Ideas about Australia

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Lecture

Australia in the World

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In my lecture this evening I will seek to situate a discussion of Australia's role in the world - actual and desired - in the context of ideas about the nation, its history, political economy and social values. I'll argue that ideas are important in politics, not separate from but packaged up with perceived interest to create what we often call a nation-defining narrative. Such narratives will be a mix of elements about what's seen to be right and wrong and what works and doesn't work; in other words a mix of what we call the "is" and "ought" factors in political judgement. It follows that to begin any analysis of politics it's necessary to start from the bottom up, in the society itself and the movements it creates, rather than the top down in the inner sanctums of executive government.

SOCIETY, CITIIZENS AND POLITICS

For most of the time, most of the people are not focused on politics - it is background noise as they go about their daily lives at home and work and in the community, where there's plenty to keep them busy. Politics is left to the politicians, the activists, the lobbyists and the media. But this doesn't mean they aren't interested. They have their likes and dislikes, notions of what is right and wrong, and views about what works and doesn't work. Across the electorate there are different understandings of the nation, its past, present and future.

What this means is that when electors are activated they don't just come to the process simply with a blank sheet and a cost/benefit calculator; they also come with a set of values and seek a "fit" between these values and what is being offered by the parties and candidates. It's true that they want their governments to be doing a good job managing the issues of the day, and should this not be the case, they may vote out a government even if the opposition's program doesn't fit their framework of thinking. The logic here isn't watertight and more often than not values are crucial in the political contest and political leaders need to have them and to be able to wrap them up in a clear and easily communicated narrative. Think of Bob Hawke's "national consensus" or Paul Keating's "competitive Australia" or John Howard's "aspirational nationalism" as examples of such a narrative.

These nation-defining narratives - and the policies determined as necessary to back them up - don't come without a contest and sometimes they are just too much for the electorate to digest, understand and support. On the other hand there are clear examples from Australian history when we see the electorate being won over by persistent and effective campaigning and communication around key points. This is why social movements are so important for political parties. They create momentum in society and build alliances around shared ideas. Quite often such ideas gain majority support before political leaders of a similar view realise it and feel confident enough to go on the front foot in advocating them. I would put same-sex marriage into that category today - it's a majority view within the electorate but not within the Parliament.

BIG IDEAS, SMALLER IDEAS AND THE KEY QUESTIONS

In saying all of this there is a distinction that needs to be made between "Big Ideas" and "Smaller or Singular Ideas":

1. Big ideas: these are in effect ideologies backed up by particular views about human nature and human society, for example, socialism or liberalism.
2. Smaller or Singular Ideas: make particular and contestable claims about this or that policy, for example:
    a. "Privatising GTE's will improve efficiency"
    b. "More money spent on research will increase productivity"
    c. "Making drugs illegal will reduce their consumption"

We debate both BIG and SMALL ideas by producing evidence or by making assumptions about what might be possible. Both hard facts and lofty hopes are involved.

When it comes to a nation the major contenders for power will have a particular view on what is the best mix of big and small ideas. Indeed the narratives referred to earlier involve and come into play in relation to the key questions we seek answers to when reflecting on our nation, its past, present and future? My list is as follows:

1. What's best for Australia - free trade or protection?
2. Should economic activity be free of restriction or highly regulated?
3. Should Australia be monoculture or multicultural?
4. What is most important for society - independence and self-reliance or solidarity and social support?
5. Should our nation's primary objective be economic growth or sustainable development?
6. What is most important our material living standards or our well-being overall?
7. What's best for society - a strong state that enforces a strict moral code or a minimalist state that allows for extensive freedom?
8. How best do we secure our position in the world - traditional alliances and military strength or internationalism and the use of soft power?
9. Should our constitution be unitary or federal and should power be centralized or decentralized?
10. What's best when it comes to the use of executive power - strength of purpose or democratic engagement?
11. Should Australia keep the British Monarch as head-of-state or should we be a republic?

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

There are many variations on a theme when it comes to each of these questions and it's not usually a case of "either-or". You might believe, for example, that markets are good but not in all areas of the economy or you might believe that governments are strengthened not weakened when they involve the people through institutions of democratic engagement.

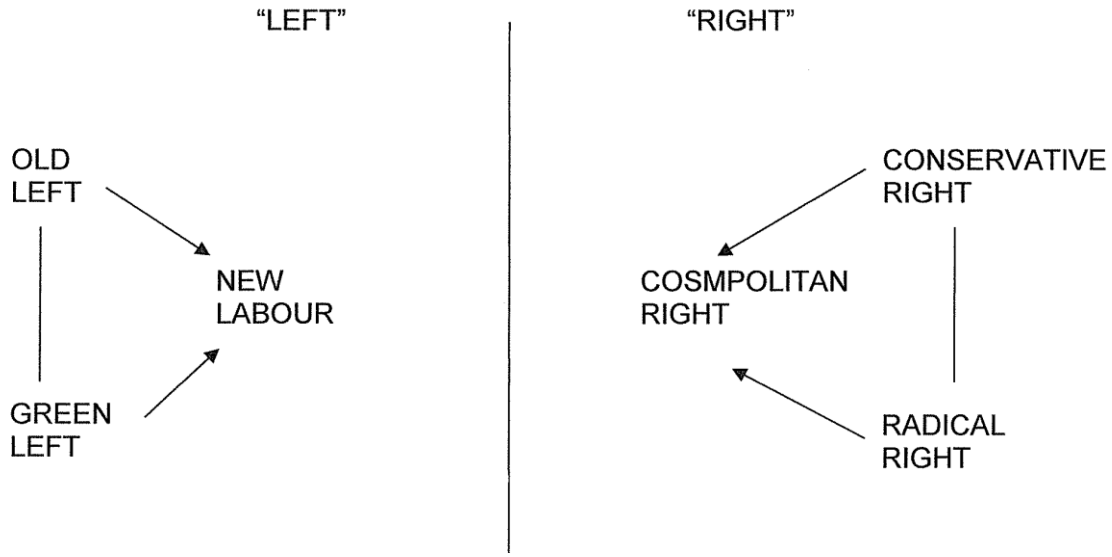
I also note that monoculturalism may have a leftist or a rightist tinge. For example old left nationalism built around unionism and protectionism is different from contemporary nationalism built around self-reliance and "have-a-go" entrepreneurialism.

In relation to the range of ideas that any one individual or party may bring together there will usually be key priorities. For example the Greens regard the environment as the major issue around which to develop their politics. Conservatives, on the other hand, see tradition in all its forms as the key.

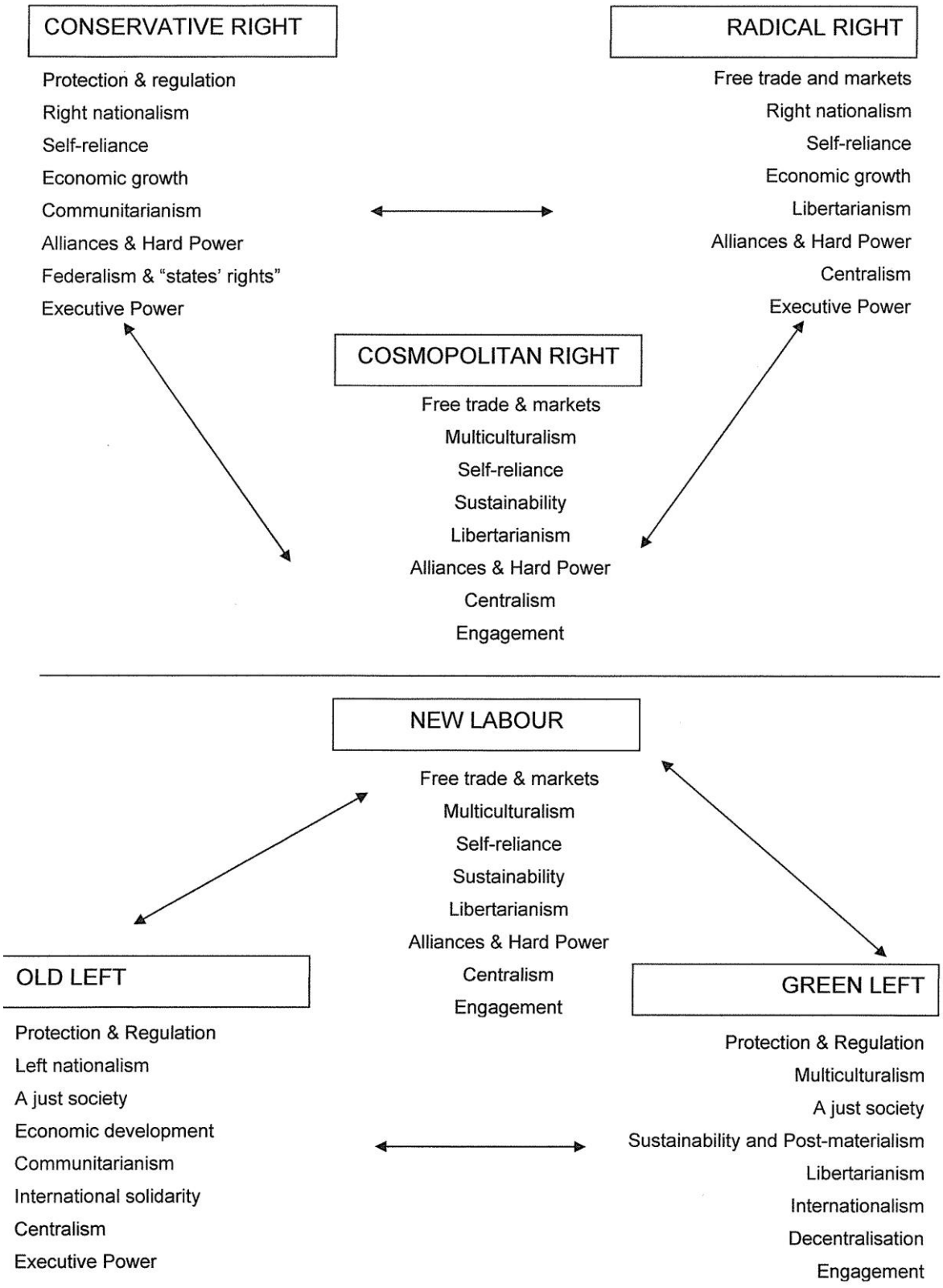
A distinction can be drawn between fundamentalists who say principles are to be adhered to no matter what and pragmatists who say it is more complicated than that, if only because principles can clash and choices have to be made that almost inevitably mean compromise. For example the old left will see public ownership as the critical link that can't be compromised just as conservatives might say the traditional family cannot be compromised. Pragmatists, on the other hand, are pluralists who see contradiction and complexity rather than natural order and simplicity.

Given that I have identified ten areas where different ideas compete for our attention and loyalty it is clear that there can be many permutations and combinations at play. In Australian politics today I can recognize six sets of ideas - three to the left and three to the right. Note that I am using the terms "left" and "right" when some analysts say they are no longer appropriate. It's true a lot has happened since the revolutions that shook Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries created these categories as a way to describe what was going on. A lot has happened since and much of what was called radical (and on the "left") is now established practice in many nations, our own included; such as democratic elections, extensive civil liberties and the Welfare State. Nevertheless there are still currents to the left who say more needs to be done and currents to the right who say too much tradition has been abandoned. It is, however, a more complicated picture, particularly on the question of open markets where some on the right agree with some on the left that more government intervention is needed. In the case of the former it's intervention in the interests of social justice and for the right in the interests of social stability.

What we see is a wide range of considerations coming to the table and movements of opinion emerging based around groupings of big and smaller ideas. Putting to one side the question of the Australian Republic which has its own range of permutations and combinations I would identify three on the left and three on the right:



I reach this conclusion by situating the response to the key questions in this way:



THE SIX AUSTRALIA'S OF OUR IMAGINATION

These are, of course, different ideological tendencies; when we take them into the political arena we may see a slightly different take on matters. For example, we might list six tendencies:

Firstly there is "Strong Australia" represented by many of our strategic thinkers and defence analysts in Canberra. They want to see our borders protected, our armed services strengthened and our alliances bolstered. They see an uncertain and changing world - no time to de-prioritise defence and security.

Secondly there is "Old Australia", best represented by Bob Katter - committed to protectionism, opposed to privatisation and de-regulation, concerned about the future of rural and regional Australia, and tough on asylum seekers. They want to develop the nation.

Thirdly there is "Globalised Australia", best represented by the big-end of town and their free market intellectuals. They want an Australia that is open to the world economy and which supports freedom in production, distribution and exchange. "World's best practice" is their ambition.

Fourthly there is "Cosmopolitan Australia", well represented in the contemporary scene by Paul Keating. The cosmopolitans are also globalists and free-traders but are anxious to see to it that "commercial values" aren't allowed to define our culture and our cities. While economic rationalism is important, it isn’t everything!

Fifthly there is "Fair Australia", represented by the remnants of what was called the "New Left" in the 1960s and '70s. These social democrats believe in political, social and economic rights, multiculturalism and more equality in the distribution of wealth and income. They don't like the compromises that have been made to our welfare and opportunity state.

Finally there is "Green Australia", represented by Bob Brown and now Christine Milne. They too believe in equality, but want it backed up by a low-carbon economy, reduced defence spending and tougher controls over economic development generally. They want to constrain development as it has been understood by "Old Australia".

When analysing these narratives, one can see both conservative and radical tendencies. Old Australia wants radical change to return Australia to the past, while the Greens want a radical renewal. The social democrats want to preserve the Keynesian welfare state, while the globalisers want to change it. The Cosmopolitans want change in some contexts, but preservation in others. The security brigade and the Greens both want a radical response to global insecurity, but differ markedly on the question of what this means.

It is this mix of reaction and renewal which faces our parties and parliamentarians. The major parties need to summarise their positions in the context of these six narratives. On the one side we have Bill Shorten and his politics of a fair go, and on the other Tony Abbott and his politics of self-reliance. What, we might ask, will the line- up be if Malcolm Turnbull becomes Liberal Leader?

IS THERE A CONSENSUS POSITION?

Asking this question reminds us that back in the latter years of the Howard Government and the early years of the Rudd Government some sort of consensus position was emerging. It had four elements:

1. A productivity agenda designed to improve competitiveness through market reform and greater support for education and research
2. A social inclusion agenda designed to tackle injustice, support multiculturalism and lift participation rates in the market economy
3. A climate and environment agenda based on an Emissions Trading System and stronger regulation of industry, locally and internationally
4. A security agenda based around anti-terror laws, our alliance with the US, increased overseas aid and greater participation in world forums.

It can be seen here how different ideas about Australia have been combined to form what may be called a centrist approach in both the national and international arenas. A left-of-centre version would emphasize 2 and 3 and a right-of-centre version would emphasize 1 and 4.