

Leftist policies pave kids' road to hell

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The Weekend Australian

21-22 July 2007

The Calvinist conception of predestination (whether you end up in Heaven is predestined and nothing you can do can alter whether you are chosen or not) is analogous to life outcomes for indigenous children of Cape York Peninsula. You can bet that a child from our community will end up poorly educated, semi-literate and ill-equipped for equitable participation in Australian society and the economy. The few who succeed are the exception. They defy predestination, but they are few and far between.

This predestination is not just about what kind of education our children receive. It is about the place they will occupy in society and the economy. They are predestined to either not improve on the position of their parents or to deteriorate in their position, by ending up worse off.

If we accept Jared Diamond's thesis that the Aborigines of Australia have the capacity to be rocket scientists and neurosurgeons, then strong forces must be at work to prevent social progress on the part of our children.

I do not think social progress comes naturally. Otherwise the provisioning of public education for Aboriginal people should result in progress. Social progress is not easy; it is about defying strong forces.

Education is the principal ladder that allows unprivileged individuals to advance in capitalist societies.

But obtaining a quality education does not come easily or naturally. Whilst we hope that education would transcend our material imperatives and realise abstract ideals about human fulfilment, it still principally serves the economy of the day. In the old industrial economy, the education system responded to the need for a large uniform army of workers with basic education and skills. The economy and the influential classes had an interest in workers being trained and educated to a certain extent, so that the labour force could be productive.

The system also allowed for the advancement of some talented working-class children. The hey-day of working class advancement produced a working class meritocracy who advanced into the middle class in large numbers and even beyond: witness the career of Leon Davis, working-class boy from the steel town of Wyalla, former CEO of Rio Tinto and Chairman of Westpac.

The rise of the old working class meritocracy was almost a mass movement (think of how many working class families produced university graduates). Today, for the lowest classes, such advancement is not a mass movement – it is increasingly sporadic and isolated.

Several decades ago, almost all Australian families were integrated in working life. The modern society economy does not seem to guarantee comprehensive inclusion.

We have record low unemployment, but the number of people who depend on welfare has increased. We have an underclass of people who pass on their outcaste status to their children.

There have always been class divisions and under-privileged people. One of the original leftist ideas is that much of our culture, in the broad sense of the word, serves class interests. The educated middle class includes two groups with quite different societal roles. Education provides the skills and knowledge to contribute to wealth creation or to produce and disseminate ideologies and cultures.

The middle-class producers of culture and ideology often see themselves as Left. My texts and speeches have often been perceived as attacks on the Left. But I support key policies of the Left. In many policy areas, Aboriginal people can agree with the Left, including the people who have felt most hit by my criticism. I agree with them on land rights and environmental conservation, trade union organisation, redistribution and the role of government in guaranteeing equitable health care and education.

The contention of mine that has caused most consternation when I have challenged the Left during the last eight years is that the result of progressive policies can be at odds with the good intentions that inspired them. My aim has been, as Dennis Glover wrote in *The Australian* yesterday, to “set higher standards for the Left” by critically examining the actual outcomes of ostensibly leftist policies. It is appropriate to set high standards because the Left’s claim to the right to govern rests on their promise to lift the living standard and life prospects of the lowest classes.

The challenge of education facing our children should be understood as a class challenge. There are strong class forces at work that are barriers to social advancement for our people.

The main means by which class stratification is maintained and social progress impeded is not by direct and conscious oppressive behaviour by privileged classes. Rather, the forces of class, operate culturally. They are embedded in the prevailing ideologies and intellectual currents, popular and niche cultures. Their effect is to cause confusion in the minds of lower class people about social progress and how it might be achieved, and cause them to behave in ways that are – when we really examine them – contrary to their interests.

I developed a (provocative) rule of thumb when it comes to examining the nostrums and prescriptions of the middle class culture producers, who often come from the progressive cultural Left: whatever they say our people should do, we should look at approximately the opposite of what they say, because that will usually be the right thing to do. Therefore:

- They say substance abuse is a health issue and should be approached with tolerance, we say it is a behavioural and social order issue and we need to rebuild intolerance.
- They say education should be culturally appropriate, we say that this should not be an alibi for anti-intellectualism, romantic indigenism and a justification for sub-standard achievement and expectations.
- They say we should respect “Aboriginal English” as a real language, we say we should speak our own traditional languages and the Queen’s English fluently.
- They say our people need to be defended in a hostile criminal justice system, we say we need more policing to restore law and order in our communities.
- They say our people are victims and must not be “blamed”, we say our people are victimised but we are not victims.
- They say we have a right to passive welfare, we say we do not have a right to dependency and that we in fact have a greater right to take up a fair place in the real economy of our country.
- They say that economic integration is antithetical to our identity, we say our culture cannot and will not survive as long as we live in the social dysfunction caused by economic dependency
- They say poverty is our main problem, we say passivity is our main problem because it prevents us from taking advantage of opportunities to get out of poverty and the resources we do get that could relieve our poverty are squandered.

The striking thing about this stark disagreement about what is really progressive is that we are at odds with so-called progressive thinking across vast tracts of policy.

For me it is not personal antagonism or ill-feeling that explains the gulf between myself and the great majority of national indigenous leaders and intelligentsia (and their progressive fellow-travellers), it is this fundamental analytical and policy gulf about what is progress and what is not. Denis Glover is right when he says that I am a man of the Left because my fidelity is to the lot of the underclass of whom my people are its most miserable members.

It is just that I believe liberal and conservative insights and policies currently have more to contribute to indigenous uplift than some outdated conventional progressive thinking.

It became clear to me that some elements of leftist ideology contribute to the barriers that keep our people down. The key to understanding this phenomenon is to recognise the profound change in the role of leftist theory in our society. When the theories of the Left were originally formulated, the Left was an oppositional or revolutionary force. However, like the Church before it, the Left has merged with power and government. Leftist ideology are integral to the political and intellectual structure of our society.

The challenge for the Left today is to stop naïvely assuming that leftist policy by definition are policies that will help the most oppressed, such as my people. The most obvious example that this is not the case is the rise of a political and intellectual industry that explains, defends and facilitates behaviours which keep people down in the underclass. A young Aboriginal today who follows the conventional leftist recipes of the last four decades is destined to keep him or herself at the bottom of society.

Of course the Left has on some issues consistently been strong supporters of indigenous rights, and indigenous people also have reason to support main elements of social democratic policy.

There are encouraging signs that the Left is reconsidering its reflexive support for so-called progressive policies. People like me would then have less reason to be ambivalent about the Left.

If leftist thinkers like Glover and David McKnight don't effect fundamental shifts of the kind that Christopher Hitchens and the authors of the Euston Manifesto are seeking in the United Kingdom, then the Left in Australia will continue to be divided between its political wing – with its Keatingite commitment to rational economic policy (scorned by the progressives) – and its cultural wing, which will seek to maintain a baleful influence on social policy. The political wing led by Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard (who told The Sydney Institute last week that “the old days of passive welfare for those able to contribute are gone”) are not at all wedded to the outdated aspects of progressive thinking, attuned as they are to the expectations of the Australian community, but the cultural wing is still a strong force for stasis and, dare I say it, conservatism.

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