
OPINION

Responding to the Conservative Agenda

When we devised the theme for this issue we were hopeful that the issue could offer some strategies for addressing the conservative agenda. With the conservative parties in power in all but one Australian parliament it seemed an appropriate time to start thinking about how the current flow of policies can be turned around.

The problem is exactly what are we turning around? And what is the conservative agenda? The election of the Blair Government in the United Kingdom in May underscores this dilemma. While the crowds cheered the end of a tired Conservative government it appears that, apart from some areas of policy, they have just elected another conservative government. Of course, it may be that the election of a Socialist government in France has more significance for discussion of alternative directions than we will ever know. Alas, our media have some difficulty in dealing with foreign language politicians, *c'est la vie!*

Of course, all this discussion about other countries is not tangential to the position in Australia. We are being told constantly that it is global change which requires us to change and that our welfare is intricately tied into events in other lands. Presumably this means that we need to have a compliant workforce on low wages in Australia because this has been the basis of the economic success of other countries. Human rights, an independent judiciary, a social wage, non-corrupt police, open government, social justice — it might be a useful exercise to locate how many countries in the world can boast these traits before we discuss the direction of global change.

What is the conservative agenda? Do even the conservatives know? Is it slash and burn? Or simply more miserly accounting methods? Are human rights expendable except when business is affected, or is it just that the cost of justice sometimes is simply too expensive and so we must accept a little (a lot?) less? Is the reform of industrial law needed to make us more competitive or is that just code for facilitating lower wages so fewer corporations move off shore for

cheaper labour (because they can find it here)? Does the black hole really exist?

We can no doubt find many people who would like to see certain people disappear down that black hole and others who would not mind if some of our exports included the gurus who advise the government. It is much more difficult to find people who possess a 'big picture', an alternative vision of where we can go instead of where we seem to be heading. We know that people feel insecure, we know that stress is increasing, we know that social security rights are being contracted out and negotiated away, we know that the legal aid system is being sold off, we know that for many people justice is something they only see football club presidents get but we just *don't* seem to know what we can do about it.

Perhaps it is time to resurrect two words which some people regard as outdated: social justice. It seems we have lost the will to assert the right of all people to receive social justice. For some people this term appears to belong to the last decade, perhaps there is a suspicion that it can be easily manipulated to mean different things to different people. But, as Robert Manne has said, that alone is not sufficient to discard the term. Do you believe in social justice? Of course. What does it mean? Well certainly not what is happening to a lot of people at the moment.

How should we define it? Well asserting human rights, an independent judiciary, a social wage, non-corrupt police, open government, equal opportunity and tolerance of difference might be a good start. Gee, I feel better already. It's time(!) to start talking in more positive terms about what we can achieve towards social justice instead of shouting from the sidelines about the latest injustice.

Is social justice an outdated term? Does it matter? Who said the free market was a new concept anyway?

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