

Post Howard Australia: Decline and Hope

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A Change of Government

Its eight years since the Howard coalition was defeated. Labour has completed two terms, with a balance of power held in the Senate by the Greens.

They moved to counter some of the more regressive actions of the Howard Government, for instance repealing some but not all of the Industrial Relations legislation. They were able to successfully reach out to our Asian neighbours, and there are many more cooperative projects, particularly involving China.

In most dimensions of society there is increased division; paradoxically, at the same time there are also emergent trends which evidence dynamism and fresh ideas.

The Larger Context

World trends continued to impact the Australian economy and culture. China emerged as an ever more powerful economic player, and has started to act more bullish in relation to the US. Its exchange rates, artificially low for a long time, increased so imports became more expensive. This has not dramatically reduced the demand for consumer goods, but it put pressures on inflation in Australia, leading to a period of increasing financial instability.

The lack of any further major assets that the government could sell off ended the period of budget surpluses. The increasingly tense global security climate contributed towards an increase in the defense budget, leaving even less for hospitals, schools and social services.

Social and Ecological Stressors

The result has been a further reduction in the quality of life for the majority of people who increasingly cannot afford the private services which guarantee some kind of standards. The public health system has more and more resembled the American example of hospitals which turn people away because they simply no longer have the capacity to serve them.

This reduction of support services has further stressed the social fabric, and seen an increase in violent crime. Those with money live in the ever more popular gated communities, whilst the rest live in areas which are rife with drugs and gang fights.

Climate fluctuations have increased, leading to more droughts and floods. This has stretched

government resources and led to a further exodus from the country to the cities. Australia has moved further away from being a large agricultural producer, becoming even more dependant on the export of commodities. Several new uranium mines have opened and young people increasingly spend the first 5 years after school working in remote locations, many of them saving substantial sums of money.

Youth Trends

While the middle aged and older populations struggle more and more to make ends meet, many of the younger generation are able to set themselves up financially. Generation Z as it has been called seems confident, savvy and not at all phased by the increasingly rocky social situation. These young people have adapted rapidly, and are able to learn, absorb and apply some of the new technologies very effectively. Some of them have become integrated with the traditional job market, others are networking socially, on a business level and politically in ways not seen before.

As issues become current, these networks rapidly spread information, and organise political action. They are remarkably effective, knowing how to pressure politicians and even big business. They are able to organise instantaneous boycotts on levels not seen before, and thus have a significant influence on companies. As they have investments from their work in the mining sector, they are able to use coordinated action to pressure companies to change policy. They use their shareholder status in very activist ways, and bring their lobbying skills to bear on company directors and boards.

Several youth organisations have become prominent, with a widespread influence in schools. Through messaging they can instantly mobilise hundreds of thousands of students throughout Australia, and have brought about some significant changes in the educational system, making it more democratic.

Another result is a dramatic increase of the number of young people in parliament. There are now 20% of politicians who are under 35. This has led to a range of innovative ideas being introduced as legislation.

Community Health

There has been a growing recognition of mental health as an important arena, as mental illness outstrips physical illness as a source of concern. Although government funding has only increased marginally, there has been a significant development of communitycare groups, along the landcare group model. A small amount of seed funding from government, along with a large bequest left by Rupert Murdoch. Three of his children ended up with severe mental health problems, and on his deathbed he left a large sum to set up a foundation which operated both in Australia and the USA.

These communitycare groups have stepped into the vacuum left by the contraction of government social services, and in many ways have served the community much better. They operate on a cooperative model, and work to strengthen social bonds. Their effectiveness has varied, generally having most impact in poorer areas, and less in the more affluent ones. They have developed community events, communi-

ty support and educational networks, and worked to develop a kind of street life previously only seen in majority world countries. They have become a significant influence in local government decision making, leading in some places to creative developments such as a shift from road funding to the provision of free public transport.

Local Character

While these groups have enjoyed a great deal of success, other communities have become more and more fractured. This has led to a very strong identity in different areas of cities, with people tending to stay more in the area they are familiar with. In some ways this has strengthened a sense of connection with local community, but it has also increased fear to some degree, with people less willing to go into certain areas which are more dangerous.

In the next generation of young people, this has led to an increasing sense of local identity, and with that the development of local culture. Although the influence of American TV and movies is still strong, some of the progressive initiatives of the Labour government have meant that there are now many small local broadcasters – radio, TV, and the new mobile channels which have become very popular. There has been a resurgence of Australian content as a result, and the arts have blossomed. Funding has not generally come from government, but from a new form of investment which is called cultural stocks. This has become a new form of commodity, and thus has achieved a kind of financial value never designated before.

Economic Frames

While there is still much conservative thought about economics, this is being challenged by a new more holistic conception of economic activity. Government has been slow to take these ideas up, but they have been hotly debated in academia, and are starting to percolate out into policy, as graduates take up positions in the public service and industry. These ideas include community economics, quadruple bottom line accounting, activist economics, and entirely new ways of conceptualising economic measurement.

These new ideas about economic development have been especially absorbed by the younger generation. The successful experiences of an increasingly strong worldwide coop movement have moved thinking away from survival of the fittest capitalism, towards a greater emphasis on cooperation. Climate change and a number of ecological disasters have led to green economics being taught at many universities. The Prout¹ framework - introduced in the 20th Century by Indian philosopher PR Sarkar - has become quite influential, particularly in terms of bringing spiritual values into the economic arena.

While many problems remain, and new ones emerge, these trends have allowed people to feel some hope for the future.

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Notes

1. For more, see www.pia.org.au or www.metafuture.org/sarkar/htm.