

Big picture required

By Noel Pearson

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It is predominantly a place of moral leadership. All our great presidents were leaders of thought at times when certain historic ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified.

– Franklin Roosevelt on the US presidency

John Howard's bid for a fifth term faces two trite but true problems in the Australian electorate: complacency about the idea of a prime minister Kevin Rudd and an accumulated cynicism-scepticism about Howard and his Government.

According to the cliché that governments lose elections rather than oppositions winning them, the Opposition Leader's textbook pursuit of a me-too strategy – assiduously avoiding any horse-scaring in relation to those areas of policy that are Howard's strengths by presenting a younger facsimile of the original, and opening up clear but cautious differences only in areas of Government weakness – should lead Rudd to the Lodge. Rudd's strategy is working so far.

Howard faces the ignominious prospect of losing government and even his seat of Bennelong. If Howard loses his 33-year hold on the seat but Labor's 16-seat deficit proves to be a bridge too far for Rudd, Peter Costello will inherit the prime ministership in dubious circumstances, not having gained it in his own right at an election by the people or through a forced or unforced transition from Howard.

Howard's status as Prime Minister and his renowned electoral prowess temper too much contemplation of his predicament, but who can know the private fears harboured by the king? People hope or fear that Howard may yet, in the words of his predecessor, "bolt in".

All of Howard's apparent strategy is aimed at shaking the electorate out of its complacency and combusting the idea that Rudd is no different from the incumbent whom the electorate paradoxically trusts but does not love, or for whom the electorate's affection has waned. The Prime Minister has been like a man trying to strangle his own shadow. No matter what wedges, what fears and bold and decisive manoeuvres he has tried, Howard has yet to make progress to crowbar Rudd out from his bear hug and into the open.

No doubt the vast attention and energies of Howard's election campaign will be devoted to the problem of complacency. Howard's inner sanctum of policy concocters, led by Peter Conran, and strategists, led by Mark Textor, see complacency as the enemy and will engage in a combination of new tactics and constant rendition of those themes that they have already laid out, in the hope and belief that the gap in the polls will close and their wily leader will prevail against the odds.

This is, of course, necessary for the Liberals, but I argue that it will not be sufficient.

Howard has no discernible strategy to tackle the scepticism-cynicism in the electorate, the jadedness, the loss of interest and desire for change. It is a mistake to attribute cynicism to the Howard haters and to dismiss them as lost to all reach, because cynicism and scepticism are parts of the same spectrum and the line between the lesser problem of scepticism and the harder problem of cynicism is blurred.

The road to resentment starts with scepticism and slides into cynicism before it hardens into complete loss of faith. It seems to be generally agreed that aside from the visceral hatred of Howard from the Left, the intensity of the disenchantment of the mob in the middle is warm but not smouldering.

My thesis is that the country has come to a point in its cycle where what George Bush Sr once disparaged as "the vision thing" has become salient once again. The absence or inarticulation of vision is gnawing at the nation, even if Howard's anti-millenarian nature still provides relaxation and comfort to many, and there may be hesitation (not to say paranoia) about invoking vision.

After the election of March 1996 –which saw, in cartoonist Peter Nicholson's classic depiction, the departure of the nation's former big-picture artist and the entry of the new champion miniaturist – Australia was indeed entering a cycle where voters placed themselves at the centre of democratic

grievance, entitlement and rightful focus. It was not really the twilight of the elites (the elites merely changed from those sanctioned by the Left to those sanctioned by the new rulers of the Right); it was the return of the spotlight on the mainstream.

The “forgotten people” of the mainstream and their material concerns and aspirations returned as the main business of the nation. Real estate, second mortgages, extraordinary growth in personal wealth, wider spread consumption of luxury goods – all the fruits of the Bob Hawke-Paul Keating reforms and the Howard-Costello management – preoccupied the nation for a decade and four elections.

Instead of families trudging off to church on Sundays, today we congregate in the aisles at Bunnings, worshipping the god of renovation and property. We have been living on bread alone and there has been lots of it.

The politics of materialism and aspiration employed by Howard fitted the cultural politics of the era. The neo-conservative hammers of the Right’s cultural war were the decisive drivers of the first three of Howard’s four election victories, with only the 2004 election being driven primarily on the material basis of economic management and interest rates.

Howard’s problem is that the politics of material aspiration and cultural war may be maxed out. This kind of 51 per cent politics is straining to reach above the line in 2007. My contention is, first, that there comes a point at which a consistent focus on materialism leads to ever-diminishing returns. In times of unprecedented prosperity and low unemployment, people will nevertheless remain unsated if the entire basis of the relationship between them and those who govern is based on materialism. Working families who have never had it so good will indeed feel that they have never had it so bad. You want selfishness? Then engage people solely on the basis of their material self-interest.

How can voters complain about Howard’s commitment on interest rates when everyone understood at the time of its giving that it was a commitment that plainly could not be given? But they do, and they will insist on their right to be wilfully gullible.

Second, we are now at a time, in the words of Franklin Roosevelt, “when certain historic ideas in the life of the nation have to be clarified”. Let me give four big questions that are far from clear, and that are in dire need of transcendent guidance and leadership:

- The nation’s security. Australia is starkly divided on this question and is in a terrible muddle and confusion. You need only to have watched the recent debate on the ABC’s Difference of Opinion and the strange moral ascendancy of Julian Burnside QC to appreciate how utterly at odds we are in this country in relation to basic questions concerning security. Howard’s leadership on this question, even if it were correct, is simply not prevailing and the country urgently needs to get its thinking clear on the issues at stake.
- The nation’s fairness to working people and the disadvantaged. This newspaper argues with the federal Government that workplace reform is essential for economic growth, and working people and the disadvantaged are best served by a dynamic, liberal economy that produces jobs and increased opportunities.

This may be right, but the relationship between a liberal economy and a fair go has yet to find a compelling narrative.

- The nation’s balancing of environmental responsibility and the economy is a matter of great anxiety to Australians across the spectrum. The Howard Government’s problem is one of its own making: for 10 years the Government insisted on not just a scepticism about global warming but outright denialism. While there is a lot of room for economic irresponsibility by Labor, Howard faces the problem that, for too many sceptical Australians, his Government just does not take the environment and global warming in particular seriously enough. The nation needs an equally zealous commitment to the environment as there is to the economy.
- I have previously talked about the Government’s failure to rise above the sense in indigenous policy that it is mean and pursuing a traditional, punishing negativity. The Prime Minister’s line at Hermannsburg this week about the “thugs and bullies” sheltered by the permit system,

and the assimilationist emphasis of his policy articulation, underscores how the Government simply cannot transcend the prism of cultural war in which it conceives policies concerning native Australians.

Without deprecating Textor's genius, a pollster is only as good as the questions he asks and the context in which the questions are intended to be put. Whether we reveal the better angels (or the worst devils) of our natures depends on context and the angle of the questions asked of us by our leaders. Textor has drawn much devastating success for Howard from those angles drawn from the toolbox of cultural war: it is what they best understand.

Aside from the fact that the conservatives are naturally hidebound to their traditional ways of success, one of the real constraints on Howard is his personal aversion to large visionary leadership lest it be over-promising. The secret to Howard's longevity is his singular Methodist talent for containing (or at least concealing) hubris. I don't think aspirational nationalism quite answers the need for vision and moral leadership. In the absence of vision, Howard finds himself in the position of being vulnerable to an opponent simply promising fresh thinking.

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