

LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

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Where's the vision?

Australia is in the grip of a leadership crisis. There is a dearth of political and business leaders who can transcend their narcissism and egoism-and their hubris-sufficiently to offer the country policy visions that inspire hope and energy in the economy and in society.

Ordinary citizens are disillusioned and angry, but this seems hardly to register in the minds of most of our political leaders. The country has perhaps never been so poorly led.

It is tempting to lay all the blame for this at the feet of the Prime Minister. John Howard's less than distinguished public policy record certainly leaves much to be desired. But Mr Howard is a symptom of the problem, not its cause. His political counterpart, Kim Beazley, can hardly be said to be offering a genuine alternative to Mr Howard's prim and colourless leadership.

And most of our political leaders are engaged in careerist politics-that is, they treat politics as a job, where issues of salary levels and allowances, perks and superannuation are their main concern. The idea that politics is a vocation to community life, to serving the public good honourably and dutifully, has all but disappeared from public life.

We see this when some ministers blame their departments for serious administrative blunders with significant political, and economic-repercussions. We see it when ministers cynically dismiss legitimate concerns about potential conflicts of interest if they insist on pursuing private business while attending to their ministerial responsibilities.

We see it when the taxpayer is required to fund an expensive Kirribilli mansion and the Lodge in Canberra for the PM and his well-heeled family. We see it in the unnecessary

junkets MPs award themselves even as economic necessity dogs increasing numbers of families who have to struggle with youth unemployment, increasing cost of food, housing, education and health. These are all fairly symbolic issues, but they do symbolise the growing distance that is going on between our political leadership and ordinary citizens. Increasingly, we have a sense of them and us-rather than all of us pulling together.

There are four major challenges facing this country as we enter the new century. How we respond will determine how Australia will be regarded as a nation state in the international community. If we don't get it right, we will be increasingly derided in world affairs.

The recent sarcasm directed at John Howard by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir-maybe a case of the vindictive in pursuit of the venal, will give way to far more entrenched attacks on Australia. This will see us becoming the lonely country, the 'poor white trash of Asia', as one regional leader once suggested. We could become isolated-despised like the old apartheid South Africa. The first of these challenges is Aboriginality. The world will not for much longer permit us to stumble and mark time over the issue of reconciliation. John Howard's recalcitrance on this issue is humiliating the country in important regional and global forums. His rigidity is embarrassing and his leadership is seriously tainted by his failure to genuinely contribute to the reconciliation process.

The second challenge is multiculturalism. The nurturing of a richly diverse community ought to be one of the most exciting possibilities facing this country. Incorporating it all into a uniquely Australian contribution to the evolution of a democratic society could be a major contribution. But again, Mr Howard has to be dragged kicking and screaming to the issue. He can barely bring himself to utter the word.

The third challenge is how Australia manages-intelligently, engagingly its proximity to Asia. Despite the honourable-if late in the day-commitment to East Timor, our relations with East and South-East Asia-the regions of most vital importance to us have plummeted. The mess that is now our relationship with Indonesia is only the most obvious problem here.

Today, Australia's loneliness in regional and international forums is seriously undermining the national interest. We are without a coherent and effective foreign policy as our Foreign Minister impresses few and disaffects many. Mr Howard seems obtusely unaware of the havoc his lack of policy is wreaking. Australia is rapidly becoming the laughing stock in the region of greatest economic and strategic importance to us. The fourth challenge in

how to direct the economy in the face of a rapidly-and at times dangerously globalising world. John Howard's response has been to burrow further into economic rationalist programs, eg, the privatisation of the rest of Telstra, even as these policies are being discredited around the globe. We have only to consider the appalling vandalisation of the Russian economy by 'free market forces' to realise the madness of such doctrinaire policy-making. Today, Russia is an economy beset by anarcho-capitalism, huge levels of corruption, and its vast black economy is in the grip of organised crime.

Mr Howard sees his introduction of a GST, in this context, as a great achievement. It is not. And post-GST, there is no broad vision, no understanding of where the economy, much less the country, is likely to go.

On the Labor side, Mr Beazley's policy vision remains opaque and dull. All we can go by, so far, is his less than shining record in the Hawke and Keating governments. There he remained an unreconstructed economic rationalist, obsessed by managerialist solutions to much bigger human problems. There is no evidence at this stage that Kim Beazley will do other than offer the same. Are there potential leaders likely to emerge from outside the mainstream political parties? Both the Liberal Party and the ALP are largely factionalised groupings of self-promoting detached, or managerial, politicians. The factionalising undermines the efficacy of public life and capacity for inspiring leadership.

Thus we are forced to look outside the political mainstream for new leadership. There are some exciting possibilities. Noel Pearson, the Aboriginal leader, is one very hopeful candidate. Jason Yat-sen Li, the young Sydney lawyer and constitutional reformer, is another possibility. In Adelaide, former lord mayor Jane Lomax-Smith demonstrates the potential of women as a source of leadership though she will need widespread support, especially from the women's movement, if she is to survive the ruthlessly self-interested male leadership in the grotesquely factionalised State ALP.

And we should look to recent history, too. During the 1970s, Don Dunstan was able to make South Australia a national and international focus for public policy reform and innovation. His strengths as an 'outsider' in politics, his intellect, his passion and commitment, and his determination to inform and educate the electorate for reform mark him in stark contrast to the leadership we have today. Potential leaders should focus on these sorts of strengths and cultivate them. Otherwise, Australia faces a grim future.

It is a future into which the country is headed if we don't challenge our leaders and demand something greater than most of them are able to offer at the moment.

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