

Everything's changed?

The Liberals have locked in conservative government

Tom Switzer

The other day, I received a call from an aspiring opinion page contributor and former Australian diplomat who declared, in a voice that oozed a certain sort of metropolitan smugness: 'Now that everything's changed, I'll be writing more often for *The Australian's* opinion pages' (which, during my editorship in recent years, have tilted in a conservative direction).

To which I replied: 'Everything's changed? Goodness, what's happened?'

Imagine my surprise when he responded, first, by saying 'Haven't you noticed? We have a new government!'—as if to suggest that the newsrooms all across the country would now conform to new editorial instructions from the Canberra politburo—and then by insisting that his article for me would highlight how 'the rest of the world is celebrating the end of the Howard era'.

Surely, I asked, in many parts of the world for long periods of time, isn't good peripheral vision required to be aware of the Australian political scene? And isn't, moreover, the global commentary of our election outcome virtually confined to disgruntled ex-pats and locals such as novelist Richard Flanagan who, writing in *The Guardian* on 26 November, argued that 'a decade of John Howard has left a country of timidity, fear and shame'? We then wished each other good day, and hung up grumpily, one set all.

The point here is not to make fun of the sophisticates who are dancing on John Howard's political grave, but to suggest that Australia will remain, for the most part, a pretty conservative place in the post-Howard era. And that those who take it upon themselves to represent the country's conscience will probably still spend much of their time agonising over what left-wing British newspapers think about us, and convincing themselves that we are an international pariah.

Indeed, all one needs to know about the new political landscape is that the new government thought that the one it replaced on 24 November was pretty good. How else to

explain that Kevin Rudd went out of his way to echo, not repudiate, John Howard's agenda during the past year? And not just 'economic conservatism' either. On a wide range of issues—from border protection and the federal intervention in remote indigenous communities to welfare reform and a national schools curriculum—Rudd usurped, not contested Howard's position. True, Labor now dominates all State and Federal governments and no doubt there will be some adjustments to Howard government policies on Kyoto ratification and perhaps an apology to indigenous people. But the centre of political and cultural gravity is nonetheless well to the right of where it was a decade ago.

Whereas once conservative ideas were swept aside as being outside the boundaries of serious (and morally respectable) consideration, today they represent the political and cultural mainstream. On the great battlefields of history, economics, citizenship, reconciliation, national sovereignty and values generally, conservative ideas and those of classical liberalism increasingly prevail. Newspapers, once the beacons of political correctness, have become livelier platforms for debate and dissent.

None of this is to deny that the left still controls the arts, universities and the public broadcaster. But far from losing the hearts and minds of the Australian people, conservatives redefined the nation's cultural terrain. Howard's own contribution to this shift, moreover, has been profound. Consider some of his many achievements:

He was a long-standing supporter of the economic reform agenda, which transformed Australia from a heavily protected and subsidised closed shop into a high-growth, less-inflation prone, market-oriented powerhouse that is the envy of the industrialised world. He attacked the intellectual left's monopoly of public morals and validated the values of the mortgage belt.

A consensus thus developed that those who want to become Australians should sign up to the nation's fundamental values—be they sexual equality, religious and other freedoms, or respect for other cultures. Add in a basic knowledge of English and an appreciation of the traditional narrative

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of Australian history and you had the makings of the citizenship tests that won overwhelming popular support. That would have been inconceivable during the Keating era of zealous multiculturalism and shame about the nation's past.

Howard's drawcard was that, during his tenure, Australians became a relaxed, self-confident people who were at the same time alert to the dangers of militant Islam. Everything that should be up—incomes, economic growth, the stock market, the budget surplus, consumer and business confidence and the standard of living—was up, while everything that should be down—unemployment, inflation, even interest rates—was down.

Thanks to his reforms, Australian society now offers unparalleled opportunities. Far from producing Dickensian sweatshops, as predicted by the unions, the workplace changes have produced steady and low-inflation wage growth. The rewards of the economic miracle have been evenly spread across poorer, middle and richer suburbs and regions. No wonder the old Labor language of class warfare has no strategic traction; to paraphrase Richard Nixon, we are all aspirationals now.

To be sure, Howard's decisions sometimes left a lot to be desired. He was as given to paternalism and pork-barrelling as any of his predecessors. Much to the chagrin of his ideological supporters, he failed to articulate a clearly defined set of conservative philosophical principles. He was neither a Reagan nor a Thatcher. And his dramatic failure to execute an orderly succession plan will tarnish his historical reputation.

Still, Howard's legacy has been fashioned by the extent to which he has transformed the political and cultural landscape. If anything, the 2007 election was about his successor, with Rudd making the case that it was he, rather than Peter Costello, who is the true heir. Whether Rudd governs as he has campaigned remains to be seen, but his political success and legitimacy depends on presenting his agenda as a moderate form of Howardism, just as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair represented milder versions of Reaganism and Thatcherism respectively. If, indeed, Rudd turns out to be Howard lite, then one suspects that people such as the aforementioned opinion page contributor will still be fretting and wailing about the state of the nation.

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What next?
