Robinson, Geoff 2013, Spectres of labourism, Overland, no. 213, Summer, pp. 67-74.

Published online at: https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-213/feature-geoff-robinson/

This is the published version.

© 2013, Geoff Robinson

Reproduced by Deakin University with the kind permission of the copyright owner and the publisher, O.L. Society Ltd.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30077074
In March this year, prime minister Julia Gillard boasted that she led a Labor government, not a social democratic one or a progressive one. She described Labor as ‘politically, organisationally, spiritually and even literally, the party of work’. Her academic admirers were in agreement, with labour historian Nick Dyrenfurth arguing that, unlike that latter-day Trotsky, Kevin Rudd, ‘Gillard “gets” the labour movement’.1

Despite their differences, both Rudd and Gillard believed that the Right’s cultural politics during the Howard years had divided a natural majority for the centre-Left. But they disagreed as to who made up this natural majority. Gillard’s labourism evoked fidelity to an imagined working class whose foes were cast both as inner-urban progressives and wealthy elites. Rudd’s appeal was more amorphous: upon his return to the position of prime minister, he cast Labor as the party of a classless progressivism – the ‘new way’. To Rudd, the division between Labor and its opponents was not about economic interests or cultural divides but rather about the future and the past.

Both leaders, and their academic admirers, built on the arguments of recent Australian humanities scholarship that emphasised identity and agency over structure in explanations of political life. In power, both leaders often governed against the spirit of their respective appeals: Gillard’s first act as prime minister was to revise the Resource Super Profit Tax of her predecessor in favour of the ‘vested elites’ and ‘infamous billionaires’ that labourists such as Wayne Swan disparaged. When Rudd reclaimed the leadership, one of his first initiatives was to ‘lurch to the Right’ on asylum-seekers.2

Their records revealed the limitations of cultural politics.

Gillard’s labourist appeal enthused Labor activists and parliamentarians. She won the loyalty of much of the Labor-sympathetic intelligentsia, such as Dyrenfurth, David Burchell, Judith Brett, Frank Bongiorno, Waleed Aly and Tim Soutphommasane.3 Dyrenfurth’s response to Labor’s 2010 traumas was to declare that the party’s motto should be ‘It’s the culture,
stupid’. Equally, Swan argued that a spirit of egalitarianism was incarnated in ‘our history and our national character’. From this perspective, history was on the side of the Left, and culture and class were one. These latter-day labourists argued that ‘the Left’ had abandoned the ‘Australian legend’ and ‘mateship’ to the Right. 4

Some of Rudd’s intellectual admirers, such as Robert Manne, were more detached from the Labor tradition, but they too argued that politics was about a battle of ideas. Manne believed that Rudd’s 2007 election victory was more than just a change of government: it indicated a fundamental change in the ‘political atmosphere’.5

Gillard’s labourist appeal was a political failure. Electoral support for Labor plunged to historic lows, and this collapse was most apparent among ‘traditional’ Labor voters: members of non-Anglo immigrant communities and workers without university qualifications. Her panicked parliamentary colleagues finally brought Gillard’s term to an end. Rudd’s return as leader challenged Labor’s identity as a party based on trade union affiliation.

Gillard’s labourist defenders offered little explanation for her unpopularity except to blame Rudd.6 They ignored the fact that an earlier generation of Labor-sympathetic intellectuals had been down this road before during Bob Hawke’s leadership. Indeed, in 2010 Gillard claimed that Hawke was her role model.7

Thus Gillard’s intellectual loyalists followed the path that many of the 1980s Left had followed. In those years, Labor’s state-sponsored nationalism, apparent in Hawke’s advocacy of an Australianised school curriculum, appealed to a generation of intellectuals whose politics were formed in the 1960s. For younger intellectuals, cultural theory came to legitimate a largely affirmative celebration of Australian popular nationalism.8 From the perspective of the present, the 1980s seem like the years in which Hawke’s benign populist nationalism won the culture wars. Yet during the Hawke years, Labor’s appeal to working-class voters was significantly eroded. This decline occurred long before the spectres of ‘political correctness’, ‘culture wars’ and the ‘big picture’ stalked the land. Labor insiders were well aware at the time that ‘the base’ was unhappy. As early as 1986, Labor pollster Rod Cameron called for a ‘return to basic Labor values’.9

For contemporary labourists, the erosion of working-class support for Labor during the Hawke years has been largely overshadowed by Paul Keating as prime minister. The Keating years are cast by labourists as a period in which Labor was preoccupied by non-economic ‘big picture’ issues such as Mabo. Dyrenfurth and Bongiorno argue that Keating demonstrated ‘an almost Whitlamite departure from his overwhelming preoccupation, while Treasurer, with sound economic management’. But this is a misleading portrait: economic policy issues were central to the Keating years, with the shift to enterprise bargaining, the One Nation and Working Nation economic statements, and national competition policy merely a few examples. Where Keating did diverge from the high economic rationalism of the mid-1980s, it was to place a greater emphasis on the social safety net.
Unfortunately, Labor’s focus on social protection for the poor undercut support among working-class voters in employment. Labor insiders know this: when Keating’s staff in 1995 toyed with ‘triangulation’, it was issues around social welfare that they focused on, not Mabo or the republic. A similar story unfolded in Britain, where Labour voters in employment have become particularly hostile to the recipients of welfare payments. The foundations of the Gillard government’s crusade to move sole parents onto Newstart were laid during the death agony of the Keating government.¹⁰

In the aftermath of Howard’s 1996 victory, the Liberals boasted that their ‘social conservative’ appeal had won working-class voters. This theme was taken up by media commentators and had a significant impact on many Labor politicians. Commentators from the Left intelligentsia mostly blamed Labor’s defeat on its record of economic liberalism.¹¹

Howard’s directionless first term led some commentators on the Left, such as Guy Rundle, to argue that it was Pauline Hanson rather than Howard who set the agenda on the Right. Amanda Lohrey even contended that, although the Left had lost the election battle, it had won the war against reactionary conservatism. Later critics of Howard, such as Manne and Margo Kingston, actually voted Liberal in 1996. In that year, a Whitlamite intellectual such as David Williamson was more preoccupied by the dangers of ‘political correctness’ than by what he assumed would be the minimal impact of a Howard government.¹²

Until 2001, Howard in power was unpleasant enough to anger the Left but not so politically effective as to inspire panic. Before the 2001 election, it seemed likely that he would be, at best, a two-term prime minister.¹³ It was the conservative victories at the elections of 2001 and, even more so, 2004 that made him an intellectual and political problem. While Labor’s capitulation on asylum seekers in 2001 was deeply upsetting for many of the progressive intelligentsia, it was Howard’s election victory in 2004 that was particularly traumatic for labourists. Dyrenfurth described the sight of Tasmanian timber workers cheering the prime minister as both ‘comical’ and ‘disturbing’; Rundle spoke for the Left as whole when, after the 2004 election, he anticipated epochal transformations and a ‘vastly more problematic period’ ahead.¹⁴

Both progressives and labourists drew on the cultural turn in humanities scholarship to explain Howard’s success. The subsequent political failures and policy disappointments of Rudd and Gillard demonstrate that pursuing a victory on the ‘cultural battlefield’ is to confuse a metaphor for reality.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the focus of Australian historiography became ‘cultural history’. In this framework, ‘culture’ was to be not just the subject of historical inquiry but an approach to historical inquiry based on the empathic interpretation of ways of living. The popularity of the approach to understanding human experience extended well beyond historians.¹⁵

The cultural turn led historians to consider political identities as a form of cultural expression. The political implications of this were ambiguous. Sometimes discourses were cast, as in Foucauldian readings, as forces that created individuals. Across the spectrum of the Left, it was common to identify a ‘contradiction’ between ‘true’ conservative values and the relentless dynamism of neoliberal capitalism, a case backed by citations from John Gray,
the former British Hayekian liberal turned critic of globalisation. Rudd’s essays as opposition leader repeated this argument and cast cultural wars as a distraction from this contradiction. For Gray and his epigones, such as Rudd, political contests were not between social forces but disembodied concepts.

From another perspective, political discourses were created by the agency of individuals. Brett pioneered this approach. She claimed to follow in the tradition of political psychology associated with Alan Davies, but her work largely rejected his Freudian explanatory framework for an empathic emphasis on individual biography and personal values. In Brett’s analysis, Menzies and then Howard appeared as master cultural engineers.

Brett’s own writing reflected not only intellectual trends but also the destabilisation of Australian political certainties during what Peter Beilharz called the ‘Labor decade’. The crisis of official Liberalism generated a renewed interest in liberal ideology, while the faith of Left intellectuals in parliamentary socialism was shattered by the manifest inconsistency between Labor’s policies in government and even the most anaemic form of socialism. Political certainties were up-ended at the very time that economic liberalism became an unchallengeable certainty. Meghan Morris’ cultural-studies fascination with Keating anticipated the approach that Brett would bring to Deakin, Menzies and Howard.

The emphasis that the cultural turn placed on language and discourse implied a focus on political leadership. This orientation was congruent with the interest that American presidential politics increasingly attracted in Australia. Loyalty to British or European socialism no longer distracted Left intellectuals from the fact of hard and soft American hyperpower. Howard seemed an Australian equivalent of George W Bush.

Australian observers pined for political leaders who would be able to reshape Australian political discourse by force of will, as they imagined American presidents did. In fact, the capability of American presidents to change public opinion by force of rhetoric is minimal – and Australian prime ministers have even less ability. Despite this, Gillard’s unpopularity was attributed by many Labor supporters to her communication failures.

It was a curious judgement, since by any objective standard Gillard was a better communicator than Hawke, whose convoluted expression, propensity for wandering off topic, and tendency to address audiences as though they were Arbitration Court judges was the despair of his speechwriter. Hawke’s labourism built on a real social basis: a union movement whose consent was required to effectively govern Australian capitalism. Gillard’s labourism – however eloquent – was no more than words.

After Howard’s political triumphs in 2001 and 2004, it was conservatism, not liberalism, that fascinated Australian intellectuals. Labourists such as Burchell argued that Labor could appeal to ‘conservative’ voters by distinguishing itself from the priorities of the Left intelligentsia. Beneath the nodding to Machiavelli and Weber, Burchell simply repeated conventional wisdom about the importance of aspirational voters and the need to eschew the Left’s ‘canards’ about ordinary Australians. His work anticipated the rightward turn that many enthusiasts for Gillard would take after 2010.
The rapid decline in support for the Howard government after WorkChoices and Rudd’s assumption of the Labor leadership undercut the appeal of conservative labourism as an electoral strategy for the Left. Even the ‘Your Rights at Work’ campaign eschewed labourist rhetoric for a broadly social liberal and progressive appeal. Unions appealed to general values of ‘fairness’ and ‘rights’ assumed to be shared by all Australians, rather than to specific class interests or even the interests of unions themselves. The fall of Howard seemed to exemplify the progressive case: even on the vexed issue of refugee policy, the concessions of the Howard government during its last term could be with some optimism cast as a similar triumph of values, with ‘decent’ Australians finally seeing through his politics of fear.21

In the euphoria of Rudd’s victory, new Labor MPs cast the 2007 election not as a victory for social democracy but for the ‘Australian value’ of fairness. The apparent consensus on climate change policy between Labor and Malcolm Turnbull’s Coalition seemed another example of how Labor had marginalised Howard-era conservatism. Admirers of Rudd, such as John Quiggin and Scott Steel, cast the Liberals as a crippled political force doomed to endure a long term in the wilderness while Labor, it seemed, had developed an alternative ‘ordinary populism’ to that of Howard. Australia was set to become the Victoria of Steve Bracks, writ large.22

The crisis of the Rudd government during 2010 undercut the progressive case. The consensus on climate change was shown to rest on the shaky foundations of Turnbull’s liberalism, while refugee policy returned as an intractable problem for Labor. It was in this context that the Rudd government announced the Resource Super Profits Tax. Over the next months, the tragedy of Ben Chifley’s bank nationalisation was replayed as a farce.

Labour historians cherished the memory of Labor’s cultural politics: how early twentieth-century publicists and politicians had evoked a dichotomy between productive workers, symbolised as Australian bushmen, and parasitic capitalists cast as ‘Fat’. Early labour movements sought to rally the productive classes against the unproductive. This was the legacy revived by the Chifley government’s campaign against the banks and by Rudd’s battle with the miners. Labor moderates like Chifley considered finance capital to be unproductive, and hoped for a producers’ alliance against the banks. In similar style, Rudd pledged that the mining tax would enable reductions in overall business taxation. Even the demonology of Gina Rinehart recalled older images of ‘Fat’ that cast capitalists as feminised and corpulent.23

Both in the late 1940s and in 2010, Labor was baffled by the extent of capitalist resistance and by how many Labor voters were receptive to the arguments of bankers and miners. There is no natural left-wing ‘economic’ majority that slumbers, waiting to be called into existence by an appeal to ‘true’ Labor values, even when the appeal has carefully eschewed ‘wedge’ issues such as anti-communism in the 1950s or marriage equality and the fate of asylum seekers today.24

With the mining tax, Rudd tied himself to the labourist banner. As a result of the political failure of the tax, he was overthrown by a leader much more closely aligned with labourist traditions. Gillard’s first act was to accept an unfavourable compromise on the mining tax.25
This was followed by the disappointing outcome of the 2010 election, when Labor was forced into minority government.

Labor’s loss of support and the rise of Tony Abbott encouraged the labourist argument. Dyrenfurth and Soutphommasane argued that Rudd had been wrong to argue that the culture wars were a distraction, with Dyrenfurth contending that ‘[n]othing less than an all-out cultural war on Labor’s behalf is required to prosecute a reformist legislative agenda’. Soutphommasane took up the arguments of those American liberals, such as Richard Rorty, who blamed the New Left and the cultural turn of academic radicalism for much of the rise of working-class conservatism during the 1970s.26

The fruits of this culture war were meagre. Labor drifted towards acquiescence in Howard’s cultural conservatism combined with a flood of labourist rhetoric. Gillard’s social conservatism approached parody. Like the contemporary American Right, she assumed that personal ‘conservatism’ such as ‘politeness and thrift and fortitude and doing duty and diligence’ translated into political ‘conservatism’. Gillard hoped that opposition to marriage equality would place Labor on the winning side of this conservatism. She was notably unsuccessful: voters regarded her as to the Left of Rudd. Labourists tied themselves in knots to justify an increasingly severe refugee policy, whereas Rudd would simply give voters what he thought they wanted.27

Even by the criteria of an imagined ‘socially conservative’ labourism, the Gillard government’s performance was disappointing. Tax rates were lower than under the Hawke and Keating government, as were core welfare payments relative to median incomes. The spectre of ‘welfare dependence’ was an obsession for the government, as demonstrated by its reforms to single-parent payments. Gillard’s opposition to marriage equality made her an outlier even among much of her support base, but her political heir apparent, Bill Shorten, although a tepid supporter of marriage equality, championed an illiberal scheme for ‘boot camps’ for the young unemployed. The industrial relations reforms of the first Rudd government were largely of Gillard’s devising but they did not correct the notable post-2000 redistribution of income from wages to profits.28 It is not surprising Gillard’s revived labourism was disappointing, for the old labourism exemplified by the ALP between the two world wars was a doctrine of defeat. It offered no practical guidance to the Scullin Labor government during the Great Depression, while the achievements of the Chifley government owed little to labourism.29

The electoral and policy record of the Rudd and Gillard governments was disappointing for intellectuals who placed their hope in either leader. Both labourists and progressives cast politics as a war of ideas. Both ignored what Louis Althusser called ‘the conditions of force’ to which theory must defer if it was to become a power. In the end, both labourists and progressives during Labor’s short decade subjected their ideas to the political force of a Labor party focused on victory at almost any cost.30


17 Gavin Kitching, The Trouble with Theory: The Educational Costs of Postmodernism, Allen & Unwin, Sydney,


Geoff Robinson @geoffpolhist is in Politics at Deakin University. His book on Jack Lang *When the Labor Party Dreams* is still available.