

Edging out the wedge

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“If we tear this country in half we can pick up the bigger half.”

– Pat Buchanan to Richard Nixon

“Triangulate, create a third position, not just in between the old positions of the two parties but above them as well. Identify a new course that accommodates the need the Republicans address but does it in a way that is uniquely yours.”

– Dick Morris to Bill Clinton

“In addressing the other party’s issues, a ‘me too’ campaign never works. To be successful, a candidate cannot just mimic his opponent’s rhetoric or programs; rather, he has to invent a new range of solutions to the problems historically associated with the other party. In the 1996 campaign, Clinton did not merely parrot Republican proposals, he sought to defuse the pressure for GOP programs by using Democratic means to achieve Republican goals.”

– Dick Morris

It was Malcolm McGregor, writing in the lead-up to and during the course of the 1996 election campaign which ended in John Howard’s landslide victory over Paul Keating, who first introduced “wedge politics” into the lexicon of Australian politics. Nowadays every gallah in every pet shop talks about wedge politics. We see a wedge in everything, even where there isn’t one.

To my mind McGregor was the only Australian commentator who understood what was going on in that election. He understood what the Liberals’ strategists and pollsters had learned from their internship with the Republican Party in the United States about how to break up that great rainbow coalition of voters who would otherwise be attracted to the Democrats in the United States and to Labor in Australia.

It was during that election on Radio National’s Late Night Live that I first heard broadcaster Phillip Adams discuss with an American political commentator that other Stateside innovation, the dog whistle: the transmission of high-frequency signals that only certain sections of the public attuned to those signals can hear, with the aim of dividing constituencies and detaching voters from one’s opponents.

Fear, resentment, envy and prejudice are the fuel of dog whistling, but in a democracy that sees itself as advanced and tolerant, this fuel cannot be explicitly employed; it must be done indirectly and with appropriate subtlety. The whistler must show himself at arms length from the ugly manifestation of conflict that the whistles may incite, reinforce or exacerbate.

Australian federal politics lost its innocence in 1996 and the full armoury of political combat developed in the United States was introduced to Australia. I gave the first public analysis of this reality in my address to The Sydney Institute in the course of that election, where I pointed out the hidden subtext to the Liberal Party’s apparently inclusive slogan “For all of us”.

Columnist Gerard Henderson has pointed out that much of what is said to be wedge politics is in fact traditional politics, hallowed through long practice.

There is much truth in this, but politics also evolves and the United States, that hothouse of political competition, has produced much innovation in political methods that has influenced politics across the world. Fear, resentment, envy and prejudice have ever been the stuff of democratic contest, long before people spoke of wedge politics.

Traditional politics was mostly class based. Richard Nixon accepted Pat Buchanan’s advice to “tear the country in half” at the beginning of a new era of new cleavages based on race, culture, sexual identity and so on.

The New Left's legacy of identity politics and political correctness from the 1960s eventually degenerated into absurd self-parody in the '80s and turned the Left into a fat, juicy, ripe target for cultural and electoral backlash, a target harpooned with glee by the political Right time and time again.

The power of wedge politics does not just come from whatever Machiavellian deception and malicious psychology may be alleged to be employed by the proponent. It also comes from the fact that the policy being pushed by the proponent is often correct and supportable by the electorate.

And those wedged are placed in an excruciatingly difficult position because their objections to the underlying psychology of the wedge can easily be taken as objection to the substantive policy. Over the past 10 years the Left has consistently fallen into this trap.

After Howard's first budget, McGregor explained how the rainbow coalition just played into the hands of the government's strategy from 1996:

"As a bonus, the other ingredient of successful wedge issue politics, an unpopular enemy, has duly emerged. Demonstrations of enraged unionists, hygienically challenged Trotskyite students, and militant Aborigines have conveniently provided an element of villainy to reinforce the laager mentality of the silent majority.

"Behind their synthetic horror at the street agitation, the Liberals would be delighted at the images beamed into mainstream living rooms last week.

"As Aboriginal activist Michael Mansell denounced the budget as assisting farmers and miners at the expense of Aborigines, the belly laughs down at Liberal Party headquarters must have gone on tear-inducing crescendos. They might offer to buy him some air time during the Lindsay by-election."

This haplessness has marked the Left's response to wedge politics over the past decade.

Asylum seekers were inflated into a target by progressives who allowed a principled stand on detention to be indistinguishable from complete opposition to any effective response to people smuggling. The target was fattened, ready for harpooning long before the Tampa came over the horizon. You add righteousness to principle and you inflate the target.

Worse than the Left's strategic naïvete and failure to distinguish between the attitudinal and psychological faults of the wedge issues employed by the Right – as opposed to their policy merit – the Left's vertiginous outrage has led them to actually believe the policy to be wrong because it is associated with wedge politics.

So sending police in to restore order to communities and to investigate abuse in indigenous communities is effectively opposed as wrong policy, when it is patently the correct first policy step.

The inability to separate policy from motivation and to support the former whilst understanding the latter is the mistake that the Left routinely makes in response to wedging from the Right. So they are seen by punters as opposing common sense policy.

The political leadership of the Left, after 11 long years, is bitterly aware of this problem and hardheads such as Wayne Swan have been alive to it from day one, but have been unable to control the broader non-parliamentary Left.

It is naïve of Aboriginal leaders opposed to the Northern Territory intervention to expect the ALP to "take a principled stand". Kevin Rudd and Wayne Swan will not be cutting their throats for black fellas.

I have come to accept that wedge politics is now part of Australian political life. To the extent that wedge politics employs prejudice and harms the fabric of our polity – an allegation I have made in the past – then it is up to political leaders and commentators to expose it.

Craig Emerson sought to educate his side of the political divide in an insightful analysis in 2003 when he called for a "wedge watch". However this is not so easy. Separating policy content from

underpinning psychology and attitude is difficult, and those on the defensive always risk being made “Willie Horton’s running mate”, just like the hapless Democrat contender Michael Dukakis was saddled with the black felon Horton by Lee Atwater in the infamous 1988 presidential election of George Bush Sr.

Kevin Rudd is a more accomplished disciple of Mark Latham’s guru Dick Morris. Rudd responds to Howard’s every attempt to drive the wedge by adopting a “me too” stance, no matter how opposed he himself, his party or parts of his constituency might be to the policy at issue. Rudd is employing to the letter the advice of Morris, Bill Clinton’s most important advisor: don’t fight your enemy on his strong ground, identify with his strengths and say catechismically: “I’m with John!”

The great innovation of Morris in that crucial period advising Bill Clinton between the 1994 midterm Congressional elections (a landslide defeat for the Democrats at the hands of Newt Gingrich’s new Republicans) and his recovery to victory in 1996, was what he called “triangulation”.

Triangulation involves parties from the Left stepping forwards and right towards the centre, to ground traditionally occupied by their opponents. Rather than just splitting the difference, triangulation seeks to take over ground traditionally associated with one’s opponents and do it in a better and more balanced way than one’s opponents would.

The originators of triangulation were the Hawke and Keating Governments in Australia since 1983. Having adopted the neo-liberal paradigm of rational economics, Hawke and Keating continued to triangulate the Coalition by stepping to the right on economic policy.

They forced their opponents to move further to the right, and scare the horses back towards Labor. *Fightback* was the product of this long successful strategy.

Clinton and Tony Blair’s New Labour came later. Triangulation was devised by Hawke and Keating, even before it was named by Morris.

The question remaining after the ascendancy of triangulating social democratic governments across the West was whether parties of the Right could triangulate their opponents on the Left, or whether their only combat weapon was the wedge.

At the beginning of the election campaign in 1996 John Howard showed an isolated example of how the Right can indeed triangulate the Left. He chose an issue that was the traditional strength of the Labor Party: the environment. The first and lasting image of that campaign was the image of Howard in mufti receiving effusive endorsements from Alec Marr of The Wilderness Society and Jim Downey of the Australian Conservation Foundation in the lush Tasmanian forests, announcing the then Opposition’s \$1 billion Natural Heritage Fund.

The environmentalists understandably wanted to start a bidding war but whatever Labor tried to do in response, Howard had taken their ground and the image resonated throughout the campaign.

In the United States, Karl Rove presented George W Bush as a “compassionate conservative” and his No Child Left Behind education policy – aimed at the needs of America’s most disadvantaged communities – was a second example of how the Right could triangulate the Left with electoral advantage.

In the remaining months of this parliamentary term John Howard stands knee-deep in a neap and tepid tide. The tide has palpably receded on his long ascendancy, but it has not utterly gone out.

The public was served one of the country’s most handsome budgets this year, but it did not change its primary voting intentions.

The Government has committed \$1.8 Billion towards the disabled and their carers – the largest investment in history – and the Government has not profited.

Perhaps Howard’s predicament is best caught by the paradox involved in the Northern Territory intervention: where 70 per cent of the country support the policy but it has had no impact on their

voting intentions. This can be interpreted as an unfortunate but understandable lack of interest on the part of the mainstream in minority issues such as disabilities or indigenous affairs: this is how members of the Government probably interpret things.

I do not think this interpretation is right. There was overwhelming support for the budget – a priority issue directly affecting the mainstream voters – and yet the same phenomenon was at play: the votes are not moving. Of these three policy issues – the budget, the disabilities investment and the Aboriginal intervention – which of these most colours and characterises Howard and the government he leads?

I think the Australian people see the Government as too mean and lacking in spirit when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There is no largeness, no vista, no poetry. The government's strategists know only one button when it comes to black fellas, and it is a harsh one. This harsh button yielded much electoral return in the past but it is now seriously depleted.

Seventy per cent of the country agree with the tough love business but I think Australians of good will also harbour Michael Long's forlorn and simple question from his walk from Melbourne to Canberra: Where is the love?

Based on those things that are Caesar's, there is no reason for Howard to be tossed out at the next federal poll: there's plenty of bread in the country. But man does not live by bread alone.

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