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Imagine - A Community First Party

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Thank you for inviting me. I find it strange, I have to say, to be at Moonee Valley again – I spent much of my younger days here losing a lot of money very pleasurably, and it's odd to be back now talking about social justice.

I'm not going to address directly the question of whether a Community First party would be a good idea. Only once in my life did I ever think I might form a party, or at least a small Senate ticket. I was going to ask Tim Costello to head the ticket, and I would be second on the list and do the work – but luckily for both of us, I never actually got around to ringing him.

That was in the 2001 election, when I suppose I still believed that a social justice ticket, as I saw it, would have some chance of affecting the campaign minimally. I have to say that I don't believe that now.

What I wanted to say then, and one of my fundamental beliefs ever since, and my text for today, is what Sir William Deane said time and time again when he was Governor-General. A country will in the end be judged by the way it treats those who are weak, vulnerable, or disadvantaged. As a society, or at least as a political society, we seem to have forgotten that.

Today I want to offer an analysis of the difficulties involved in thinking seriously about a Community First party (or, as I would like to call it, a social justice party). Then, perhaps, after having filled you all with gloom I might offer some grounds for hope arising out of my own experience in politics.

I want to start with Margaret Thatcher. Nobody who's followed politics has any doubt that Margaret Thatcher changed the political landscape of Britain for ever.

Nobody in Australia, in my view, should doubt that John Howard has done the same to us, though there's some difficulty in saying exactly how. In this talk I want to give analyse the way in which John Howard has changed Australia, or at least Australian politics.

As some of you will know, the term I use to describe Howard's impact on Australian culture is 'conservative populism'. In part I mean by this that Howard is willing to disregard any of the

traditional Liberal values that he associates with a group he calls ‘the élites’ and that he is prepared to make a direct appeal, as in the Tampa case, to the gut instincts of ‘the people’ (in inverted commas).

In part, too, I mean that Howard is willing to treat with disdain the inconvenient example of experience, as can be seen in his reaction before the last election to the letter from 43 former military chiefs and diplomats recommending caution over Iraq.

In part, too, I refer to the way in which the PM has managed to form a direct line to the people through the intensive use of TV soundbites and extensive appearances on the radio programs of friendly talkback hosts. It’s strange to think that it’s someone like John Howard has been the most populist PM we’ve ever had, even more so than Bob Hawke, but that’s the truth.

There is, however, more to Howard’s conservative .populism than this. Though he is still of course attentive to the commercial requirements of business organisations, and responsive to the Party’s core constituency of small businesses (as is shown by the industrial relations legislation that will soon pass the Senate), the Liberal Party under John Howard has become integrally connected to Middle Australia.

In part this has been achieved through the selection of truly representative parliamentarians – I’m thinking of people like Joe Hockey and Jackie Kelly – and in part, and this is the part I want to dwell on, through a conspicuous rejection of the whole post-Whitlam social justice agenda of multi-culturalism, Aboriginal conciliation and reconciliation, gay rights, uncompromising environmentalism, and just treatment for refugees.

Because Howard’s policies have become associated with the long boom that we are still experiencing the electoral impact of this conservative populism has been profound.

What we call rural and regional Australia is now usually under coalition control, federally at least.

While Labor dominates the cosmopolitan inner city urban seats, in the middle and outer suburban suburbs of the capital cities the Liberal grip has been tightening from one election to the next.

Western Sydney is all but conquered. Once solid Labor seats in Melbourne's north and west have begun to move towards the Liberal party. For the Labor party, the depth of the crisis can no longer be denied.

I belong loosely to a group that I would call the pro-Labor social justice liberal intelligentsia (there's a mouthful for you) and we, too, are in crisis. I want to talk about two responses to this crisis that emerged shortly after the last election.

The first was from Dr. Carmen Lawrence, a woman for whom I have a profound respect. She argued that the party's fortunes could be reversed by the recruitment of a vibrant rank and file. I'm not at all convinced that this is the solution.

In contemporary Australian politics there seems to be little connection between a party's membership strength and its electoral performance. With an identical rank and file, after all, the Queensland Liberal Party dominates Queensland's federal politics but performs abysmally at the state level.

Even more importantly, if new members flock to Labor they will probably come not from the suburbs but from the inner city seats. The injection of these people, whom I have termed 'cosmopolitans', would if anything widen the gulf between the ALP and the great Australian mortgage belt.

An alternative left-liberal analysis from a friend whom I admire came from Barry Jones. Barry argues that since Keating Labor has become almost ideologically indistinguishable from the coalition.

To revive Labor's fortunes he advocates a return to the Gough Whitlam/Paul Keating program of aggressive cultural reform. In my opinion he has comprehensively underestimated the effect on Australia of the Howard years.

Just as British Labor did not find its answer to Thatcherism by looking backward to Harold Wilson or Michael Foot, Australian Labor will not find the answer by returning to the social justice visions of Whitlam and Keating.

They were part of a different time.

It's not only Labor that's faced with a crisis of identity. It's also those of us concerned with social justice and environmental issues.

To me at least it seems obvious – and I would be happy if you disagree with me, and even more happy if you were able to convince me that you're right – that many of the issues of greatest concern to us in this room are of little interest to, or are even anathema to, the majority of our fellow-citizens.

This lack of interest, even this hostility, does not reveal that in our concerns we were wrong. It does reveal, however, a fundamental contradiction between the needs of Labor and the values of people of the left.

Even the most eloquent flights of fancy cannot wish away the contradiction I have faced bluntly since the last election.
It is this. It is an almost ethical requirement of a two-party system that both parties strive for power.

In order to win power under present circumstances, the Labor Party must reconnect with its blue-collar base and, even more importantly, regain the ground it held in middle Australia during the Hawke years.

It will not be able to do this on the basis of a program where the issues of greatest importance to those of us concerned with social justice have a central, or even a prominent, place.

In the era of Howard's conservative populism there seems little alternative for Labor than to move culturally, if not economically, to the right. If this is so, members of the social justice left such as myself have three political options from which to choose.

The first is a movement to the Greens. The second is to remain inside the Labor Party under the discipline of a self-denying ordinance, keeping quiet about our issues and waiting for more hopeful times. The third option for the left – the progressive social justice left – is to struggle for the causes it believes in outside the framework of party politics.

We are fortunate to live in a free society. There is no reason why those who care about aboriginal reconciliation, to take one example, should not devote themselves to work at the grass roots.

There is much to do! There is no reason why those who are concerned about multiculturalism and worried by the increase in the anti-Moslem mood in this country should not engage themselves in inter-communal dialogue.

There is no reason why those who believe in justice for refugees should not help those on the purgatory of temporary visas to get on with their lives as well as possible. Those who opposed the invasion of Iraq should oppose the propaganda of the government and the bias of the Murdoch press to create a greater public awareness of the frightening deterioration of the conditions of life in that country.

During the Hawke-Keating ascendency the left-liberal intelligentsia probably became too dependent on the government for support.

The period since the election should have taught us that what the government can give, the government can take away. Just as the scope for action has increased in recent years, so has the need for action that is independent of government and outside the framework of party politics becomes ever more vital in these unpropitious times.

Are there grounds here for any reasonable hope?

The asylum-seeker issue, the issue with which I have been preoccupied since the last election (and even before), leads me to think that there are.

Let me outline the problems that these people have gone through. Between 1999 and 2000, about 1200 asylum seekers reached or tried to reach Australia by boat.

The overwhelming majority of these people had fled from Afghanistan under the Taliban, from Iraq under Saddam Hussein, or from the theocratic police state of Iran. Most of these people did reach Australia.

Of these, the overwhelming majority spend several traumatic months or even years imprisoned in a remote desert detention camp before being accepted as genuine refugees.

For these people the tragedy of their lives did not end at this point. All were given mere temporary protection visas, which meant that they had no security, no sense of a future, no right to travel, no right even to apply to be reunited with their families.

A large number of those people are still living in a state of agonizing uncertainty on these temporary visas.

Some have effectively been forced to return to their homelands, to the chorus of Arab rage following the Australian involvement in Iraq.

Some, too frightened to return, or willing to leave Australia but having no country that will take them, have spent the last four or five years in indefinite imprisonment.

I have met many of these people. I have spoken at length with many Australians who have befriended them. I have read the publications of the psychologists and psychiatrists who have conducted studies into their mental health. On the basis of this I can say that their experiences in the detention centres has made them suffer greatly, and in some of them the human spirit has been profoundly, even irreversibly, destroyed.

What is worse than this is the simple fact that Australia's system of treatment for asylum seekers -- temporary visas, permanent imprisonment for failed asylum seekers – has been entirely purposeless.

Since the implementation of the Pacific solution in September 2001 only one asylum seeker boat, from Vietnam, has reached Australian territory.

Because the deterrence of asylum seekers has been almost 100% effective, the consignment of refugees to a condition of permanent temporariness and all failed asylum seekers to a state of permanent imprisonment is not only wicked but completely irrational from the policy point of view.

If tomorrow every temporary visa holder was granted permanent residency, if tomorrow every declined asylum seeker was granted permanent residency, if tomorrow every detained asylum seeker was released from a detention centre, nothing untoward, even from the viewpoint of the Howard government, would occur.

One of the things that gives me hope is that human hearts are uneasy in the presence of injustice. The grand untold story is of the thousands upon thousands of Australians who have been committed to work for the wellbeing of the Middle Eastern or central Asian refugees or asylum seekers.

I think of the lawyers who worked tirelessly pro bono. I think of the psychiatrists and doctors who won round the colleges of their professions to the cause. I think of the journalists with the ABC or Fairfax – and here I have to mention Michelle Grattan as one of these – who have done all they can to keep the issue alive.

I think of the residents of the detention centre towns who have become almost permanent visitors to the centres to give comfort where they can. I think of the citizens in such wonderful and inventive groups as Rural Australia for Refugees, or Australians Against Racism, or Spare Rooms for Refugees.

Even in the most unpromising political times, even when the government has seemed most unbending, even when the opposition has been too scared to take issue with that government, even though much of the media has seemed indifferent, even when public opinion has seemed almost aggressively hostile, such people have never given up their struggle for justice or lost heart.

Now politics is a strange and unpredictable business.

Who could have predicted that one of the people to be entangled in the Australian detention system would have been one of us, a permanent resident of Australia since the age of 8 with an acute mental illness, whose dreadful experiences in the immigration system would suddenly illuminate for very many ordinary Australians what hundreds or thousands of articles have over the past four or five years gone through without effect, and who would have predicted that a group of coalition backbenchers led by one of the wiliest tacticians in the party would decide to risk the wrath of the PM and their colleagues by sponsoring exactly the kind of

legislation which this country so desperately needs if it is to regain its honour.

It is too late to repair much of the damage we have done to the twelve hundred or so people who appealed after 1999 for our assistance.

It is not too late to treat this group with mercy by giving all those in detention or on temporary visas permanent protection, nor is it too late to pass legislation that will prevent anything like these recent disasters recurring.

Yet in this talk that is not really my main point. Even the fact that there is now a slim prospect of the Petro Georgio legislation being passed cannot be relied upon by the many thousands of Australians who fight for what they believe is right outside the limits set by parliamentary politics.

And despite what has appeared to be, and still is, the desperately unpropitious nature of the time I know that there are hundreds of people in this room whose lives are devoted to civil society action of such a kind.

I have only two things to say to you. You have my deep respect, and always be of good heart.