

The Rewards of Cultural Incompetence

MICHAEL WARBY

HOW do you spell 'One Nation Party'? P-L-D, because it's the DLP in reverse. Whether in Government (WA) or in Opposition (Queensland) the voters have been punishing the Coalition.

The Coalition faces the prospect of One Nation splintering the liberal-conservative vote in such a way that it will not only lose the next federal election, but be kept out of power for a long period of time—in the same way that the splintering of the Labor vote via the DLP did much to keep the ALP out of power from 1955 to 1972.

If this happens, it will have no-one but itself to blame. It will be the just reward for its sustained incompetence at cultural politics.

Pauline Hanson herself is not really about economic issues. She has nothing to say on them which is not already being said by the Democrats, Greens, left of the ALP, humanities and social science academics and the ABC. She did not gain prominence by talking about economic issues, but about cultural ones, about issues of national identity. Issues such as crime, immigration, indigenous issues. The issues where the gap between media opinion and public opinion is widest.

And this is where the Coalition is reaping the rewards of its sustained incompetence in cultural politics. Over the years, it has made no serious attempt to build up its intellectual resources in these areas. When in power, it has no serious network of people to appoint to cultural institutions. Consequently, it has, with a few honourable exceptions (Tony Abbott being the most prominent) no strategy for

dealing with cultural issues apart from pallid acquiescence in the fads and fashions of the progressivist ascendancy, passive negativism (no, I won't say 'sorry') or silence.

It is not that the Coalition has to have a single view. On the contrary, a broad-church approach is precisely what is required. But it had to be willing and able to articulate the range of concerns of its social base effectively. By treating large areas of cultural and social policy as effectively 'no-go' areas (reinforced by being burnt by its own incompetence when it did so venture—for example, Asian immigra-

Voting for One Nation is the only way people can vote for colour-blind public policy—all the other parties stand for some form of 'separate development'

tion) it left them open for someone to come in and articulate concerns that were not being addressed. Which is what Pauline Hanson did.

In the 1966 Census, around 670 Tasmanians claimed to be Aboriginal. In 1991, 8,882 did and in 1996, 13,873

did. Michael Mansell has complained bitterly that there are many phoney Aboriginals doing it for the money: such mendacity and corruption revolts many in rural Australia. Yet voting for One Nation is the only way people can vote for colour-blind public policy—all the other parties stand for some form of 'separate development', with all its attendant failure, corruption and dishonesty.

The Coalition's federal margin is so narrow (a 0.8 per cent swing would see it lose office), that the smallest swing experienced by any Federal Government since 1966 (0.9 per cent) would be sufficient to tip it out—and every election since 1966 (1993 alone excepted) has seen a swing against the incumbent Government. But its margin is so narrow because of the cultural revolt on its own turf in 1998, where One Nation got one million votes *despite* its leader being clearly revealed, by her 'easy tax' policy, as a dill.

It is widely acknowledged that the vote for One Nation represents a scream for attention by people who feel they are not being listened to. Yet the approved response is to say that the preferences of people who vote for One Nation, people whose votes the Coalition has been seeking for years, are unclean and will not be accepted—thereby shouting at them that they will not be listened to. The only response to such insulting Coalition arrogance is the obvious one—OK, that's a done deal.

Ostracism is not a basis for dialogue.

As for the danger of a loss of urban votes from such preference deals; first, product differentiation is an advantage ►

one is supposed to be able to get from being a Coalition (while weakness and indecision are never attractive). Second, it has been Coalition acquiescence in 'no-go' areas and in large slabs of opinion being beyond the pale which has allowed such a mentality to take root. So Coalition incompetence at cultural politics means it is now placed in an impossible dilemma.

The demand by people (who would never listen to anything John Howard says) that he should have shouted Hanson down is really an attempt to maintain the legitimacy of shouting people down—and shutting out of public debate lots of people including those who think like, well, John Howard.

The National Party may be in terminal difficulty (with the possible exception of Queensland). It was created out of a revolt by rural exporters against their exploitation by the Deakin system of wage arbitration and trade protection. From the 1920s to the mid-1980s it had about 15 per cent of the seats in the House of Representatives. Since the mid-1980s, it has declined to about 10 per cent. This is precisely the period when the replacement of the Deakin system got underway in earnest. Population shifts have not helped, but the real story has been the steady replacement of National Party MPs by Liberal MPs (and, latterly, rural independents).

The Country-cum-National Party was created and lived as a protest against economic exclusion and exploitation by urban interests. Perhaps it can be re-born as a protest against cultural exclusion and exploitation by urban interests. After all, the major moral vanity issues of environment and indigenous affairs operate on the basis of urban posturing which imposes costs on rural Australia. The urban greenies and reconciliation posturers get the moral vanity, the bush gets the devastated industries—forest towns demolished, development projects blocked, rural property rights compromised. (And their guns taken away on the insulting implication that they are all potential Martin Bryants.)

If I were the National Party, I would not campaign against economic reform—unless I was prepared to campaign against the welfare state in a fundamental way (since it is the increasing revenue demands of the growing welfare state which fundamentally drive economic reform). I would start advocating such things as capital punishment, pride in Australia, the same

In the midst of an economic boom, the Coalition is in serious trouble.

And it is all its own fault. It's the culture, stupid!

set of rules for all (in particular, no Treaty), welfare reform, firm crime policy, compensation for compromised property rights. I would denounce urban posturers who make country Australia pay for their preening indulgences. I would not tolerate the idea of 'no-go' areas in public debate. In fact, I would seek them out.

The other big mistake the Coalition parties have made is that they have become high-tax parties. They would prefer to spend taxpayers' money themselves than hand it back to its constituents (another sign of being out of touch). Of course inflation spikes caused by public policy (the GST) should be taken out of petrol excise indexing (which betrayed the original *Fightback!* deal of GST for lower petrol prices). Under Howard, Australians pay more taxes per head than ever before in history. The way the modern state works, the net effect of bigger government is to tax the social base of the Coalition parties to pay funds to the social and activist base of the Labor

Party. It is very stupid of the Coalition to play this game. It should be attempting to reverse it in the only way it can be reversed—by smaller government.

Part of the problem for the Coalition is that its cultural opponents are shameless liars. The secret women's business lie has been exposed, but here is a list of current shameless untruths: that there was a 'stolen children' genocide; that poverty is increasing; that income distribution is (after taxes and transfers) becoming more unequal; that most people are worse off; that government is shrinking; that the welfare state is shrinking; that opposing Native Title or special programmes for indigenous Australians is a mark of racism; that opposition to multiculturalism or immigration is proof of racism; that human-induced global warming with major negative consequences is settled science. But the Coalition gets swamped in such lies because it fails miserably to develop its own intellectual and cultural resources. Their opponents get away with such lies because public debate is so dominated by the self-serving moral vanity of the progressivist ascendancy. Yet, after five years in office federally, the Coalition has done nothing seriously to contest the dominance of cultural institutions by its opponents.

Mainstream liberal-conservative politicians have responded to the unreal moral vanity of the media rather than the values, concerns and experience of its own social base. What have Coalition Governments actually delivered since 1992 except fiscal rectitude? When then Queensland National Party Leader Rob Borbidge said that voters were not listening to the major conservative parties, why should they? Those parties have become part of the unreal game, they have become part of the problem.

In the midst of an economic boom, the Coalition is in serious trouble. And it is all its own fault. It's the culture, stupid!

Michael Warby is a Fellow of the Institute of Public Affairs.

IPA

REVIEW