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Comment

Did the Howard Government Undermine Australian Democracy?

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Rae Wear (2008) has argued that the Howard government (1996–2007) promoted a dangerous form of ‘top-down populism’, which undermined Australian democracy. Wear argues that this populism is illustrated by the Howard government’s willingness to take up aspects of One Nation’s policy platform, the use of wedge politics to secure the government’s position and minimise dissent from the Labor Opposition, a neglect of minority rights and the diversion of resources to appease rural and regional voters (Wear 2008).

This response questions Wear’s decision (2008, 626) not to examine other evidence (such as public opinion polls) and her reliance upon secondary sources that all make negative judgements about the Howard government’s performance in regard to immigration, Aboriginals, border protection, refugees and the promotion of ‘Australian values’ (Manne 2001; Markus 2001; Warhurst and Simms 2002; Marr and Wilkinson 2004; Brett 2007).

The use of primary evidence actually complicates Wear’s argument that the Howard government’s willingness to take up a number of potentially divisive issues undermined Australia’s progressive democratic capacity. Given Wear’s own reference to Labor’s past close relationship with ‘enlightened middle class interests’ which did provide a valid opportunity for those left behind to be heard (Wear 2008, 629), a wider discussion of available evidence may help explain why other research (McAllister and Clark 2007) noted a belief that government was increasingly run for all of the people (18% in 1998 to 33% by 2004), a finding far more optimistic than provided by Wear’s analysis.

Let us begin with Wear’s argument that the Howard government promoted ‘traditional Anglo-Australian forms of identity’ in line with expectations promoted by One Nation (Wear 2008, 625–7). The Howard government certainly encouraged greater cultural integration, as seen by its decision to abolish the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research in its first term. There was also the publication of its *New Agenda for Multicultural Australia* (December 1999) and

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Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity statements (May 2003), which promoted a view that new citizens and residents be committed to Australia and the basic structures and values associated with Australian democracy.

Wear's argument downplays important evidence. After all, cultural integration has been a longstanding concern of a majority of Australians, long before the emergence of One Nation. A June 1996 AGB McNair poll found 60% support for multiculturalism (Millett 1996), but public concern about cultural independence was evident in a number of polls taken since the late 1980s (Betts 1999), including a 1994 *Saulwick* poll which found that 61% agreed that immigrants 'should live and behave like the majority of Australians'.

In response to concern about Islamic extremism, notwithstanding the possibility that governments can overreact as evident by charges against the Gold Coast-based Indian doctor Mohammed Haneef later being dropped (Wear 2008, 630), the Howard government hardly led public opinion. While many Muslims were offended by the negative attention given to their community, no government (or opposition) was likely to ignore overwhelming public anger in response to the radical views offered from a few within the Muslim community. In 2006, after evidence of hostile attitudes towards women (*Australian* 20 February 2006), a *National Nine Newspan*¹ (13 September 2006) found 73% support in response to the proposition 'Should visitors to this country be forced to endorse Australian values' while 77% supported the introduction of a formal citizenship test (*Newspan* 26 September 2006).

Even if one takes a cynical view of the Howard government's promotion of cultural integration, and chooses to downplay the ongoing difficulty that all nations have in regard to both respecting cultural differences and encouraging greater integration, support for multiculturalism in Australia remained high at 70% (*Newspan* 22 December 2005) shortly after the Cronulla riot between citizens of both Anglo-Celtic and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

There are also problems with Wear's assumption that Howard used immigration to divide the Australian population. Wear refers to cuts to the immigration intake for 1997–98 by 13.5%; the Pacific solution and the excision of Christmas and Melville Islands from Australia's immigration zone for dealing with increasing boat arrivals; limiting refugee rights; and the 2001 *Tampa* affair, when 430 asylum seekers on that ship were not allowed to land on Australian territory (Wear 2008, 625–7), a decision supported by two out of every three people (Goot 2002) with 56% wanting all asylum seekers to be held in detention centres (*Newspan* 13 February 2002).

The Howard government's decision to vary the extent and type of immigration was also consistent with longstanding public concern. A June 1996 AGB McNair poll found that 65% believed that the current immigration level was too high within a climate of high unemployment (Millett 1996), a finding similar to a number of polls taken from the late 1980s (Betts 1999). A similar relationship was evident in regard to the Howard government's promotion of skilled immigration given that 60% of the June 1996 AGB McNair poll wanted fewer migrants settling under the family reunion program

¹All *Newspan* references were found on the website <<http://www.newspan.com.au>>. Consulted 24 September 2009.

(Millett 1996), a finding consistent with a 1988 review of immigration (FitzGerald 1988). Hence, between 1995 and 1996 and 2007 and 2008, the number of migrants entering Australia through the family reunion program declined from 46,500 to 38,400, while skilled immigration increased from 20,000 to 65,400 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2003, 131; Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIC] 2008, 3).

Other evidence refutes Wear's claim that the Howard government undermined progressive trends in regard to Australia's immigration program. For instance, immigration arrivals increased to 149,000 by 2007–08 (DIC 2008, 3) as the economy improved and unemployment declined (under 5% by 2005). This increase mirrored softening public attitudes, as suggested by the Australian Election Study, which found that the proportion wanting a cut in immigration declined from 63 to 35% between 1996 and 2004 (McAllister and Clark 2007, 34–5). Further, Australia retained one of the world's highest per capita immigration inflows between 1997 and 2006 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2008). And of the 149,000 immigrant arrivals in 2007–08, 65,000 (40%) came from Asia (compared to 25% in 1994–95), along with 8,200 from North Africa and the Middle East and 10,600 from sub-Saharan Africa (Millett 1996; DIC 2008, 21).

Similarly contestable is Wear's assertion that the Howard government's treatment of Aborigines provided another example of divisive populism that undermined Australian democracy (Wear 2008, 626, 628). Wear's examples are the government's threat to hold a 'race' election if the Senate failed to pass the government's Wik legislation (until resolved by negotiation with independent Senator Harradine prior to the 1998 election), denying a 'stolen generation'; abolishing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission in April 2004 without being replaced by another Aboriginal representative body; and its response in the Northern Territory to the *Little Children are Sacred* report (2007), which resulted in 'the acquisition of Aboriginal communities for five years, compulsory health checks of children, the quarantining of 50% of welfare payments for the purchase of food and other essentials, making welfare payments contingent on school attendance, bans on alcohol and pornography in Aboriginal communities and an increased emphasis on law and order'.

Far from taking up the One Nation agenda, as Wear claims, the Howard government increased Commonwealth funding for indigenous-specific programs from \$1.7 billion in 1996–97 to \$3.5 billion in 2007–08 (Treasury 2005, 21; Treasury 2007, 29). Further, while the Howard government endeavoured to lead debate, public opinion on Aboriginal matters continued to fluctuate and even turn against the Howard government. For instance, though a January 1997 *Morgan Gallup Poll*² (MGP) found majority support nationwide for legislation that would stop native title claims on land by pastoral or farming leases (MGP Finding 2952), greater debate led to just 30% of respondents believing that the government's 10-point Wik plan 'was doing the right thing by all those involved' (MGP Finding 3075, April 1998). And though opinion was

²All *Morgan Gallup Poll* (MGP) references were found on the website <<http://www.roymorgan.com.au>>. Consulted 24 September 2009.

fairly even in regard to the Howard government's refusal to apologise for past treatment of Aboriginals from June 1997 to October 2000 (MGP Finding No. 2933; *Newspoll* 1 June 1997, 8 October 2000), support increased (69% for one poll) by the time Rudd apologized on behalf of the Commonwealth (*Newspoll* 19 February 2008) with Brendan Nelson, as the new leader of the Coalition, supporting the process.

In regard to the Howard government's willingness to intervene in response to Aboriginal governance matters, this was consistent with wider public expectations. Just as one 2004 poll indicated 66% support for more agreements similar to one between the federal government and a Western Australian Aboriginal community that stipulated greater attention to health issues in exchange for the installation of petrol pumps (*Newspoll* 28 December 2004), another poll expressed 61% support for the 2007 Howard government intervention in the Northern Territory (*Newspoll* 10 July 2007). While Australia's intellectual left was clearly unhappy with the Howard government's Aboriginal policy mix (Wear 2008: 626, 628), McAllister and Clark (2007) noted that the proportion of Australians that thought that help for Aborigines had gone too far actually declined from 55% in 1996 to 44% by 2004.

Wear also charges that the Howard government retreated from economic rationalist policies in order to pander to One Nation's economic nationalism. Wear refers to the government's decision to block Royal Dutch Shell's \$10 billion takeover of Woodside petroleum in 2001, extra spending given to Australia's rural and regional areas from the sale of Telstra, special assistance to sugar farmers and drought relief packages, rural electorates receiving 77% of the grants awarded by the Regional Partnerships Program during the 2007 election campaign, and farmers being offered support payments in response to drought (Wear 2008, 625, 627).

The use of a few economic policy examples by Wear proves very little. The Howard government's economic policy mix, when viewed in its entirety, offered a pragmatic approach that sought to balance Australia's commitment to freer trade, make the economy more efficient and uphold the national interest. Certainly, there were examples where the Howard government ran soft on the process of economic reform. For instance, shortly after One Nation's greatest electoral success at the 1998 Queensland state election, the Howard government decided not to implement the National Competition Council's recommendation that 93% of Australia Post's services be opened to full competition (Washington et al. 1998). During July 1998, the government also announced that the standard letter rate would remain frozen at 45 cents until at least 2003 and that no post office or mail centre in regional Australia would close.

Appeasing rural and regional voters is hardly unusual for a Coalition government given that it depends on rural and regional votes to offset Labor success in cities. And in this era of ongoing and extensive economic reform, it has been rural and regional areas that have needed greater assistance given that many towns lost bank branches and services and had most to lose from privatisation of telecommunication services, not to mention adverse economic effects caused by drought. In contrast to Wear's argument that extra spending on rural and regional areas was another example of dangerous populism inspired by One Nation, Australia was just one of four OECD nations in 2005

where the gap in income between the richest and poorest regions was less than double (OECD 2009).

At other times, the government did listen to concern by the public and industry groups (not just One Nation supporters), as seen by substantial support for manufacturing industry assistance. For example, consistent with a June 1997 poll that indicated 68% support for protecting Australian industry (MGP Finding 2996), the government at the time froze the general automotive tariff at 15% from 2000 until 2005, although it was lowered from 22.5%. The government also implemented a \$2 billion Automotive Competitiveness and Investment Scheme to operate from 2001 to 2005 (Doak 1998), with another \$4.2 billion provided for the 2006–15 period, although the tariff would fall to 10% from January 2005 and 5% from January 2010 (ABS 2005).

These decisions were consistent with public opinion at the time, but other Howard government economic policies had far less regard for public opinion. Indeed, the Howard government took an immense political risk with the introduction of a goods and service tax (GST) given divided opinion in a number of polls right up to the 1998 federal election. *Newspoll* suggested that the GST was a major issue for 53% of voters at the 1998 federal election (27 September 1998). In addition, its determination to privatise 100% of Telstra was in the face of hostile public opinion: 62% in March 1998 (MGP, Finding 3066), 78% in July 2002 and 75% in August 2005 (*Newspoll* 16 August 2005). The same is true of the widespread unpopularity for the Howard government's promotion of Australian Workplace Agreements, particularly from 2005 when it removed the 'no-disadvantage' test.

Wear also argues that the Howard government had little regard for the long-term national interest with Howard determined to 'show the electorate he cared by spending their money' via grant schemes, subsidies or tax breaks, with little regard for the long view (Wear 2008, 630). But higher levels of spending by the Howard government in economic boom times is hardly any more fiscally irresponsible than when the Keating government achieved an average budget deficit of 3% of GDP from 1991–92 to 1995–96 despite Commonwealth revenue increasing from 22.9 to 24.2% of GDP (Treasury 2007), at a time when Australia's GDP averaged 3.75% growth from 1992–96. Moreover, as events have turned out, the Howard government's determination to reduce public debt has placed future governments in a better position than most developed nations to address lower private sector economic activity in response to the 2008–09 economic crisis. In 2007, Australia's public debt (15% of GDP) was the second lowest in the OECD (Central Intelligence Agency 2008).

In any case, it would have been politically difficult for the Howard government to avoid higher levels of welfare spending, despite the possibility that extra resources may have been allocated to infrastructure or public housing. With health and education ranking amongst the three most important issues (*Newspoll* 11 June 2002, 24 February 2004, 20 February 2007), greater assistance to families helped counter opposition to reforms that resulted in higher costs for health and education. For example, the introduction of much higher charges to the Higher Education Contribution Scheme was opposed by 68% (MGP Finding 2977), while a September 1996 poll found that 57% were not prepared to pay for more for healthcare services (MGP Finding No. 2935)

after the August 1996 Budget increased the Medicare levy contribution from 1 to 1.5% of income and imposed an extra 1% penalty on those without private insurance on earnings of \$100,000 for families.

There is also Wear's selective use of evidence. While Wear quotes the discussion about wedge politics made by Wilson and Turnbull's 2001 article titled 'Wedge Politics and Welfare Reform in Australia' (Wear 2008: 625), where is Wear's discussion of the Howard government's tougher social security and welfare policies given that sector consumed \$96 billion of the total \$232 billion federal budget for 2007–08 (Treasury 2007)? Does Wear view tougher rules for welfare as another dangerous form of populism?

Howard and Costello had indicated long before the rise of One Nation that a Coalition government would adopt tougher measures to counter the dramatic rise in welfare dependency (Howard 1995b, 8; Costello 1995, 7), despite acknowledging that a decent social security system to protect the most vulnerable was essential (Howard 1995a). Mutual obligation programs were overwhelmingly supported by the public. For instance, a February 1997 poll indicated 70% support in regard to a compulsory 'work-for-the-dole' scheme for 16–20-year-olds out of work for six months (MGP Finding 2963), with another reporting that 75% favoured the scheme with 80% of participants reporting satisfaction by February 1999 (Arndt 1999). In addition, 1999 and 2000 Roy Morgan research indicated 58% support for single parents to seek part-time work once all children reached primary school, while 85% wanted people on disability pensions to work in accordance with activities that matched their abilities (Saunders 2003, 11–12).

Consistent with the Australian Election Study that found that the proportion of voters who believed that government was run for all of the people increased from 18% in 1998 to 33% in 2004 (McAllister and Clark 2007), the evidence suggests that the Howard government (1996–2007) hardly undermined Australia's progressive democratic capacity.

It is indisputable that the Howard government provoked considerable controversy on a number of issues, including its response to Aboriginal issues, social security beneficiaries and asylum seekers or even its reluctance not to ratify Kyoto – a policy mix that angered the left. And by 2007, with the Howard government struggling for support given its unpopularity, especially in regard to industrial relations, Iraq and the environment (at a time of rising interest rates), it may have even promoted desperate policies, such as its proposal for the Commonwealth take-over of Devonport's Mersey hospital in the marginal Tasmanian seat of Braddon (Wear 2008, 629).

However, in making a claim that the Howard government was dangerously populist, Wear should have done much more than rely on secondary sources that all made negative judgements about the Howard government's performance in regard to immigration, Aboriginals, border protection, refugees and the promotion of 'Australian values' (Manne 2001; Markus 2001; Warhurst and Simms 2002; Marr and Wilkinson 2004; Brett 2007).

Given that policy trends in Australia's liberal democracy are best explained by evaluating the ongoing interaction that takes place between political parties, interest groups and public opinion, Wear should have examined this crucial relationship in order to provide more sophisticated analysis about the Howard government's policy mix.

Wear's assertion that the Howard government (inspired by One Nation) adopted a dangerous form of populism, which undermined Australian democracy, is not supported by the evidence. Further, Wear's selective use and reliance upon secondary sources, downplays important primary evidence that suggests a contrary conclusion. In essence, the Howard government was determined to respond to the concerns of Australians on a number of issues where community opinion was divided and whether this determination undermined Australian democracy is highly questionable.

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