

# 'Beyond left and right' or 'the end of ideology'?

## Comparing two discourses

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*A paper presented at the Australian Social Policy Conference 2009, 8 July<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract:** This paper argues that there are similarities between recent arguments to the effect that politics has moved 'beyond left and right' and the 1950s Cold War thesis concerning 'the end of ideology'. In particular it argues that both are ideological offensives against the left, and as such, both are right-wing, claims to neutrality and moderation notwithstanding. The paper starts by briefly defining 'left' and 'right' in terms of stances in relation to power-as-domination. The main part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of what each discourse has had to say about both the left and the right, in order to demonstrate some of the ways in which both discourses can be regarded as right-wing. It points out that politics today, far from transcending any left/right distinction, demands ever greater clarity and vigilance about what is at stake. It concludes by raising the question (but not answering it) of why there has been a renewed ideological offensive against the left, given the success of neo-liberal policies worldwide.

### *Introduction*

It has become common practice in recent years to assert that party politics in the western democracies has moved 'beyond left and right' and the attendant antagonistic social divisions, and that politics is now a consensual affair taking place in a centre defined by common interests and mutual agreement. A few months after the Labor Party won the 2007 federal election, for example, [Prime Minister, Kevin] Rudd, entitled a speech he gave to the Sydney Institute, 'Abandon left and right for a vision to unite'. In that speech he said: 'Now more than ever, we need a real debate that transcends the old battlelines of the left and right of Australian politics', and referred to 'a new tradition of the reforming centre of Australian politics' (Rudd, 2008).

Rudd gave no reasons for this supposed transmogrification out of the realm of political strife and into a new centre of (presumably) peace and reconciliation (apart, of course, from the fact that it was *his* party that was now in power). But he did note that the relationship between left and right is one of conflict, even though he didn't say what the conflict was about.

I suggest that the issue between left and right (despite Rudd's claim to be beyond both) is not so much one of conflict, but rather both a question of power *and* a question of resistance to power and unjustified privilege.

It is generally agreed that the defining characteristic of the left is equality, while the defining characteristic of the right is inequality. As Anthony Giddens put it: 'On the whole, the right is more happy to tolerate the existence of inequalities than the left, and more prone to support the powerful than the powerless' (Giddens, 2007: 251). But while notions of equality and inequality go part of the way towards illuminating the distinction between left and right, the second part of Giddens' statement—about the powerful and the powerless—hints at something more basic at stake, namely, positions in relation to power, or rather to domination, i.e. those social arrangements that operate in the

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<sup>1</sup> [Note August 2024: The sources for the references cited were correct at the time of writing. Some are no longer correct, especially citations of government publications. Interpolations in square brackets have been added on this date.]

interests of some at the expense of others' basic human rights. The kind of power that makes sense of the left-right distinction is economic domination, i.e. capitalism. In that sense, the left refers to whatever resists the power-as-domination that creates the economic inequalities; the right refers to whatever supports, justifies or excuses it.

The 'beyond-left-and-right' thesis bears some similarity to the 1950s Cold War position on 'the end of ideology'. Both are ideological offensives against the left and both are partisans of the right, despite claims to scholarly objectivity and neutrality. This has implications for any social policy based on claims to being beyond left and right. If those claims are in fact right-wing, the possibilities for an end to the neo-liberal domination of the welfare regimes of developed nations like Australia are slim to non-existent.

And in fact, the Rudd government has done nothing to roll back the welfare 'reforms' of previous governments. The infamous 'breaching' policy is still in place, as is the 'work-for-the-dole' scheme, not to mention the tightened requirements on single mothers and people with disabilities to find paid work (with scant regard for effects on job availability of the recent 'global financial crisis'). The regime of penalties for 'wilfully and persistently noncompliant job seekers' (DEEWR, 2008: 22) has been retained, and there has been no reversal of the Howard government's decision to subject single mothers of children over the age of six and people with disabilities to the same regime. Any changes the Rudd government has introduced have been purely cosmetic: e.g. provision for a 'compliance assessment' to determine whether or not an eight-week suspension of payment after three failures [to attend compulsory meetings with the 'service provider'] would be appropriate (DEEWR, 2008: 22).<sup>2</sup>

It is true that no social democratic government has ever introduced an unemployment benefit that was unconditional. But both the conditions and their enforcement can be more or less harsh, and the harsher end of the spectrum was the one favoured by the previous avowedly right-wing government. The Rudd government's failure to reverse or even modify the harshness is not evidence of a move beyond left and right. On the contrary, it remains firmly ensconced in the right wing.

This paper investigates what each of these discourses has had to say about the left and the right, with the aim of clarifying their right-wing biases.

### *What each discourse says about the left*

#### **'End-of-ideology'**

It is well-known that the 'ideology' whose demise was announced with the 'end-of-ideology' thesis was 'Communism' or 'socialism'.<sup>3</sup> As one of the thesis' proponents, Irving Kristol, put it in 1968, in his description of Daniel Bell's book, *The End of Ideology*:

By the "end of ideology," Mr. Bell appears to mean, above all, the collapse of the socialist ideal. And he is quite correct in the emphasis he puts upon this event. It is not too much to say that the collapse of the socialist ideal is the most striking event in the history of political thought in this century (Kristol, 1968).

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<sup>2</sup> For discussions of the changes since the Rudd government took office, see; Eardley, 2008; Madigan, 2009; Peatling, 2009

<sup>3</sup> The terms were often used interchangeably, although sometimes 'socialism' was used to designate an acceptably moderate contrast to 'Communism'.

Another proponent, Edward Shils, stated his conviction in his 'End of ideology' paper that '[c]ommunism had lost the battle of ideas with the West' (Shils, 1955: 53), while Seymour Martin Lipset, whose book, *Political Man*, concludes with a chapter called 'The end of ideology?' also agreed with the denunciation of 'Communism'. In Lipset's view 'Communism' was the extremist version of left-wing politics. He did believe that the political commitment of the 'end-of-ideology' thesis was itself left-wing. But Lipset's 'left' simply rested on the 'equalitarian' values of the American Declaration of Independence (Lipset, 1963: 341), and its status as a left-wing position is dubious. Even though he referred to some of its adherents as 'socialists', it has also been described as 'neo-conservative', including by Lipset himself.<sup>4</sup>

But the anti-communism of the 'end-of-ideology' proponents was at the very least one-eyed. Even granted that Stalinism was a thoroughly evil regime, fascism and Nazism received a minute fraction of the attention devoted to 'Communism', and even then they were regarded simply as variants on the theme of totalitarianism. The 'end-of-ideology' anti-communism was itself ideological (Bobbio, 1996: 3). It functioned to serve the Cold War purposes of the US by providing an intellectual justification for US worldwide economic hegemony. It forbade criticism of the US, and its discussion of the right, including Nazism, was curiously non-judgemental (except for McCarthyism) (see below).

### **'Beyond-left-and-right'**

Within the more recent discourse, what we are supposedly beyond is not both left *and* right, but only the left. The alternative political scenarios recommended exclude the possibility of retaining any aspect of socialism, while at the same time incorporating right-wing views.

It is true that at least one proponent of the thesis, David McKnight, expressed some sympathy for socialism—he said he wanted to 'reconfigure ... the motivations and values of socialism' (McKnight, 2005: 124) for the 'new humanism' which he believed superseded the social divisions between left and right; and he did accurately identify the core belief of socialism as 'its critique of the social and political power that comes from concentrated wealth'. He felt that the 'new vision' he was proposing 'should build a moral critique of greed and self-interest, and design policies to restrict the power of this elite' (p.239).

But it was unclear how the power of the elite could be restricted, given that no restrictions were to be placed on the markets that created the concentrated wealth. He agreed with Friedrich Hayek (among others) that 'the market ... acts as an information medium' (McKnight, 2005: 116). Any attempt to control markets would damage the economy by impeding the flow of the information required for their successful operation. But if there is no possibility of intervening to influence the distribution of wealth, there is also no possibility of restricting the power that comes with its ownership. There's also no possibility of implementing anything resembling socialism.

Anthony Giddens had no desire to incorporate socialist insights into his suggested alternative, 'generative politics'. He disagreed with what he regarded as both aspects of socialism—central planning and egalitarianism. He disagreed with the former because

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<sup>4</sup> Green (1987: 5-6) quotes Lipset identifying himself as a 'neo-conservative' (in Horowitz and Lipset (1978) *Dialogues on American Politics* New York: Oxford University Press); and his obituary in the *New York Times* said that he was 'one of the first intellectuals to be called a neoconservative' (Martin, 2007).

western industrial societies were too ‘complex’ to be planned, he said, and there was once again the problem of markets as information media, or ‘signalling devices’ (Giddens, 2007: 58-9). In the case of egalitarianism, at best ‘all is muddle’ (p.59); at worst, it’s an excuse for mass murder, just as the ‘end-of-ideology’ exponents said, although this time in Cambodia rather than in the Soviet Union. Egalitarian socialists, he said, ‘have seen political power as an instrument to be used to produce socio-economic levelling—carried to its extreme, one might argue, in the policies of Pol Pot’ (p.62).

In these accounts, there is no possibility that socialism could be retained in a social order that was ‘beyond left and right’. Whether muddled, murderous or misguided, it was clearly socialism that had to be left behind, at least in the view of these proponents of the ‘beyond-left-and-right’ thesis.

### *What each discourse says about the right*

#### **‘End-of-ideology’**

The ‘end-of-ideology’ proponents sometimes saw themselves as moderate left-wingers in the US sense of liberal Democratic Party supporters, and they did have a critique of the right. Both Bell and Lipset criticised McCarthyism as an exemplar of the right-wing and (in Lipset’s case) of fascism. This was not surprising, since their own liberal democratic position was attacked by McCarthyism for being soft on communism. But Bell believed that McCarthyism was no great threat to the American way of life because ‘the United States [was] so huge and complex that no single political boss or any single political group [had] ever been able to dominate it’ (Bell, 1960: 112) (except, of course, for rich white men), whereas ‘Communism’ was a threat to democracy because it was ‘a conspiracy’. And his ‘end-of-ideology’ book contained no critique of Nazism or fascism.

Lipset (1963) discussed fascism at some length, although he didn’t believe that it was only a right-wing phenomenon—in its extreme form the left could be fascist, too, he said—and he had nothing to say about fascism’s defining characteristics—its violence, its worship of the ‘strong leader’, and its connection with a particularly lethal form of masculinity (Theweleit, 1987, 1989; Hesse, 1990; Milfull, 1990). He regarded McCarthyism as a type of fascism with its roots in the social instability of the petty bourgeoisie. But he ignored the fact that Marxism said it first; and he had a somewhat specious argument denying that fascism (or Nazism) had anything to do with capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

He was able to avoid connecting right-wing discourse with ideological justifications for capitalism, because of the way he characterised the right wing. He saw it in terms of throne-and-altar, divine right conservatism, i.e. in terms of the remnants of those feudal social structures Marx argued had been supplanted by capitalism. For example, he said, ‘The ideal of the right extremist is not a totalitarian ruler, but a monarch, or a traditionalist who acts like one’ (Lipset, 1963: 130). In focusing on this kind of right-wing, he was able to ignore right-wing discourses justifying the structures of capitalist rule.

But the clearest evidence for the right-wing nature of the ‘end-of-ideology’ discourse is provided by its origins. The source of its popularisation and dissemination was a 1955

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<sup>5</sup> He was trying to argue that Nazism was not a consequence of capitalism (as some communist theorists were arguing), and his evidence was that business interests in Germany didn’t originally support the Nazi party and hence they were not responsible for creating it. He did acknowledge, though, that big business supported the Nazis once they got into power.

conference in Milan called ‘The future of freedom’,<sup>6</sup> and all the proponents of the ‘end-of-ideology’ thesis attended it. They were also members of an organisation called the ‘Congress for Cultural Freedom’ (CCF), which sponsored the conference. The CCF was later found to be wholly—and secretly—funded by the CIA (Scott-Smith, 2002). As the CIA itself has noted, ‘The Congress for Cultural Freedom is widely considered one of the CIA’s more daring and effective Cold War covert operations’ (Warner, no date: 87).<sup>7</sup>

At the time, the CIA were reluctant to fund overtly right-wing enterprises, because they saw their mandate in terms of drawing the intelligentsia in Western countries away from Marxism by supporting the intellectual enterprises of what they regarded as the social democratic left-wing (Pybus, 2000).<sup>8</sup> But however conciliatory and magnanimous the CIA might have been towards intellectuals in the 1950s, its ‘Congress for Cultural Freedom’ didn’t fool everyone. Bertrand Russell, for example, left the CCF because, in his view, it was ‘in favour of cultural freedom for Russia and China but disapprove[d] of it elsewhere’ (Blitz, 2002). And the interests it served—the world dominance of US interests—locates any enterprise it funds well and truly in the right-wing.

### **‘Beyond-left-and-right’**

Among the proponents of the ‘beyond-left-and-right’ thesis, there is some criticism of the right, of neo-liberalism in particular.<sup>9</sup> But aspects of right-wing thought are incorporated into their suggested alternatives to left and right in a way that socialist ideas are not. By ‘right-wing’ I don’t mean ‘conservative’. I agree with that conservatism can be distinguished from the right (although for different reasons). The fact that both Giddens and McKnight argue for the retention of some form of conservatism in any political program that goes beyond left and right, is not why I say their programs contain elements of right-wing thought. In McKnight’s case, his right-wing commitment comes from his agreement with Hayek about the inadvisability of placing any restrictions on ‘markets’, i.e. on the wealth accumulation that is the primary purpose of the capitalist economy.

In Giddens’ case there are at least three aspects of his suggested ‘future of radical politics’ that are right-wing. First, there is the individualism and voluntarism of his ‘life politics’. Take, for example, this approving quote from someone he refers to as ‘one of the most prominent contemporary students’ of ‘happiness’: “‘People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives’” (Giddens, 2007: 180-1). Second, there is his apologia for capitalism, for example, such assertions as: ‘the demonizing of large corporations ... does not make much sense now’ (Giddens, 2007:

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<sup>6</sup> Scott-Smith, 2002: 437; Lipset, 1955, 1963: 441n1, 442n2; Shils, 1955; Bell, 1960: 17.

<sup>7</sup> This article is by-lined ‘Michael Warner’, but it appears on the CIA website (as well as a number of other places on the internet), from which I downloaded it on 31.12.08.

<sup>8</sup> According to one commentator (Fulford, 2000), this was the reason for the secrecy. Members of the US Congress had to be kept in the dark because they couldn’t see the difference between the liberal democratic left and ‘Communists’, even though the recipients of CIA funds were avowedly anti-communist.

<sup>9</sup> Giddens’ criticism is muted—neoliberalism is merely paradoxical: it is ‘hostile to tradition’ and yet it ‘depends upon’ it for legitimacy and because of its connection to conservatism (Giddens, 2007: 9—Giddens’ emphasis). It is also exculpatory—neoliberalism does support inequality, he admits, but only because of its ‘theory of the necessary flexibility of labour markets, not [because of] a justification of inequality *per se*’ (p.251).

89); and: ‘The days when global inequalities could simply be blamed on the spread of capitalism are certainly over’ (p.98). And third, there is his outright support for right-wing arguments, for example,

Some of the major problematic aspects of the welfare state have by now been identified clearly enough, partly as a result of neoliberal critiques. The welfare state has been less than wholly effective either in countering poverty or in producing large-scale income or wealth redistribution (Giddens, 2007: 17-18).<sup>10</sup>

Given this embrace of right-wing meanings and values, it is wildly inaccurate to insist that party politics has moved ‘beyond left and right’. If it is the case that the distinction between left and right has become increasingly blurred, that is not just a neutral fact to which political life has to accommodate itself. On the contrary, it is a victory for the right-wing, and it needs to be identified as such and challenged and deplored, not meekly accepted. It suggests, not that political differences have been faced and overcome, but that politics has shifted so far to the right that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find any left-wing values or policies at all in the public arena.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, both the earlier Cold War discourse and the more recent ‘centrist’ one are right-wing. Both serve dominant interests and the interests of domination. The ‘end-of-ideology’ thesis did this by finding and focusing exclusively on a plausible enemy elsewhere (i.e. ‘Communism’), by censoring any criticism of its paymaster, the US, and by instituting a worldwide intellectual hegemony favourable to US interests. The ‘beyond-left-and-right’ thesis does not on the face of it serve US interests quite so blatantly, but only because those interests in the accumulation of wealth and the power that brings for the ruthless few, have become genuinely worldwide. The thesis serves the interests of domination by denying it exists—consensus is now the order of the day, it would seem, and political differences have become no more than differences of opinion revolving around a core of agreement, and alternating by way of a civilised election process.

But this cannot be the case if world hunger is increasing, if citizens of wealthy nations are homeless, if the economy cannot employ everyone or care for those who cannot engage in paid work, if corporations won’t take responsibility for the detritus created by built-in obsolescence or for the detrimental effects of the production process on the earth’s ecosphere, if the global economy on which we all depend continues its disastrous melt-downs. It is far from being the case that there is no longer any need for some such distinction as the traditional one between right and left. The need for clarity about what is at stake is more urgent than ever before, as the left-wing vanishes from the political scene altogether.

I want to conclude with a question: Why was there a revival in the 1990s of an ideological offensive against the left that seems more suited to the Cold War of the 1950s? Or rather, since there has never been a time when the left has not been under attack, why has the campaign been stepped up? ‘Communism’ might fairly plausibly be

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<sup>10</sup> Here he shows wilful ignorance of a number of well-known facts about the welfare state, i.e. that it was not meant to counter poverty but to maintain it, even while mitigating the worst effects of what Richard Titmuss called the ‘diswelfares’ of the capitalist system (Titmuss, 1967: 151); that poverty in the wealthy industrialised nations would have been worse without it; and that it was never intended to redistribute income or wealth, so the fact that it failed to do so is hardly surprising.

seen as a threat in the 1950s, but why now? Given the worldwide success of neo-liberal policies, called ‘structural adjustment’ in the third world and ‘welfare reform’, ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ in the West, and given, too, the demise of communism (so-called), the left has already been defeated in those battlelines Rudd mentioned (or it has surrendered). So why the perceived need for a renewal of hostilities? I’m not going to answer the question. I’m just raising it for your consideration.

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