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The coming culture wars

By Geoff Robinson
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Twenty years ago many critics saw John Howard as yesterday's man. They argued that his doubts about Asian immigration and nostalgia for the 1950s had doomed him in the emerging cosmopolitan, globalised and internationally competitive Australia. Yet John Howard fought back to achieve extraordinary political success.

As Prime Minister he aggressively identified himself with the cause of cultural conservatism. His opponents were battered and bewildered by his electoral triumphs of 2001 and 2004 but have seized on his 2007 defeat as evidence that cultural conservatism is exhausted as a political force.

This is not the case. Likely trends in Australian immigration, the rise of China to superpower status and the broader transformation in the Australian political right under John Howard's watch suggest that conflicts around cultural identity could remerge as a significant political factor in Australia. A decade from now John Howard's legacy will continue to inspire the Australian right.

John Howard changed right of centre politics in Australia. To him liberalism was a tool of economic management rather than a broader philosophy of life. He sought to apply market-based economic tools to achieve three conservative objectives; popular acceptance of inevitable human inequality, the bolstering of a sense of national identity that placed whiteness, Christianity and British ancestry at the centre and the encouragement of virtues of individual enterprise and aspiration.

These themes had always had a strong base among the Liberal Party's mass support but had been largely ignored by media commentators.

Throughout the Howard years cultural conservatives won key policy battles; the roll-back of native title, the defeat of the republic referendum, the draconian legislation against asylum-seekers, reform of family law, and the ban on African refugees.

Thirty years ago David Kemp showed how racial conflict in areas of high aboriginal population provided opportunities for conservative mobilisation. His analysis anticipated recent populist conservative anti-Muslim mobilisations at Cronulla and Camden when the “culture wars” took real physical form.

During the Howard era the left was preoccupied by "neo-conservative" bogeymen but the populist conservatism of the Howard years rather echoed what Americans call "paleoconservatism", a traditionalist conservatism that looked back to faith, race and nation rather than free-market economics or specific foreign policy goals.

On a global basis it is Islamic fundamentalism that is the most powerful form of the new conservatism, and David Hicks was a notable recruit. In Australia paleoconservative themes are represented by journals such as National Observer, Newsweekly and increasingly Quadrant, and conservative intellectuals such as David Flint, John Stone and Jim Salem and before them B.A. Santamaria.

The most zealous vehicle of this revived traditionalist conservatism is Fred Nile's Christian Democratic Party which demands that the religious freedom of Australian Muslims be curtailed.

During the Howard years the free-market right fragmented. Some of its members, such as Charles
Richardson, drifted to the left in opposition to Howard’s social conservatism, but other free-market advocates, such as Gregory Melleuish, Barry Maley and Peter Saunders, have become much more sympathetic towards traditionalist Christianity, defence of the patriarchal family and the classical conservative position that class inequalities reflect genetically determined differences in intelligence.

Immigration and foreign policy are likely rallying points for the populist right in coming decades. Maintenance of high levels of population growth in Australia will require historically high levels of immigration. The ethnic composition of Australia faces radical and accelerating change.

Immigration is largely driven by the young who migrate in search of higher living standards. The triumphs of capitalist industrialisation in Asia will increase living standards and reduce the incentive for migration from Asia. The Australian immigration net may have to be cast more and more to those regions bypassed by capitalist industrialisation; Africa and the Middle East.

In the United States opposition to the migration of Hispanics, who are Christian and largely European in heritage has become a major conservative crusade. In Australia immigration of much more culturally divergent populations could become a major conservative rallying point and it may be linked to anti-feminist mobilisations in which Anglo-Australian women will be criticised for their rejection of child-bearing in favour of education and careers.

Cultural conflicts around immigration will take place against background of a broader revolutionary shift in world affairs. The conquest of Australia was the most dramatic expression of the rise of European civilisation to world dominance, but in coming decades China may supplant the United States as a global economic superpower.

As Mitt Romney has powerfully argued the United States may eventually share the fate of the once seemingly eternal European imperial powers. Charles Pearson’s 1893 prediction of the passing of European world dominance will finally be fulfilled. On the American right fear of China runs second only to that of Islam, with both seen as threats to the project of Christian civilisation, and sections of the Australian right have begun to echo these concerns.

The increasing political and electoral weight of Asian-Australians is likely to attract conservative concern if relations between China and the United States deteriorate. The role of Asian-Australian voters in John Howard’s Bennelong defeat has already attracted conservative ire.

John Howard’s critics are entitled to celebrate his defeat but the style of conservatism that he represented has substantial political achievements to its credit and it will retain substantial appeal to right of centre voters. Australian political life cannot remain exempt from the siren calls of faith, race and nation.

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