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Australian Labor: the new conservatives

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WEEKEND ESSAY

Mark Latham was a fiery comet who burnt himself out in 14 months. But some of his ideas remain to illuminate the way forward for Labor. They do this because they focus on the real roots of Labor's ongoing crisis of belief. These roots lie in Labor's ideological world view, which arose from the 19th century, blossomed in the 20th century but whose moment has passed.

The classical Labor view of the world revolves around the economy and the **workplace** relationship. The battle was thus over the distribution of the economic product between capitalist and worker.

Originally, this vision responded to the material deprivation of the working class. Progress was therefore defined as ever-increasing living standards and material affluence. Today, Labor's philosophical vision still runs in this orbit, determined by the gravitational pull of these ideas.

This world view is not wholly wrong - such a framework based on the economy and on paid work does matter. The problem is the definition of what constitutes the "economy" is increasingly inadequate because the world has moved on.

Since the entry of women into the workforce in great numbers it is impossible to separate paid work and what we call "the economy" from the family and family values. It was once possible to separate the production of goods from the reproduction of society but this is no longer the case. This is because, today, changes in the economy, such as the lengthening and inflexibility of working hours, have a direct impact on the family in a way they did not when the sole breadwinner was male.

This conflict between family and economic values explains the intervention by conservative religious figures on the side of the trade unions in the debate over the Work Choices bill.

Labor's original world view is inadequate for another reason. It omits the environment. Increasingly, as global warming hits, the old vision based on paid work and a narrowly defined economy is becoming demonstrably inadequate. It is no longer possible to separate a notion of the economy from the natural world. An economic vision must include the idea of sustainability, which means seeing oxygen, carbon, water and minerals as elements of an economy to be regulated (including through the market mechanism), not plundered.

These two dimensions - the family and the environment - provide part of the deeper philosophical tools for Labor to renew its world view and its critique. Renewal also depends on displacing the centrality of material deprivation and economic inequality of the old capitalism and focusing on the social and environmental consequences of the new capitalism. Importantly, both areas reveal the vulnerability of **John Howard's** neo-liberal right.

Labor's social critique should begin with the recognition that the new capitalism is not a friend of the family, nor of the values that families embody at their best: caring, altruism and love. Such values do not make any sense to a system whose logic insists the truly valuable things are those that can be commodified - that is, bought and sold in a market.

Capitalism, old and new, has been stripping the family of its functions for many years, putting a price on those functions and selling them back. This has been very much a double-edged sword. Meals prepared outside the family home and child care have been important benefits, for example, but the problem is there is no end in sight to this process of total commodification of personal and family life. Left to the logic of new capitalism, this process is inexorable and unstoppable.

The new capitalism induces families and communities to mimic its values. Thus parents outsource their needs and commodify care; they emotionally downsize, telling themselves they can get by with less intimate personal contact; civic life becomes lean and mean and self-interest displaces a common good. Life resembles a work/spend treadmill, leaving little time for unhurried, non-market relations between people.

Yet these kinds of activities create personal and community bonds that are essential for human communities and are quite different from market relations.

Labor can tell a compelling story about the new capitalism's effect on the family as emblematic of a wider story about the decline of all non-market relations. Bonds of respect, civility and trust are being weakened and relations based on competition, self-interest and suspicion are growing. Social cohesion is strained.

While none of these processes appear in dramatic form and the process is slow, its direction is unmistakable and relentless.

The second strand in a new Labor story is that the new capitalism is ecologically unsustainable. Capitalism has been enormously productive and the new capitalism even more so. The world economy quadrupled in the past half century and will do the same in the next. The global population has expanded from 1.5 billion to 6 billion in the past 100 years.

With this development has come extraordinary advances in the wellbeing of many people in the West, whose lifestyle is the benchmark for billions of others.

But the cost of this industrialisation is unsustainable. The new capitalism is a high-energy and high-consumption economy that is now the model for new **industrial** economies such as China. The problem is that this model is slowly destroying the biological and ecological bases on which human life depends.

Most compelling stories have elements of fear and danger. In this case the most alarming is climate change induced by fossil-fuel use. This is inducing the shift in climatic zones, loss of biodiversity, extreme weather and health impacts.

Founding a new vision on the family and environment, as well as the old vision of economic inequality, can lay the basis for a different identity for Labor.

But here's the twist in the tale: Labor needs to present itself not as a radical force but as a conservative one. Labor needs to begin to name Howard's new right for the radical force it is.

Labor and the left use words like radical and conservative as signals of approval or disapproval, but this is misleading. Modern, so-called conservatives like Howard are no longer afraid of radical social change. In fact they embrace it.

When you set the market mechanism in place, not just in the economy but in the family and the community, then you begin to destroy family and community values. The market radicalises society - it throws away old habits and old values based on a communal identity; everything is valued in terms of the dollar and individual self-interest; social solidarity crumbles.

In contrast, Labor's vision for a sustainable society needs to be reframed as a new and sensible kind of conservatism. This approach should emphasise - as old-style conservatives do - protection and security.

Tradition is another important concept. The interdependence of living organisms that has evolved through millions of years is a tradition indeed!

Allied with tradition is stewardship, on behalf of our ancestors and for our children's children. This notion, which is so familiar today in the appeal of environmentalism, was originally enunciated by conservative thinker Edmund Burke. Yet it fits perfectly with environmental philosophy. And in any case the environmental movement first arose from what was originally called the conservation movement.

Developing a new vision and a new Labor story won't be easy. It is not a simple arithmetical "adding up" of a list of progressive causes. But a new synthesis based on the family and the environment as well as economic equality may lead to the happy ending Labor desperately wants.

Caption :PHOTO: David McKnight

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