

What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars"

Part 5: John Howard and "the Australian way of life"

By Nick Beams
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Below we are publishing the fifth part in a 10-part series written by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. The remaining parts are available at the following links: Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4, Part 6, Part 7, Part 8, Part 9 and Part 10.

The political agenda of John Howard, Australia's current prime minister, has, for the past two decades, been grounded on his recognition of one vital fact: that the free market program he espouses will never win long-term mass support. His efforts have consequently been devoted to deflecting the social anger and resentment produced by his policies away from their real causes and toward, instead, an imaginary enemy. There have been various candidates: so-called "cultural elites", Asian immigrants, "queue-jumping" refugees, terrorists, or anyone who could conceivably be branded a threat to what was commonly called, in an earlier period, "the Australian way of life."

It would be wrong to suggest that Howard started with a worked out plan—far from it. Rather, his modus operandi has developed pragmatically in response to changes in the political environment. But it has been built around a central core. Of all the leading figures of the Liberal Party, Howard has been the one most prepared to use the ideological baggage of right-wing nationalism—reaching right back to the formation of the White Australia program—to cover his free market agenda. This has been the key to his relative political longevity.

The new orientation to Asia

Right-wing nationalism began its resurgence during the 13 years of the Hawke-Keating Labor government. Between 1983 and 1996 the system of national economic regulation, which had been at the centre of the "Australian settlement," was dismantled.

The Labor government was responding directly to international pressures. A crisis of profitability for the global capitalist system had brought an end to the long post-war boom. Under these conditions, the violent free market programs of the Reagan and Thatcher governments, accompanied by deep-going attacks on the working class and trade union movement, set the new policy framework which would eventually be followed by all governments, whatever their political colouration.

Any illusions that a social democratic government could hold on to the previous program of Keynesian economic policies and national regulation were quickly dispelled by events in France. The Mitterrand government was engulfed in crisis almost immediately upon being returned to office in 1981. Within a space of less than two years, its

program of nationalisation and Keynesian measures had disintegrated.

Recognising the changed global situation, one of the very first acts of the incoming Labor government in 1983 was to float the Australian dollar. A cornerstone of national economic regulation was thus removed, and the way opened for the deregulatory, and then privatisation, measures that were to follow.

Another key aspect of Labor's agenda was its orientation towards the rapidly growing Asian economic region. This, too, reflected underlying economic trends. By 1984 the volume of trans-Pacific trade exceeded that of trans-Atlantic trade. The European economies were experiencing low growth levels, while the "tiger" economies of South East Asia were expanding rapidly, and, during the first half of the 1990s, were to account for about half the increase in world economic growth. The region was becoming more economically important for Australia, accounting for half its export markets. Moreover, there was a fear that with the emergence of North American and European trade blocs, Australia could be squeezed out of world markets. These considerations lay behind the Australian government's decision to back Japan's moves for the formation of an Asian economic grouping. Initially, the US was not going to be included. But when it became clear this would lead to an open conflict, the US was admitted and the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) was established.

The Labor government's Asian orientation shaped the program that was developed by Howard. He had, of course, no opposition to Labor's free market agenda. Indeed, Howard was among the leading "dries" in the Liberal Party and had initially proposed many of the measures subsequently implemented by Hawke and Keating. But he had sharp differences with Labor's shift away from Australia's traditional relationships with Britain and the US. At the same time, Howard sought to capitalise on the uncertainty generated by the Labor government's economic and social policies by casting his agenda as a return to "traditional" values, against Labor's attempts to denigrate the Australian historical record.

Setting out his *Future Directions* program in 1988, during his first period as leader of the Liberal Party, Howard said he wanted to see "one Australia" that was proud of its heritage. This, however, did not exist under the Hawke government.

"Even people's confidence in their nation's past came under attack as the professional purveyors of guilt attacked Australia's heritage and people were told they should apologise for pride in their culture, traditions, institutions and history. Taught to be ashamed of their past, apprehensive about their future, pessimistic about their ability to

control their own lives let alone their ability to shape the character of the nation as a whole, many came to see change as being in control of them instead of them being in control of change. With it, hope and confidence in the future were transformed into concern and despair.” [1]

For Howard, the 1950s—when the economy was expanding, White Australia was still in force, and the “great silence” still reigned over the history of oppression of the Aboriginal population—constituted an ideal to strive for.

“I think of the Menzies period as a golden age in terms of people. Australia had a sense of family, social stability and optimism during that period ... I believe in the traditional values of Australia: egalitarianism, strong families, entrepreneurial opportunity, hard work, Protestant work ethic. I believe economically that the government should leave it to the markets. If you have a choice between government enterprise and private enterprise you should give it to private enterprise.” [2]

The front cover of Howard’s *Future Directions* program depicted, as his biographer David Barnett was to put it, “a happy family, a nice-looking couple with two nice-looking children, standing before their nice home with its white picket fence, with a nice family car in the driveway.” [3]

The Liberal Aboriginal Affairs Policy, released in October 1988, stated as its first basic principle that: “The Coalition rejects the notion that this generation of mainly European Australians should feel a sense of guilt concerning the actions of previous generations against the Aboriginal people. Guilt is not hereditary.” [4]

Howard plays the race card

In Howard’s view, changes in immigration patterns and the composition of the Australian population were undermining the basis of national identity. He explicitly attacked the concept of “multiculturalism” which had been introduced in 1978 by Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. Multiculturalism, he insisted, signified a loss of direction. According to Howard, it “suggests that we can’t make up our minds who we are or what we believe in.” “The objection I have to multiculturalism,” he said in January 1989, “is that multiculturalism is in effect saying that it is impossible to have an Australian ethos, that it is impossible to have a common Australian culture. So we have to pretend that we are a federation of cultures and that we’ve got a bit from every part of the world. I think that is hopeless.” [5]

For Howard the overriding issue was the building of an electoral base of support for the Liberal Party, under conditions where it was not possible to win mass support for its free market program. By the end of the 1980s, the illusions that had accompanied the rise of Thatcher and Reagan had been dispelled, as the social consequences of their agenda became ever more apparent. In Australia, hostility to the Labor government began to grow over its subservience to the interests of finance capital and the major corporations, reflected in the demand from sections of workers that the trade unions disaffiliate from the ALP.

Basing himself on Liberal Party research and after careful consideration of the options, Howard set out to play the race card. He began to highlight the question of immigration, specifically the level of immigration from Asia. While not advocating a return to White Australia, Howard started to talk about “imbalances” in the immigration program.

On August 1, 1988, when asked whether the rate of Asian immigration was too fast, Howard replied: “I think there are some

people who believe it is. I wouldn’t like to see it greater, I am not in favour of going back to a White Australia policy. I do believe that if it is in the eyes of some in the community, it’s too great, it would be in our immediate term interest and supportive of social cohesion if it were slowed down a little, so that the capacity of the community to absorb was greater.” [6]

The leader of the National Party, Ian Sinclair, immediately extended his support: “What we are saying is that if there is risk of an undue build-up of Asians as against others in the community, then you need to control it ... I certainly believe, that at the moment we need ... to reduce the number of Asians ... We don’t want the divisions of South Africa, we don’t want the divisions of London. We really don’t want the colour divisions of the United States.” National Party front bench member John Stone was blunter, declaring that it was no use “dancing around the bushes” and that “Asian immigration has to be slowed.” [7]

Howard’s remarks set off a storm of controversy. They were regarded as too steeped in White Australia and thus likely to cause damage to Australia’s significant and growing economic interests in Asia—now becoming the fastest growing region in the world economy.

Taking advantage of the divisions in the Liberal Party over Howard’s position, Labor Prime Minister Hawke moved a motion in parliament that no Australian government would use race or ethnicity as a criterion for selecting immigrants. Howard moved an amendment to the effect that immigration policy had to reflect “the capacity of the Australian people to accept and absorb change”—code words for cutting back the migrant intake from Asia. Three members of the Liberal Party in the House of Representatives voted with the Labor government, while two abstained.

Howard’s foray into immigration had divided the Liberals and was seen as one of the key factors leading to the destabilisation of his leadership. In May 1989, he was replaced by Andrew Peacock as Liberal Party leader. But Howard would soon develop other means to advance his perspective of national exclusion.

To be continued

Notes:

- 1) cited in Mark McKenna, *Different Perspectives on Black Armband History* Research Paper 5, 1997-98, Parliamentary Library
- 2) cited in Markus, op cit, p. 83
- 3) ibid
- 4) cited in Markus, op cit, p. 86
- 5) cited in Markus, op cit, p. 87
- 6) cited in Markus, op cit, pp. 88-89
- 7) cited in Markus, op cit, p. 89

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