

# Mediaportal Report

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▶ **Ruling ideology under threat as capitalism slowly crumbles**

Canberra Times, 01/05/09, General News, Page 15  
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06/04/2009

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▶ **ABC 666 Canberra (Canberra)**  
**17:00 News - 6/04/2009 5:06 PM**  
**Newsreader**

A Canberra political analyst, Norman Abjorensen, says that the latest financial figures indicate that the ACT Liberals are struggling with fundraising.

**Interviewees:** Norman Abjorensen, political analyst, ANU

**Duration:** 0.45

**Summary ID:** W00034276201

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Radio National (Canberra)

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AB:	3500
GB:	5500
All People:	8100

▶ **ABC 666 Canberra (Canberra)**  
**18:00 News - 6/04/2009 6:05 PM**

A Canberra political analyst says he is concerned about the escalating cost of political campaigns in the ACT.

**Interviewees:** Norman Abjorensen, Australian National University

**Duration:** 0.45

**Summary ID:** C00034276256

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# Ruling ideology under threat as capitalism slowly crumbles

After a long hiatus, the battle lines are being redrawn in Australia's culture wars, **NORMAN ABJORENSEN** writes

**K**arl Marx wrote in *The German Ideology* that the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, ie, the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. Herein lies the key to the culture wars – a term that has been bandied around with precious little definition that, according to some commentators, have been the loci of political struggle over the past two decades.

The culture wars came to the fore in Australia with the rise of neo-liberalism or, what has been called more commonly in Australia, economic rationalism. Its genesis may be found in the latter years of the Fraser government in the early 1980s, through the Hawke-Keating years of deregulation and into the Howard era where pro-business policies were given precedence over social concerns. That is the contemporary context, but the origins may go back to the French Revolution, from where we can date the modern concept of democracy. Liberalism, which predated democracy, has hitched itself to the democratic bandwagon, but the uneasy compromise of what we now call liberal democracy – a one-night stand that turned into a live-in arrangement – is at the root of the culture wars. It is simply this: the clash and resulting tension of opposites; the individualism of liberalism versus the collectivism of democracy.

Two decades ago, Francis Fukuyama coined the term the end of history, arguing that the collapse of the Soviet empire removed the only remaining challenge to the hegemony of Western liberal democracy, in essence, American-led capitalism. There was, he said, no longer any real political contention.

Fukuyama was, as he so often is,

wrong. The notion of any overarching Western consensus is simply unsustainable: the riots against the great capitalist summits in Seattle, Genoa and elsewhere make it perfectly clear that there is determined and significant opposition.

Within the so-called liberal democracies, of which Australia is one, there are great struggles taking place. Globalisation and its attendant privatisation might have delivered dividends to the big end of town, but the process has driven a potent wedge between the people and the state, and the consequent shrinking of the public sphere, in which the people have a say, in favour of the private sphere, from which they are excluded, has created a deep democratic deficit. It is truly a clash of cultures between the private business commercial culture and the public democratic culture.

The culture wars, broadly, have become the unofficial de facto opposition to rampant capitalism (especially so as parties once identified with the left, however tenuously, such as the ALP, have shed all vestiges of their opposition to capitalism). The culture wars represent the conflict of the people who are supposedly powerful in a democracy with the vested corporate interests which have seized control of more and more aspects of daily life, the ascendancy, perhaps temporary, of liberalism over democracy.

And they have generated real antagonism. The political and cultural right has identified the enemy as the new class, which it sees as constituting a structural impediment to economic growth and further development of Australia as a free-market economy. A prominent figure in the culture wars, the former mining entrepreneur Hugh Morgan, has been more explicit than most in

describing contemporary society as divided between the intellectual class – the priests, the scribes, the teachers, the TV personalities on the one hand, who are so set against the economic class made up of entrepreneurs, the managers, the businessmen, on the other hand.

An important weapon in the fight against the new class was the attempt to discredit it as elite and out of touch with the Australian mainstream, and holding cultural ideas antagonistic to mainstream values. During the Howard years (1996-2007), this progressivist elite was successfully charged with being culturally out of step on a range of issues, most particularly in its support for indigenous rights, its tolerance on immigration and asylum seeker issues, its more permissive views on law and order issues and its critical stances on the Iraq war and the "war on terror."

And this brings us back to Marx, and the quotation above. What are the ruling ideas? Quite clearly, the ruling material force is the business elite; its goal is to posit capitalism as the unchallenged orthodoxy. The divide opened up by the culture wars is the resistance to that orthodoxy.

With the departure of George W. Bush in the United States and John Howard in Australia, many commentators proclaimed the end of the culture wars, but with the current crisis brought about by capitalism's self-inflicted wounds, the culture wars are merely shifting into higher gear. The ruling ideas are once again under concerted challenge.

■ **Dr Norman Abjorensen, from the ANU's School of Social Sciences, is a contributing author to *The Culture Wars: Australian and American Politics in the 21st Century*, edited by Jim George and Kim Huynh. It was launched at the Australian National University yesterday.**