

the future challenges for australian conservatism



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The state of Australian conservatism is, in a number of respects, probably the healthiest it has been for many decades. We have a conservative federal government closing in on its tenth year in power. Union membership is in decline and, for the first time in history, there exist in Australia more independent contractors than union members. Political correctness is on the back foot in a number of areas, particularly with reference to Aboriginal issues or the extreme multicultural ideology promulgated in the 1980s and early 1990s. Numerous other examples abound where conservatism is on the forward march.

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I want to argue, however, that in spite of the progress being made on a range of public policy fronts, there are no grounds for smug complacency by conservatives. Much work remains to be done and, in some cases, the conservative cause is actually going backwards.

Business continues to be strangled by ever greater levels of unnecessary red tape and regulation. Welfare expenditure continues to grow during buoyant economic conditions when it should be falling. Unemployment rates, while improving, are still too high. Much of our previously healthy civil society has been crowded out by the encroachment of government at all levels. Important social institutions, such as marriage and the family, appear to be in a state of slow but steady decline and a range of various social ills are rapidly on the rise. All this paints a somewhat more pessimis-

tic picture of the current state of conservatism in Australia.

With this in mind, perhaps the main intellectual and political task facing Australian conservatives is the need to make the case for smaller, less intrusive government and to restore the pre-eminence of such notions as personal responsibility and self-reliance in Australian society.

The Liberal Party, in particular, as the main political representative of conservatism in Australia, has a major role to play in this regard. It needs to focus more heavily on trying to win the battle for ideas by giving more emphasis to the moral arguments for its policies, and less emphasis to its spending decisions. In making the case for smaller government and increased personal responsibility, there is also a major role for think-tanks, business groups and sympathetic academics to help explain the rationale for the re-

forms this country so badly needs.

Making the case for this philosophy of smaller government and increased self-reliance will not necessarily be easy—the Australian electorate has historically been averse to change that appears even remotely to threaten the existing order. Furthermore, governments in Australia that take on a tinge of being excessively ideological have a tendency to be thrown out at elections. Hence, there is a common and understandable desire on all sides of politics to concentrate on implementing reforms that won't excessively 'rock the boat'. That is why more effort needs to be expended on finding a way to package the changes which Australia needs that will be attractive to the voting populace.

Another major challenge for Australian conservatism is to bring about a renewed focus on social and cultural issues. Conservative governments in Australia have had a long tradition of being overly preoccupied with economic issues to the detriment of some other important concerns. Why this has been the case is something of a mystery, although one suspects that whereas most people on the conservative side of politics have generally been able to find agreement on economic matters, there have been stronger divergences of opinion on social and cultural matters, which have led to them being downplayed in the interests of maintaining unity.

However, given the nature of many of the social problems now becoming all too apparent in Australian society in spite of many years of buoyant economic growth, there is a major need to move away from the mindset which claims that if you get the economy right, everything else will fall into place. Economic growth, while helpful, is not going to be enough to overcome the problems of communities such as Macquarie Fields, parts of which are suffering from cultural breakdown.

The starting point in coming to grips with social and cultural issues lies with the current state of the universities, particularly the social science and humanities faculties. Arts faculties in Australia and across most of the Western world have mostly abandoned their traditional role as the guardians and promoters of the Judeo-Christian Western tradition. They have instead become dominated by the countercultural radical Left, which has shown lit-

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tle mercy in the academic persecution of those remaining few conservatives (or even centrists) in the academy.

There has often been a common assumption that while the take-over of universities by left-wing radicals is annoying, it is of little real long-term consequence. The assumption here is that most students, upon joining the real world of work, will leave the infantile preoccupations of university behind them, resulting in little long-term damage. Although there is a strong element of truth in this assumption, a great deal of damage is nonetheless still being done to our culture by ideas coming out of the universities.

Since their take-over by the Left, universities have used their unique position to try to indoctrinate future generations of societal elites against the very values upon which our civilization is built—which constitutes a total reversal of their original mission. There is an urgent need to think of means that would restore balance

to the universities and return them to their original role as the guardians of our civilization and culture, as opposed to being their destroyer. This is something with which conservative thinkers and policy makers have not adequately come to grips.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the negative implications of the left-wing take-over of universities is the impact it has had on schooling. As the Federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson has pointed out, many university education departments have now become little more than quasi-sociology departments. These departments teach their education graduates to see their mission as one of using education as a subversive vehicle to bring about radical social change, rather than to provide a traditional education for their students. The result is a generation of schoolchildren that have been fed with all manner of politically correct beliefs (such as black-armband history), but who are all too often functionally illiterate and innumerate and hence rendered incapable of playing a full role in society. Now there is at least a strong awareness that there is an urgent need for the reform of Australia's schools, although much work remains to be done.

Similarly, there are numerous examples of prominent Australian cultural institutions which have fallen prey to the left-wing ideology espoused by the universities. The ABC remains captive to left-wing activists, despite several attempts to try to improve its balance. It is rare for a day to pass without SBS showing some ideologically motivated French documentary criticizing George W. Bush. The National Museum of Australia still remains a near-perfect tribute to post-modernism and political correctness. And vast amounts of public arts funding continue to be spent on projects that can only be described as weird, bizarre or downright perverted. Given

that all of these organisations are subsidised by the taxpayer, governments have a legitimate role in trying to restore some semblance of balance and objectivity to these institutions; and more of an effort needs to be made to do just that.

The damage wrought to our culture by the Left is also becoming increasingly prominent in the growing number of badly dysfunctional communities in Australia, perhaps best typified by Macquarie Fields, which is, however, only one of many. It seems reasonable to suggest that, in these communities, there has been a terrible cultural breakdown and a perversion of the important social values and civility that most Australians are thankfully still able to take for granted.

The challenge for Australian conservatives is to mount a sustained critique of the intellectual forces and government policies that have unleashed this chaos on our most poor and vulnerable communities. This is a project that has been undertaken to great effect by conservatives in the US, but strangely, similar progress in Australia has not as yet occurred.

Most thinking about the problems of our most poor and least fortunate communities has instead by and large been left to socialist academics and the social welfare lobby. Leaving this task to the intellectual Left, which has long been capable of little more than continually chanting the vapid slogans of social justice, has been nothing less than a total disaster for these communities. The conservative critique of poverty and dysfunctional communities has much more to offer than that of the political and intellectual Left in this regard. But Australian conservatives are not taking enough of an interest in these issues at present, perhaps finding the parts of society they personally inhabit to be more interesting and important than its other parts further out in the western suburbs. This is a great shame, and something that urgently needs to be remedied.

The final challenge facing Austral-

ian conservatism is to become better organized. At present, there is no doubt that conservatism is in poor organizational shape for a number of reasons, two of which I will elaborate upon below.

There is a need for better communication and coordination between the intellectual wings and the political wings of conservatism in this country.

First, there remains a great gulf between the intellectual forces of conservatism operating in think-tanks, business groups and isolated pockets of academia on the one hand, and the political forces of conservatism sitting in the various Australian parliaments on the other. In a nutshell, there is a need for better communication and coordination between the intellectual wings and the political wings of conservatism in this country. Too often, conservative members of parliament and their staff are not aware of the often excellent research being conducted by think-tanks and academics just down the road that might help them with policy development and the selling of their message.

Second, but related to the first point, the intellectual side of the conservative movement in Australia can only be described as being in an institutional mess. There are too many small, isolated organisations in existence trying to do much the same thing, and in an uncoordinated way. Most of these organisations are badly underfunded and far too small to be viable as credible sources of advice to potentially sym-

pathetic policy makers and elected political representatives.

Given that there is a limited supply of money around to finance this kind of activity, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that a rationalisation of some of these organisations, which would allow for a smaller number of larger bodies, might be beneficial. With economies of scale comes the potential for greater professionalism, more credibility, higher funding, and a louder voice that makes it harder for policy makers, members of parliament or the media to ignore.

Closer attention also needs to be given to how conservative academics working in the universities, who are frequently isolated from each other, let alone the broader conservative movement, can also be brought into the fold and better utilised than they often are at present.

In conclusion, there is a pressing need for the intellectual side of conservatism in Australia to transform itself into a much more coherent force like that which now exists in the US. There, the conservative movement has proven indispensable to the current political and intellectual dominance of US conservatism. It remains for Australian conservatives to take on board the lessons that can be learned from the US example and to apply them appropriately in the Australian context.

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