What remains of conservative thought?

Greg Melleuish

Greg Melleuish is an Associate Professor and Head of the School of History and Politics at the University of Woolongong.

What does conservatism mean in Australia, a country often portrayed as not possessing much to conserve and running madly along the tracks of progress? And yet settler societies, such as Australia, are often decidedly conservative as their members wish to conserve those traditions that they have brought with them from the original homeland.

The real issue is the form that conservatism takes in Australia and how Australian conservatism fits with what is generally understood as the conservative disposition.

Conservatism, I believe, rests on two major pillars. The first emphasizes human fallibility and the capacity for individuals to make mistakes and behave badly. The second is that there is a wisdom that inheres in institutions and communities simply by virtue of their extended existence.

Conservatism is about human beings and their values; it is about preserving values that have worked and ensuring that humans do not throw out the baby with the bathwater when they engage in change.

The Anglo-Irish politician Edmund Burke is the model conservative, particularly for Australia. He wanted to conserve what was valuable and make moderate reforms when they were in line with existing values and institutions. He opposed radical change in the shape of the French Revolution, where the intention was to destroy the existing order and to start again from scratch.

Burke can pass as either a liberal or a conservative depending on what facet of his thought and activities one cares to shine light. This is true of all real conservatives; they are not reactionaries but people willing to accommodate the new so long as it is in accord with the best established traditions of humankind.

In Australia, there have been three broad expressions of conserva-

tism. The first is what can be called a Burkean political conservatism. It has attempted to preserve what is best in the British political tradition that Australia has inherited.

The second is a tradition of cultural conservatism that found a home, at least initially, in the churches and the universities. It has sought to preserve the universal values embodied by Western civilization.

The third is a form of populist conservatism that has celebrated the capacity of ordinary people to conserve their traditional values in the face of the excesses of the contemporary world.

BURKEAN CONSERVATISM

This form of conservatism has sought to preserve the best of the British inheritance without slavishly and unthinkingly following the British political model. In the nineteenth century, this meant meeting the challenge of those advocating progressive liberalism and democracy. Conservatives questioned the often excessive optimism, ultimately derived from Rousseau, that democrats and progressives

had regarding human nature.

Acknowledging the fact that 'good' human beings could often bring about bad and selfish laws, colonial conservatives (who really thought of themselves as liberals) sought to provide checks and balances on the unlimited power of the Lower House of Parliament. Some, such as William Forster, saw the solution in the form of a powerful Upper House capable of checking the excesses of the lower house. Another solution advocated by John West was the creation of a federal system that would provide a consistent system of check and balances.

Conservatives also advocated the trustee system of Parliamentary representation derived from Burke. Members of Parliament were not to be considered as delegates of their electorates, but representatives of the country as a whole who would legislate on behalf of the whole. The member was meant to be someone who stood above the community, able to legislate on behalf of the community because of his superior education and character. Sir Henry Parkes, sometimes thought of as a radical democrat, openly advocated that electors should avoid the parvenu and seek the local equivalent of the English gentleman.

These conservatives did not slavishly follow the British system. For example, John West was willing to appeal to federalism, even though it was American in origin, because he saw it as a way of adapting the principles of the British constitution to Australian circumstances.

This capacity to graft new principles on to established traditions so as to improve those traditions can be seen in the creation of the Australian Constitution. The Framers of the Australian Constitution very successfully grafted both the American federal principle and the Swiss referendum on to the British Westminster system.

In the twentieth century, this Burkean conservative tradition continued to be represented by the Constitution and the principles that it embodies. It acted as a bulwark against radical change without remaining fossilized in a rigid outdated form. The
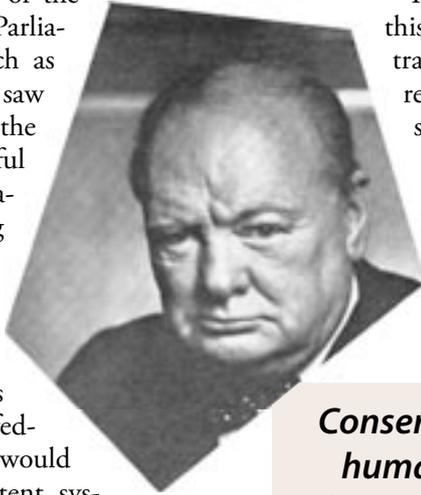
> **Conservatism is about human beings and their values; it is about preserving values that have worked and ensuring that humans do not throw out the baby with the bath-water when they engage in change.**

same can be said, by and large, of the legal profession in its interpretation of the constitution. Finally, the Australian people have demonstrated Burkean 'prejudice' in their judicious evaluation of the need for change when asked to vote in referenda, including and especially the 1999 republican referendum, on changing the constitution.

CULTURAL CONSERVATISM

Cultural conservatism derives its strength from its appeal to values that transcend the here and now and are worth treasuring for what they reveal about the human condition. In the nineteenth century, the major sources of cultural conservatism in Australia were the churches and the universities. In an a open and fluid society, in which getting and spending could too easily overwhelm an individual, both the churches and the universities sought to keep alive the permanent and the spiritual aspects of human nature.

This can be seen in the definition of culture used by Charles Badham in 1882:

> When we see the same feelings, aims, aims, affections, anxious doubts, and topics of consolation in the literature of bygone times, the thought of our permanent humanity and of the ineffaceable identity between the soul of the past and the soul of the present, makes us thoughtful, reverent, social, patriotic.

This quotation presents the central elements of cultural conservatism, with its emphasis on 'our permanent humanity' and the relationship that links together the past and the present.

In the years since Badham wrote those words, it is true that progressivism has eaten away at the vision of permanent humanity in both our universities and our churches. Nevertheless, there has been a tradition that has followed Badham. It has continued to be faithful to the idea of a permanent humanity and to the imperative that we be refreshed and inspired by the great works of literature and art.

In the twentieth century, the major defenders of this tradition of cultural conservatism tended to come from two overlapping sources. The first were those writers and academics who opposed what they saw as the nihilistic tendencies of Romanticism, and later its bastard offspring, post-modernism, in the name of Classicism. ▶

Such writers argued that the restless, hyperactive individual postulated by Romanticism, who believed in his capacity to consume the universe, would eventually discover that the only goal he or she would attain would be that of the void.

In opposition to Romanticism, they advocated the clear, calm and objective world of classical forms that are eternal and are capable of being known by human beings. This classical tradition has been handed down to us from the Graeco-Roman world. With its emphasis on balance and moderation, it stands in stark contrast to the tortured individual of both Romanticism and postmodernism who seeks but never can find.

This classical theme was expressed most profoundly in the works of AR Chisholm and James McAuley. It can also be found in a different form in the work of John Anderson. Other cultural conservatives have also condemned the nihilism of the modern world without necessarily embracing the classical alternative. These include Ronald Conway and John Carroll. Carroll has condemned the nihilistic dimensions of what he calls Humanism, but his alternative is not Classicism but an appeal to eternal values that he believes are inherent in all people.

In the nineteenth century, Catholicism in Australia was often a regular critic of modern progessivism. During large parts of the twentieth century, as the secular intelligentsia and liberal Protestantism succumbed to progressive fads of the day, the Catholic church by and large stood firm in support of its traditions. Catholicism was often associated with classical values, so that supporters of classicism were often attracted to Catholicism and, sometimes, as in the case of McAuley, converted.

And out of the Catholic conservative tradition came BA Santamaria, possibly the most influential Australian cultural conservative of the twentieth century. Santamaria opposed the nihilism of the progressive modern world and saw that its only true hope was to revert to the traditional values of Church and family. I think that it is possible to see his influence on the current government in such areas as the family.

> *We cannot pursue reform unless we take account of both human frailty and the remarkable edifice that our ancestors have built for us.*

POPULIST CONSERVATISM

Santamaria leads on naturally to the populist form of conservatism. He argued that the Church had been delivered up into the hands of the progressives and that the only hope was to appeal to the traditionalism of ordinary lay Catholics. The secular equivalent of this populist conservatism contrasts the decadent and nihilistic values of the educated cultural elites with the sober, realistic and traditional values of ordinary Australians.

John Carroll went down a similar path in his praise of the lower middle class and its instinctive sense of right and wrong. Populist conservatism draws on the contrast, made also by American writer Christopher Lasch, between the rootless cosmopolitan elites owing allegiance to no-one and the traditional middle class that has a strong sense of both its place in the world and the values required to sustain that place.

Populist conservatism is strongly linked to nationalism and is an out-growth of Australian nationalism. It is sustained, for example, by the values of ANZAC such as heroism, loyalty and the capacity to hang on in the face of adversity. It is this type of conservatism that largely sustains John Howard and provides the key to understanding his popularity in the wider community outside the nihilistic and decadent world of the inner city cultural elites. Nevertheless, the traditions of Burkean political conservatism and cultural conservatism, largely through the influence of Santamaria, are also important for an understanding of the Howard Government.

CONCLUSION

The three strands of conservatism that I have discussed have all been important in moulding Australian culture. In Australia, there has been the continuing temptation to jettison the past and to rush headlong into an uncertain future. Conservatives have warned their fellow Australians of the perils of moving forward without taking sufficient account of the traditional values that have sustained Western civilization over the last two millennia. These values are permanent values that sustain us as human beings; we need them to flourish both in times of plenty and of dearth.

Both Burke and Badham remain highly relevant for the twenty-first century. We cannot pursue reform unless we take account of both human frailty and the remarkable edifice that our ancestors have built for us. There is a bond that links past generations, ourselves and our descendants. That bond is, as Badham rightly put it, those permanent values of our humanity which create that 'ineffaceable identity between the soul of the past and the soul of the present'.

IPA