Which community? Whose values?

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Labor's election campaign in Queensland: tricks of the trade.

The recent Queensland State election, in which the Labor Government was returned by the slenderest of margins, revealed the way in which political parties continue to plunder the law and order issue for campaign purposes. Like the electoral contest in New South Wales earlier this year, the Queensland campaign involved both major parties in a prolonged arm-wrestle over law and order. The objective was to appear uncompromisingly 'tough', or at least tougher on crime than the opposition.

During the campaign both the State Government and Opposition touted various promises to the electorate. The Coalition promised 2780 more police, 1000 more prison cells, two new prisons, tougher penalties for serious offenders and a curfew for pre-teenagers (*Australian*, 12.7.95). In mirroring the strategy adopted by the United States Republican Party, the leader of the opposition, Rob Borbidge, maintained that the Coalition's 'contract with Queenslanders' would include the implementation of the 'toughest laws in the nation' (*Australian*, 4.7.95).

The Labor Government's election package included 1500 more police, a crackdown on graffiti offenders, the re-opening of Bogo Road prison as a watchhouse, 1500 police officers and reparation to victims. The Labor Government attempted to trump the Opposition on the law and order issue by advocating the 'three strikes and out' policy in which serious repeat offenders would face an automatic prison sentence on a third offence. The application of an American sporting metaphor to penal policy had been employed successfully by the freshly elected NSW Labor leader Bob Carr and was therefore seen by the Goss Government as a potential vote catcher.

Poverty in the Sunshine State

As the election campaign progressed into June, two significant factors encouraged the Labor Government to change direction. First, there was a growing recognition in the party that little more was to be gained by competing with the Opposition on the law and order issue — indeed, the Coalition had maintained its dominant 'tough' image. Second, on 14 June the Queensland Council for Social Services (QCOSS) released a highly sensitive and potentially damaging report entitled 'Drawing the Line on Poverty'. Among a plethora of Dickensian statistics the report noted that 185,000 'income units', or 362,000 people were living 'in before-housing poverty' in Queensland. The latter figure included 136,000 children and 31,800 young people. It was further noted that 'Queensland's poverty rate is 2% greater than the national average'.[1] These findings received wide media coverage. Indeed, an article on the report in a national daily newspaper was headed 'Poverty Clouds Sunshine State's Wealthy Image' (*Australian*, 22.6.95).

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Smokescreen

Less than a week after publication of the QCOSS report the Labor Government began a new phase in its electoral campaign. Pronouncements on the law and order issue were now replaced with emotive calls for the regeneration of 'community values'. The premier, Wayne Goss, admitted with disarming candidness that the Labor Party had been searching for something 'idealistic' to 'lift the debate'. Goss proceeded to outline the need to 'glue' the social fabric together

> by helping young people before they go off the rails . . . It's part of my vision — I don't like the 'v' word — but it's part of my hope to build a community . . . If there's anything I'm remembered for in my third term, I'd like it to be that I did something positive to rebuild community values. [*Australian*, 22.6.95]

Goss stated that this process would be achieved through the opening of 50 'community recreation centres' for young people. The staff in these centres would endeavour to encourage young people to engage in various activities designed to instill in them the values of honesty and reliability.

The newly discovered idealism of the Labor Party gathered momentum during the latter stages of the campaign. Advertisements announcing the theme of 'Rebuilding Community Values' were placed in a number of provincial newspapers. For example, the *Townsville Bulletin* carried an advertisement on 5 July headed, 'Wayne Goss has a $1 Billion Plan to Rebuild Community Values'. The 'fundamental' issues underpinning this plan were 'personal safety, respect for property' and 'self discipline'. As well as promising to strengthen the 'Blue Line' of local police, the advertisement referred to the Labor Party's multi-million dollar outlay on electronic security systems for schools, more teachers, community recreation centres and drug education programs.

When confronted about the precise 'values' that the Labor Party was advocating in the development of such initiatives, senior Party members were suddenly made conspicuous by their silence. Wayne Goss's guarded utterances on this matter were equally unhelpful:

> Everyone has their own ideas as to what values are important . . . I don't want to start ramming any particular values down anyone's throat. [*Australian*, 22.6.95]

Despite such vagueness, it was apparent that the 'rebuilding of community values' was targeted at young people in the hope that the inculcation of moral virtues would contribute to less crime and delinquency in Queensland. In articulating this policy agenda the Labor Government was able to represent itself to the electorate not simply as a party 'in touch' with the 'community values' but also as less draconian on the youth issue than the Opposition.

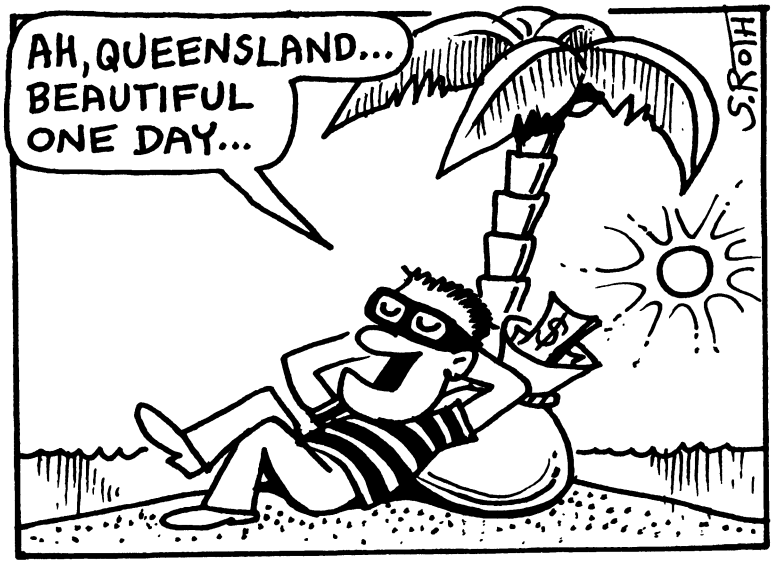
Such claims, however, soon faced repeated broadsides from critics claiming them to be simplistic and irrelevant to the problems and needs of young people in the State (Phil Crane, *Courier Mail*, 5.7.95). A representative of the Queensland Youth Affairs Network remarked that:

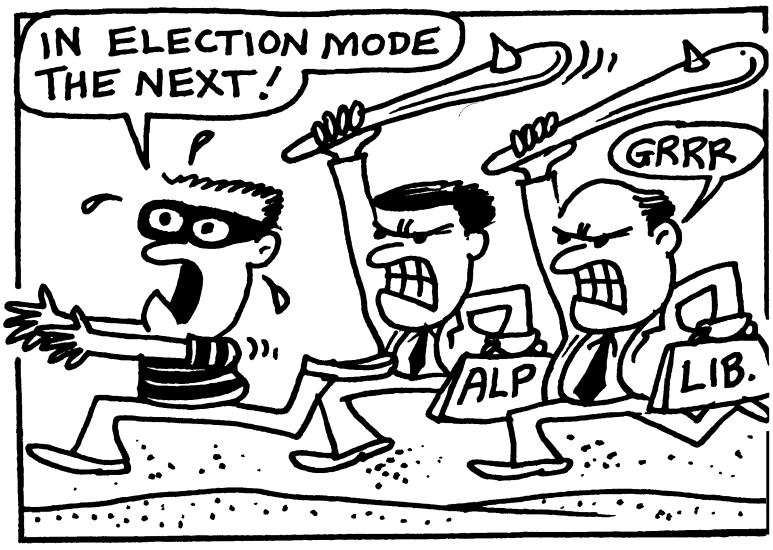
> In this election we have heard many times . . . that young people need to know the difference between right and wrong. I believe that most young people do know the difference but I'm not sure whether those making the comments know the difference. [*Courier Mail*, 1.7.95]

In addition, another commentator pointed out, that the promotion of 'community values' as a solution to deeply entrenched social and economic problems was not only simplistic but also ignored the diversity of values associated with class-divided and multicultural communities (Andrew Norton, *Courier Mail*, 8.7.95). Indeed, the assumption that it was possible to speak about community values irrespective of a precise or meaningful definition led to more confusion than clarity in the campaign discussions. Andrew Norton put the obvious and yet fundamental questions such as: 'Which community? Whose values?' (*Courier Mail*, 8.7.95). These questions have yet to receive a satisfactory reply.

The rhetoric of avoidance

On the surface at least it would seem that Labor's moral crusade of 'rebuilding community values' was a fruitful electoral strategy given the problems it faced on so many other fronts. Indeed, the decision of the Green Party to give its preferences to the Coalition and the self-confessed failure of the Government to promote its own 'achievement' of economic growth, meant that the Labor Party was compelled to seek other means of attracting public support. At the same time, however, the Party was concerned to play down the





potentially damaging effects of the QCOSS report. Indeed, rather than refer to the problem of 30% youth unemployment, homelessness and poverty in Queensland, it made more political sense to evoke nebulous idealisations of 'community values'. In this way the Government would appear willing to acknowledge and address the alleged moral crisis facing communities in Queensland.

Thus, at one level it may be argued that the Government's attempt to deflect attention from the economic difficulties facing a number of communities in Queensland was politically apposite. Indeed, there is nothing new in attempts by governments to conceal the consequences of their own policies by pointing to the apparent inadequacies of individuals. As Barbara Hudson points out in relation to recent developments in penal policy in a number of Western states, the pathologising of working class individuals, families and communities constitutes an attempt to shift the responsibility for the creation of crime and other social responses from governmental mismanagement and neglect to the alleged failings of individuals and communities.[2] From this standpoint the 'problem' is not poverty, unemployment, disadvantage or deprivation but rather the failure of people to exercise proper control and responsibility.

The same rhetoric of 'responsibility' has figured prominently in recent social policy discourse, and no more so than in the area of juvenile crime management. It is in this context that the links between 'broken homes', 'dysfunctional families' and 'disadvantaged communities' have been made most explicit. However, as Jeffs and Smith point out:

> The obsession with linking character deficiency and inadequate socialisation to the experiencing of a single parent home life has far too long served as a smokescreen obscuring the problem of poverty amongst this group.[3]

Moreover, as a British commentator points out, 'A criticism of recent debates about the family would be the tendency to concentrate on personal responsibilities, to the exclusion of other pressures which make it more difficult to be a 'good enough' parent'(David Utting, *Guardian*, 22.2.95).

Similar concerns have not hindered governments in Australia from passing legislation that puts the responsibility for crime control squarely onto the shoulders of individuals and families. Indeed, references to responsibility proliferate in recent juvenile justice reform. For example, s.4 of Queensland's 1992 *Juvenile Justice Act* states:

> . . . a child who commits an offence should be:
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> (i) held accountable and encouraged to accept responsibility for the offending behaviour; and
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> (ii) punished in a way that will give the child the opportunity to develop in a responsible, beneficial and socially acceptable way.

The Act also includes provision for the punishment of parents who fail to exercise adequate care and control of their children. The principle of parental restitution allows for the prosecution of parents where 'willful neglect' of children can be demonstrated satisfactorily to the court. Similarly, the recently proclaimed *Children (Parental Responsibility) Act* in NSW provides for the prosecution of parents if it can be established by the court that failure to exercise proper care and guardianship led the child to commit an offence.

Legislation in other areas of child and family welfare in Australia also reflects the way in which governments have increasingly hinged their policies on the moral precepts of responsibility and accountability. The origin of this discourse has emerged in the context of a liberal state seeking to realign its social and economic policies in the face of continued fiscal pressures. Against this backdrop, references to responsibility serve to deflect attention from economic mismanagement and enable governments to make significant reductions in public expenditure. One strategy used to achieve this is to evoke the imagery of 'tradition'. In so doing, governments are able to restate the 'traditional' roles and dependencies which serve to mark out the particular 'responsibilities' of families and family members. As Bettina Cass states:

> . . . in a period of increasing rates of unemployment, increasing rates of change in household and family formations and increasing ageing of the population — all generating a rise in the number of actual or potential welfare beneficiaries — and increasing government commitment to restrain expenditure for social purposes, one of the strategies available to governments is to encourage the 'privatisation' of welfare provision. Emphasis on the traditional dependencies of the family serves this purpose by focusing attention on the proper role of families to care for their disadvantaged members.[4]

It is in the context of the increasing devolution of responsibilities for various aspects of family and community life that the emergence of the Queensland Labor policy of 'rebuilding community values' needs to be understood. The resurrection of moral prescriptions for economic problems is one way of focusing public discourse on the 'internal decline' of families and communities rather than on the external pressures generated by poverty and unemployment.

The Labor Government's apparent inability or unwillingness to articulate the meaning and significance of 'community values' beyond a narrow conception is symptomatic of its own eagerness to deflect attention from growing structural inequalities in Queensland. The chairperson of the Youth Affairs Network Queensland, Phil Crane, responded to Labor's emphasis on community values by pointing to the Government's failure to provide the necessary comprehensive support services to young people and their families (*Courier Mail*, 5.7.95). Ironically, this very failure and the growing evidence of pervasive poverty in Queensland mitigates directly against the ability of parents to provide adequate care and support for their children. Indeed, Beatrix Campbell states that the rhetoric of responsibility and values:

> fails to recognise and resource those who are clearly taking responsibility for what is happening and evades the responsibility of governments for creating an alliance with them.[5]

References

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