain set of conditions. The first and most important of those conditions was that we should endeavour to establish a partnership with one of what I might loosely call the sandstone universities for a degree in Western Civilization.

I get a lot of people who stop me in the street and elsewhere and say 'Look John, what you have got to do with that Ramsay money is this'. What I've got to do with that Ramsay money is to be faithful to the wishes of the person who left the money. It's called a trusteeship and I've got to observe that.

Now, obviously we were disappointed in relation to the ANU. I anticipated difficulties, but we had gone a long way down the path and it was obvious there was a rebellion in the ranks and the university felt unable to continue. But we are now having a civilized discussion with another university and we'll continue to do that and there are other things that we can do as a centre by way of post graduate scholarships and partnerships with other organizations to pursue Ramsay's legacy. But if we're to be faithful to the conditions on which the money was left, and I've got to emphasize that, then we must continue to try and establish a partnership with one of the universities.

Tom Switzer: History, very much part of the Western Civilization curriculum. There is a growing call to downgrade, even eliminate key

British symbols in Australian cultural life, most notably Australia Day, changing the day from January 26, 1788 a day of shame according to many critics. What's your response to this growing call to change Australia Day?

John Howard: Well, I don't agree with it obviously, and I don't agree with it because I share the view that given the options available at the time the best thing that happened to Australia was to be colonized by the British, it was settled by the British.

Tom Switzer: Context is everything isn't it?

John Howard: Yes, context is everything but that's a view that a lot of people express. I understand the argument advanced by Indigenous Australians, but the reality is that if you hold the view that I do then the best thing that you can do for Aboriginal Australians is to help them in a way that they share the bounty of modern Australian and they are truly part of the bounty of the Australian community. I think if you had that philosophy I ask the question when else would you have Australia Day? The only logical alternative to the 26th of January is the 1st January which commemorates the federation of the Australian colonies.

Now I don't think Australians are going to give up New Year's Day … I really don't. The other alternatives — and this sort of window dressing of the New South Wales's opposition — are we going to replace the Queen's birthday with a special Indigenous day, but we won't do that while the Queen is still alive. I mean talk about St. Augustine make me pure, but not just yet.

Tom Switzer: How do we best reconcile Indigenous history with our British past?

John Howard: Well, we have done it fairly successfully I think, until fairly recently. You count all the facts, there's a long historical debate but there was not an organized political structure in this country at the time of British settlement which was capable of giving expression to the sort of understanding that was reached in New Zealand and some

other places. I think the best thing that we can do is to recognize the benefits of British settlement and we should stop being apologetic about the advantages of British settlement.

One of the great things about Australia in my opinion, it always has been, is that we've been very clever in taking the good bits of our heritage but rejecting the bad bits. We took from the British the common law, we took the parliamentary democracy, we took the freedom of the press, and — broadly speaking — a sense of humour. But we rejected class distinction and the aristocracy. We have a far better appreciation of the balance between public and private in health and education. We don't have the stratification in those things, we recognize both. One of the genius parts of the Australian achievement is that we've taken the good bits but we've rejected the bad bits, and that's why although we have a lot in common with the Brits on certain things, there is a distinctive Australian ethos and way of doing things which has been there forever and of course to which our Celtic inheritance has made a massive contribution as well.

Jeremy Sammut: What would you say to somebody like Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane, who often says that we need multiculturalism to keep the dark underbelly of Australian racism in check? This notion that we are this timelessly racist country…

John Howard: Yes, well his starting point is fundamentally different from mine. Of course there are racist people in this country and of course there are attitudes generations ago that looked upon Aboriginal Australians as being unable to achieve what other Australians could achieve, of course there were.

And there are still some people who have that view, but that has changed over time. But you don't — in the process of recognizing that change and adjusting attitudes and policies accordingly — you don't turn your back on a civilization. You don't pretend that we don't owe a lot to those things that gave us practices and attitudes that we take for granted and which incidentally are the reason why in overwhelming measure millions of people want to come and live here.

The fundamental reality is that our society and what we've achieved here is a magnet to millions of people around the world. We shouldn't be ashamed of that, we shouldn't be truculent about it but even we should not be ashamed of it. On occasion, we lack cultural self-belief and I think that is a terrible shame.

Tom Switzer: Your critics would say that the New York Times, The Guardian, the rest of the world is constantly scrutinising Australia and reacting to events here by condemning some of our treatment of Indigenous people and especially our treatment of refugees. How do you respond to that criticism that you will all too often hear on the ABC and universities that the rest of the world is appalled by Australia's human rights record?

John Howard: Well, I think specifically in relation to migration and refugees, I think the rest of the world is looking increasingly to what Australia did as a solution to their problems. I'm not saying this in a self-satisfying sense, but the truth is that no country will accept a fundamental undermining of its cultural identity in the name of accommodating people flows — they just won't, you've got to understand that. What has happened in Europe is that there was an attempt made to do that by the most powerful political figure on the continent and she has suffered as a consequence.

Tom Switzer: Angela Merkel and of course a lot of Germans are now recognizing your line in 2001 that we will determine who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come. Late 2015, you wrote a very important article for National Review, the New York based conservative magazine, and you made the point that we still live in a world of nation states, to pretend otherwise is delusional.

John Howard: Yes, I've had this view for a long time. I think that the principal organising unit in international relations is the nation state, it's not supra-national bodies. We have invested too much faith in supra-national bodies. I invest a lot of faith in bilateral or multilateral cooperation, but there is an enormous difference — as you're seeing with the European Union — between the supra-national

body represented by Jean-Claude Juncker and the individual members of the European Union.

When I was prime minister and I looked at Asia, I didn't look at some organising principle for the whole of the region, I thought in terms of our relations with Japan, with China and with Indonesia, they were all different. If you tried to harmonize them according to some overarching principle you would have got into terrible trouble. Who is the best remembered individual leader of the south East Asian region of the last 50 years? It would be Lee Kuan Yew.

Now, Singapore is an extraordinary example of a successful nation state. Not as democratic as Australia, democracy is a little more guided in Singapore than it is here. Incidentally that expression of 'guided democracy' was Sukarno's.

But it has a relevance. [Lee Kwan Yew] had led a remarkable country. It's an extraordinary tribute to him that it was the one country to which the leader of North Korea was willing to entrust his security.

Tom Switzer: On Lee Kuan Yew, it is interesting, on the night that he died, quite rightly he was clearly the most consequential figure in Asia in the post-war period. Neither Lateline nor 7:30 Report did anything on him. It's a fact.

Jeremy Sammut: Let's return to the big picture. Your long-time Chief of Staff, now Senator Arthur Sinodinos, once said that people say that Howard moved Australia to the right — but that's a misunderstanding. The Howard government succeeded because he expressed the innate conservatism of the Australian people. Do you think that in these politically-correct identity-politics obsessed times a government can still win office by appealing to the innate conservatism of the Australian people?

John Howard: Yes, I think it can but every era and every time is different. We had a bit of a sweet spot when it came to doing things on the economy and we gave a lot of bipartisan support to the Hawke government when it enacted economic reforms. We didn't get a lot in return when we tried to fix the tax system and deregulate the labour market and so forth.

Tom Switzer: Waterfront reform.

John Howard: Waterfront reform, any of those things. However, I still think that you can enact big economic reforms in this country if you appeal to two things. Firstly, the Australian people have got to be satisfied that an economic reform is going to make Australia better. We're quite simplistic in our desire to have reforms that help our country, and you also need to satisfy people that these reforms are fundamentally fair.

We had a lot of trouble persuading the public about the GST, it was never really very popular and it almost cost us the 1998 election. We managed to do it because in the end people thought 'Oh well I think it would be better to have it and I think Howard and Costello have looked after the less fortunate in the community' and they were prepared to go along with it. I think you do that.

There is an innate conservatism in the Australian people which is born of the belief that this is a good country and that although there are a share of racists, a share of bigots, there are people who are living in poverty, there are family breakdowns and we've seen some horrible manifestations of those in Sydney in recent times which are immensely distressing to people who place — as we all do — a high store on family life. But fundamentally we've done very well and that's why people are leery about too much radical change.

And I think both sides of politics in Australia — and my remarks apply equally to the Labor Party — shouldn't underestimate the desire of most Australians to hang on to what they've got, because they think we've done things pretty well. If that sounds like a very conservative Australian… well, I'll plead guilty.

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The Hon. John Howard is the second-longest serving Prime Minister of Australia.

Tom Switzer is the Executive Director of The Centre for Independent Studies.

Jeremy Sammut is the Director of the Culture, Prosperity and Civil Society Program.

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