

## **Without a wedge to stand on**

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The ascension of Kevin Rudd's Labor Party in Australia, followed by Barack Obama's Democratic Party in the US, marks the passing of a species of wedge politics that had been perfected by US Republicans during the Reagan era. If Pat Buchanan and Richard Nixon were the originators of this strain of politicking, then Lee Atwater and his successor, the redoubtable Karl Rove, turned wedge politics into a devastating formula for conservative electoral ascendancy.

Australian conservatives imported the wedge in 1996, and it formed part of the formidable cultural and political armoury that underpinned their 11-year reign. Their achievement was to use the wedge as one of several strategies to maintain their electoral success and achieve their policy agendas. At times the wedge was decisive, at other times it was not.

Of course, driving wedges between constituencies and between constituents and opponent parties is as old as democratic politics. What made the wedge politics of the late 20th century distinct was its preparedness to use cultural, sexual and, most significantly, racial identity politics as the virus to foment division.

In an era when explicit racism was no longer possible, to employ such a wedge required a particular cunning and audacity. Racialist insinuation through dog whistling and other breathtaking innovations developed by the machine men of the Republican Party enabled racial prejudice to be used for electoral purposes.

The counterculture and the New Left's identity politics excesses of the 1960s and '70s created the perfect conditions for the development of wedge politics. The problem was that the cultural Left had turned political decency into a form of cultural snobbery and moral vanity that was ripe for manipulation by the Right.

Wedge political bowling proved difficult to handle on the pitch because of its relative subtlety and the fact those authorising the bowling were not doing the bowling. The exposure of the method required a big accusation: of racism and divisiveness, no less, on the part of one's opponents, an accusation clearly susceptible to overreach.

Another problem was that answering the charge of political correctness with more proof of political correctness just meant that progressives kept digging a bigger and bigger hole for themselves. The ordinary punters made their judgments accordingly. And they sided with the Right because the core of the wedge often contained a kernel of conservative truth that made sense to the punters. And to the extent that progressives demonstrated their failure to appreciate this kernel of common sense, they reinforced the punters' sense that the progressives were hopelessly mired in political correctness.

In the end the wedge was never successfully combated by the political Left, it had simply run its course; the efflux of time and the accumulated weariness and mistakes of conservative rule eventually led to change.

Rove protege and John McCain's campaign director Steve Schmidt and his Australian counterpart Mark Textor will have to return to the drawing board to contemplate the exhaustion of a once lucrative source of electoral capital. With a black candidate particularly adept at facing spin bowling at the crease and a Republican candidate clearly in pain when half-heartedly prosecuting strategies that were at odds with his real character, the attack-dog Republicans of renown had lost their teeth. It reminded me of Kevin Andrews trying to whip up a scare about Sudanese refugees at the beginning of last year's election campaign. Wedge politics was an old gummy dog by then.

Having exhausted cultural, racial and identity politics as a source of electoral power, conservatives in Australia and the US will now have to fight their progressive opponents on the traditional grounds of economic and social policy and sheer competence at government.

Meanwhile, Textor and Schmidt should not lightly be dismissed. Innovation and the search for new

angles is central to the enterprise of politics, and if necessity be the mother of invention, then the conservative need to rule will drive the search for new angles.

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