

How the Aussie battler was born

Years of conservative government are blamed for making Australia outwardly rich but inwardly poor.

POLITICS

The Times Will Suit Them: Postmodern Conservatism In Australia

By Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe
Allen & Unwin, 256pp, \$35

The Land Of Plenty: Australia In The 2000s

By Mark Davis
Melbourne University Press, 379pp, \$36.95

Reviewed by
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NEO-CONSERVATISM is a colossal con trick from beginning to end and its success to date suggests that it is possible to fool most of the people most of the time. Even the acknowledged godfather of the American neocons, Irving Kristol, candidly admits to a certain subterfuge in selling an unappealing neo-liberal economic agenda dressed up in moral-religious garb. In action, this was having your world turned upside down to the benefit of a powerful few while having comforting messages of religion, family and security whispered to you as a distraction.

John Howard's trademark mix of economic liberalism and social conservatism adapted the American neocons' ideas to Australia with devastating ease, embarking on a massive upward redistribution of wealth while keeping the masses pliant and preoccupied with a whole host of manufactured diversions such as multiculturalism, the war on terror and the power of elites. Somewhere along the way Australian society was subsumed into the Australian economy.

Collectively, we have been the frog simmering in the slowly boiling water as the Australia we once knew vanished or was dismantled around us. When confronted with

a stimulating analysis of the times and an acute sense of the implications of the many changes, the effect is felt with a cultural and an intellectual jolt.

Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe, from Deakin University, subject Howard's brand of conservatism to critical scrutiny. Noting that he was unquestionably the most right-wing prime minister Australia has ever had, they detect something different about his conservatism, which they describe as postmodern. It was a conservatism quite unlike anything that had preceded it; its goal was a total reversal of the progressive principles on which modern Australia was based. The authors emphasise the discontinuity represented by neo-conservatism, a conservatism born of a sense of crisis and deeply ambivalent about liberals and political liberalism.

The emphasis was on rapid change, dismantling many of the institutions that had shaped the nation, with a willingness to suspend the role of law, the independence of the public service, and the integrity of parliamentary democracy - all to protect the so-called mainstream values. Howard's culture wars, prosecuted with singular ferocity, were not so much designed as a distraction from the main economic game but rather as central to it: to further divide the Australian people in order to conquer electorally and to supercharge the new economy.

With a chilling deftness, Boucher and Sharpe expose the destructive fallacy of the neo-liberal agenda, noting how a nation's economy, no matter how efficient, remains embedded in inherited cultural traditions. It cannot be treated as if it were merely a series of disaggregated marketplaces devoid of personal, social and personal consequences. To do so politically, as the neo-liberal agenda demands, produces a market-driven instrumental attitude towards other people which destroys families, cultures and institutions when it is



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wedging the left in the process. As he manoeuvred to embrace and ensnare that angry mass of disaffection that propelled One Nation into its shortlived orbit, Howard created the Aussie battler and with it a new constituency of his own.

In the process, Howard casually discarded the anti-monarchist, anti-British and anti-establishment policies of Ward's legend, replacing them with his own nationalistic myth of cultural authenticity infused with a politics that was pro-imperial, anti-intellectual and pro-business. Howard's battler, note the authors, was probably the strangest, most unnatural ideological medley in Australian history.

The irony here is that against the background of Howard's denunciation of the liberal-left's ideas about

Home ground ... the battler was a strange ideological medley.

how culture could be used for political ends, his own right-wing Aussie battler was the product of the same postmodern spin-doctoring of political identity that he professes to oppose so passionately.

The unceasingly provocative Norman Davis sets himself a most formidable task in seeking to analyse the present as Donald Horne analysed the 1960s in *The Lucky Country*, taking us through these complex, disturbing and perplexing times, he illuminates the way with clear insight and considered reflection. Like Horne, he detects a deep malaise and a profound sense of national under-achievement. Just as Horne found a self-perpetuating mediocrity at the core, Davis describes an Australia outwardly rich but inwardly poor.

Despite nearly three decades of economic reform, the Australia he portrays displays surprisingly few of the trappings of genuine social wealth: almost universal financial security, reliably fair and decent working conditions, strongly supported health and education systems, accessible and affordable accommodation, and universally available decent social infrastructure. The veneer of prosperity is fragile; his book title, like Horne's, a statement of ironic melancholy.

In the name of reform, lament Davis, many of the traditions that made Australia a distinctive democracy - such as the fair go - are lost. Are they gone forever?

Davis, however, defends the free market economy, suggesting it could be perhaps better managed or more strategically framed. It might be that he misses the point the hollowness at the centre of the rampant, unsustainable and unsatisfying materialism that he so sharply defines as capitalism itself.

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