

# Electorate Wins Battle, Élites Winning War

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**F**OLLOWING the Federal election, the former ALP pollster, Rod Cameron, remarked that in the contest between the electorate and the élites, the élites always win. He was clearly wrong on illegal immigration. The electorate chose a Prime Minister to reflect its concern about who comes to Australia, and who gets to stay. The electorate was being lectured by the élites to accept people who had enough money to purchase an illegal passage to Australia, having already passed through a number of countries where they could have sought asylum. The electorate concluded that the 'boat people' were not fair dinkum; they were incensed that the illegals hijacked the *MV Tampa* and used extreme means to pressure Australia to accept them.

In her book, *The Great Divide*, Katharine Betts wrote of 'the deep divide between professionally-educated internationalists and cosmopolitans (people who are attracted to the wider world of "overseas" with all its problems, challenges and difficulties) and the much larger number of lower-class parochials, people who value the character of their national home and rely on its borders to protect them from external turbulence and distress.... The former tends to approve of immigration while the latter does not.' A 'correct' attitude to immigration is a powerful indicator of one's membership of the élite.

There are other areas where the divide between the élites and the electorate is significant. On these and most other issues, Cameron is right, the élites will win. Ross Terrill

(*The Australian*, 21 November 2001) summed up the élites as follows:

They see only what they believe. In their hearts, they know what is best for us. They wince at basic Australian values. The triumph of the West in the Cold War has left them well, cold.... They like every brand of diversity except the political kind.... In a nation with an egalitarian tradition, it is startling to see a huge gap between grassroots opinion and a lockstep stratum of journalists, academics, bureaucrats, publishers and other granny-state enthusiasts fuelled by taxpayer dollars. These gatekeepers think Howard is illegitimate because on race, Asia, reconciliation, UN admonitions [over human rights] to Australia, and the Republic, he does not share their views.

These are the topics on which élite and general opinion divide, but what is the foundation of the divide? John Stone (*The Australian*, 26 November 2001) observed that the success of the large-scale immigration programme after the Second World War was based on the assumption of assimilation. He claimed that 'cultural compatibility and national cohesion' would lie at the heart of the future debate on immigration. The original contract in immigration was that Australia would accept outsiders as long as they became like us. The tail has begun to wag the dog. So it is with other debates in the élite–electorate divide.

It is not racist to suggest that some cultures are incompatible with a liberal democracy. It is not anti-

Asian to seek an engagement beyond Asia or to seek to enhance Australian ties with our most powerful ally, the USA. It is not anti-reconciliation to reject the separatist elements implied in the reconciliation agenda, which include calls for a treaty. It is not anti-human-rights to limit the law's ability to deliver non-legal outcomes, such as a better life. It is not anti-Australian to seek the political stability of the present Constitution. Of course, in matters subject to referendum, the electorate has the whip hand. Australia will become a republic when the republican élites agree on a model that is acceptable to the electorate.

An important task for the non-orthodox élites, the iconoclasts, is to reclaim the ground that the élites have stolen from the electorate. The élites suggest that to be in favour of their agenda is to be internationalist and cosmopolitan. They imply that the desire for a secure border and a comfortable home culture are incompatible with a cosmopolitan Australia. The electorate's agenda, however, is just as likely as the élite's to be consistent with a successful Australia in a global economy. The élite's agenda is more likely than the electorate's to ensure a loss of national sovereignty, and to spawn politics that are less democratic, less amenable to control by the electorate.

What is the future for the élites under the Howard regime? Unfortunately, they will carry on as before, preparing for the day when a 'legitimate' Commonwealth government returns. They, especially those who are non-science academics at public

universities, will use public funds to pursue favourite political agendas in the name of academic freedom. The Australian Research Council grants for 2000 and 2001 in the humanities and the social, behavioural and economic sciences offer a clear insight into the direction of a key section of elite thinking—academia. There were around 300 ARC grants in the Humanities and Creative Arts. Potentially, these cover the whole gamut of interests in these disciplines. An extraordinary outcome of the grants is that fully 45 relate to Aborigines. The elite obsession with Aborigines endures. For the social, behavioural and economic sciences (excluding health sciences), the research busies itself overwhelmingly with agendas of race, gender, immigration, and human rights.

There are plainly silly things, such as the project that aims to collect and interpret Indigenous Australian knowledge on weather patterns, environmental and climatic change. These are to be incorporated into the Bureau of Meteorology's Web page to provide 'much needed' information on Indigenous people's understanding of their environment. I am sure that farmers, golfers and anglers will be fascinated.

More serious are the political agendas, the foremost being an Aboriginal Treaty. Marcia Langton, long-time Aboriginal activist, has been funded to examine treaty- and agreement-making with Indigenous Australians, to 'contribute to the efforts by Indigenous organizations to secure political and economic rights through agreements with governments, industry and the community.' This is political advocacy. It does not even pretend to generate new or original work. Why was it funded?

Historians are being called as expert witnesses in cases involving indigenous litigants. Apparently, historians 'perceive serious difficulties in the Court's treatment of qualitative [read oral], historical

material, resulting in a possible denial of access to justice.' The investigation asks whether historians as expert witnesses can retain both their historical professionalism and adapt to the requirements of the courts, or whether the courts' rules of evidence themselves require adaptation. The agenda is clear—the

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recent invention of belief will have to be believed by the white man's court, lest it offend the sense of justice that the indigenous litigant feels is his due.

The human rights anti-capitalist agenda in the grants list is strong. 'Human rights abuses are perpetrated by multinational corporations, yet they are subject to few laws protecting human rights. Given the global power of these bodies, it is imperative and inevitable that greater legal accountability mechanisms will be developed.' This statement simply begins with a straw man, the ubiquitous demon, the multinational corporation. It proceeds on the assumption that multinationals are not already subject to sufficient legislation. As the study applies to Australia, this is certainly the case.

Another study asserts that 'Young women who leave school early are the most economically disadvantaged young people in the labour market'. It exclaims, 'the research findings will enrich gender justice and social theory.' In other words,

the research is designed to promote a cause, it is social science as advocacy. The fact that young women may fall pregnant in order to receive a pension may not suit gender justice and social theory. The findings of that research will have to contend with the findings of another. The other one 'will advance theoretical understanding about social justice' by clarifying 'whether authorities are seen to be legitimate or otherwise, and the conditions under which people are perceived to be entitled to benefits.' Which, translated, means that you can bite the hand that feeds you.

There are no grants for studies of wealth creation—although there is one study of the impact of China's entry to the WTO; no studies on a more efficient tax system—just the claim that 'current changes to taxation and welfare programs increase inequality'; no studies on the size of government, or the cost of restrictive practices such as the Kyoto agreement, or further deregulation of the labour market—although one promotes the union movement's labour rights agenda of the WTO. There is a study of the impact of international competition on whitegoods manufacturing, with a view to a positive response. There is a technical study of lucerne production for salinity management, and some modelling of investment and interest rates. There are no grants that study possible contradictions between Aboriginal culture and the ability to participate in the mainstream economy, or of the limits to Australian's attitudes to acceptable behaviour from those who wish to become citizens.

The electorate won the battle of *Tampa*, but the elites, through their vanguard in the humanities and social sciences, may be winning the war.

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