

[[Previous](#)] [[Major News - Federal Politics - Workplace Issues](#)] [[Next](#)]

Monday 21 November 2005



Suddenly, Howard's relaxed and comfortable with the elites

Author: Judith Brett

Publication: The Australian (008, Mon 21 Nov 2005)

Edition: 1 - All-round Country

Keywords: **John (1), Howard (1), industrial (4)**

The federal Government's IR shake-up could alienate the Coalition's base, writes Judith Brett

THIS semester I have been teaching a course called Nations and States with my colleagues at La Trobe University. Its purpose is to get politics students to think about the different ways states and nations need and make use of each other; the mismatches between their strengths and purposes.

The story of the state is a story about the development of organised, legitimate, territorially based coercive power and the uses to which it is put; the story of the nation is a story about culture, about the belief that the contours of a polity are marked by shared values, customs, forms of organisation and ways of life, and that these contours are the result of a shared history.

The history of nations and states is thus the history of the relationship between power and culture.

The core of my argument about **John Howard** is that he has achieved and held on to the political power of the state in part because he has so successfully attached himself to Australian national culture and experience. In contrast to Paul Keating, who devoted his period as prime minister to a program of radical cultural change from above, Howard promised that he would make Australians again feel relaxed and comfortable about themselves and their past.

In speech after speech, he evoked the widely shared symbols of the Australian legend, the symbols of mateship, easygoing informality and the fair go, to present himself as the protector of the national culture against the social engineering of the left-wing elites who had got their hands on state power.

And as Prime Minister he has ostentatiously identified himself with that most potent bearer of a nation's past: its military history.

But now, in his fourth term, with control of the Senate, and facing a deeply wounded Labor Party, Howard has put the relationship between the national culture and state power into reverse.

Where once he needed his identification with national experience to support his own claims to power, he is now using state power to attempt to change the nation fundamentally. Where once he spoke from Australia's heart, he is now attacking the institutions on which Australia's egalitarian values depend.

As he once accused Keating of doing, Howard has now turned the power of the state against ordinary Australians and their way of life.

I am talking about the **industrial** relations reforms, of course. These represent a rupture, not just potentially in the life of the nation, but in the way that Howard has previously governed.

Some commentators have claimed that the convergence of Labor and Liberal on the general direction of economic reform has left voters without effective choice.

Howard has now given them one. And the broad labour movement is finally stirring, girding its loins for a fight. It may not win, but Howard has laid himself open to attack in two entirely new ways.

First, his **industrial** relations reforms expose the fundamental contradictions between his claims to be an economic liberal as well as a social conservative, a champion of both the free market and the family. As the history of capitalism shows, there are inherent contradictions in this relationship as the competitive pressures that drive capitalism come up against the constraints of traditional institutions and ways of living.

These contradictions come to a head in questions about labour. Is labour simply a commodity, a factor of production with its price set by the market? Or is labour embodied in people, who have families and friends and purposes in life beyond serving the economy. That is, do people work to live or live to work?

The legislation is cloaked with a thinly argued case that the reforms are necessary to maintain economic growth so we can all continue to live as we have come to expect.

However, its central purpose is to increase the capacity of the market to set the price of labour and its conditions by dismantling the institutions that have until now moderated the impact of the market on workers.

This is not just about minimum wages, which are important, but also about the regulation of time, and the capacity of working people to balance their work and family commitments. Whether Howard admits it or not, his Government's **industrial** relations reforms show that when the crunch comes, he is prepared to sacrifice families to markets.

The second way that Howard's **industrial** relations changes open him to attack is that he has finally loosened his grip on the national values of fairness and mateship that he fought so hard to wrest from Labor for the Liberals, and is now siding with the rich and powerful (listen to the cheers from the Business Council of Australia) against the weak and vulnerable.

At the 1996 federal election and subsequently, Howard has defeated Labor on the terrain of national culture, and he has won subsequent elections by combining this with the incumbent Government's natural advantage on security issues. The economy was a bit player in the 2004 election, but the

real issue was Mark Latham's leadership credentials.

Now Howard has chosen to fight on quite different ground: the economic underpinnings of ordinary Australians' everyday lives. Although he still claims his reforms are fair, it is easy to see that they're not; that when the only real choice employees have is to take the job or not, the pendulum has swung too far.

Politics is in part about winning rhetorical battles. Until now Howard has been able to present Labor as the voice of the cultural elites. Now that he's speaking with the voice of the economic elites, Labor is back on its home ground.

Judith Brett's Relaxed and Comfortable: The Liberal Party's Australia is in Quarterly Essay 19. This is an extract from her response to correspondence in QE20 (published on December 5).

Headline: Suddenly, Howard's relaxed and comfortable with the elites
Author: Judith Brett
Edition: 1 - All-round Country
Section: Features

[[Previous](#)] [[Major News - Federal Politics - Workplace Issues](#)] [[Next](#)]

Copyright © News Ltd