

The clearest in the West: Australia's happy warriors

Mark Steyn

According to my Oz-watching pals in Britain and America, John Howard is not a failure but a victim of his own success. He made Australia safe for the Labor Party—or, at any rate, safe enough that a small but sufficient number of bored electors were willing to take a flier on a house-trained Labor on the short leash of a quasi-Blairite leader.

That, at any rate, is the spin.

Even if it's correct, and accepting that in parliamentary democracies even the greatest generals go a bridge too far, I regret Howard's end. True, I object in principle to Australia's gun laws, and I regard much of the Aussie economy as embarrassingly over-regulated after a decade of supposedly conservative rule. But, as the prime minister put it in one of his most famous soundbites, this is no time to be an 80 per cent ally. I am a 100 per cent ally of Mr Howard.

From my perch several thousand miles away, I won't pretend to be an informed analyst of the internal dynamics of the Liberal Party. During my last visit, en route from one meeting to another, there'd usually be someone in the car explaining in the ride from the airport why the fellow I was on the way to see was on the outs with whichever Prime-Minister-in-waiting I'd met with the day before. I felt a bit like Bob Hope in *The Paleface*, heading for the big shootout and getting his head stuffed full of contradictory advice: He leans to the left, so draw to the right; the wind's in the east, so shoot to the west; etc. What mattered to the world was the strategic clarity that John Howard's ministry demonstrated on the critical issues facing (if you'll forgive the expression) Western civilisation.

First, the prime minister grasped the particular challenge posed by Islam. 'I've heard those very silly remarks made about immigrants to this country since I was a child', said the Democrats' Lyn Allison. 'If it wasn't the Greeks, it was the Italians ... or it was the

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Vietnamese.' But those are races and nationalities. Islam is a religion, and a political project, and a globalised ideology. Unlike the birthplace of your grandfather, it's not something you leave behind in the old country. Indeed, the pan-Islamic identity embraced by many second- and third-generation Muslims in the West has very little to do with where their mums and dads happen to hail from. 'You can't find any equivalent in Italian or Greek or Lebanese or Chinese or Baltic immigration to Australia. There is no equivalent of raving on about jihad', said Howard, stating the obvious in a way that most of his fellow Western leaders could never quite bring themselves to do.

'Raving on about jihad' is a splendid line which meets what English law used to regard as the 'reasonable man' test. If you're a reasonable bloke slumped in front of the telly watching jihadists threatening to behead the Pope, or Muslim members of Britain's National Health Service ploughing a blazing automobile through the check-in desk at Glasgow Airport, 'raving on about jihad' fits in a way that President Bush's religion-of-peace pabulum doesn't. Both Bush and Blair can be accused of the very opposite of the traditional politician's failing: they walked the walk but they didn't talk the talk. That's to say, neither leader found a rhetoric for the present struggle that resonated. Howard did.

Likewise, Peter Costello. Sympathising with Muslims who wish to live under sharia, he mused: 'There are countries that apply religious or sharia law—Saudi Arabia and Iran come to mind. If a person wants to live under sharia law, these are countries where they might feel at ease. But not Australia'. It's a glum reflection on the times that such an observation should be controversial. Yet it stands in marked contrast to, say, the Dutch Justice Minister Piet Hein

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What next?

Donner, who remarked that if the electors voted to bring in sharia he'd be okay with that, or the Swedish politician who said that Swedes should be 'nice to Muslims while we are in the majority so that when they are in the majority they will be nice to us'.

Underpinning those words is the realisation that most of the Western world is very demographically weakened. Immigration adds to the gaiety of the nation, improves the choice of restaurants and makes pasty-faced white folks feel very virtuous about their *multiculti bona fides*, but a *dependence* on immigration is always a structural weakness, and should be addressed as such. At a time of unparalleled prosperity and peace, the majority of developed nations have chosen, in effect, to give up on the future. Mr Howard's ministry was one of the first governments to get this and, in contrast to the dismal Euro-fatalism above, to try to do something to reverse it. Peter Costello's exhortation to Aussie couples—have one for mum, one for dad, and one for Australia—gets the stakes exactly right. The mid-twentieth-century entitlement state was built on a careless model that requires a constantly growing population to sustain it.

When I made this point in a speech in Australia, Malcolm Turnbull passed me a note in which he'd scribbled down various population models based on certain fertility-rate calculations. I confess I've always had a certain antipathy to Mr Turnbull because his republicanism seemed small-minded and unworthy, but in the years in which I've spoken on this subject to political figures on three continents, that's the only occasion in which a key government figure already knew the numbers and understood their implications.

And that brings us to the government's next great strand of strategic clarity. At his 2006 education summit, John Howard called for a 'root and branch renewal of Australian history in our schools, with a restoration of narrative instead of what I labelled the "fragmented stew of themes and issues"'. As he explained at the *Quadrant* 50th anniversary celebration, 'This is about ensuring children are actually taught their national inheritance'. The absence of a 'narrative' and an 'inheritance' is a big part of the reason why British born and bred subjects blow up the London Tube, why young Canadian Muslims with no memory of living in any other society plot to behead their own prime minister. You can't assimilate immigrants and minorities unless you give them something to assimilate to. It's one thing to teach children their history 'warts and all', quite another to obsess on the warts at the expense of all else. The West's demographic weakness is merely the physical embodiment of a broader loss of civilisational confidence.

Australia should never have had a 'Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs', but, given that it did, Howard was right to rename it the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Government should promote citizenship, not multiculturalism.

The Liberal government was all but unique in understanding the three great challenges of the age—Islamism, demography, civilisational will—that in other parts of the West are combining to form the perfect storm. Just as importantly, unlike so many second-tier powers, Australia did not put its faith in the chimera of insipid, obsolescent transnational talking shops in which attitudes substitute for policy.

I liked to call Alexander Downer my favourite Foreign Minister, which, in hindsight, was damning with the faintest of praise. After all, I'm not sure during his long tenure how many candidates there ever were for runner-up: Dominique de Villepin? Britain's Robin Cook and Margaret Beckett? Canada's Lloyd Axworthy and Bill Graham? Colin Powell I never expected much from, but few hitherto clearheaded types have shrunk in office as remorselessly as Condi Rice. I loved Downer for his gleeful mockery of transnationalism and its pointless committees stuffed with representatives of what he called 'busted arse countries'. (I attempted to introduce the term 'busted arse country' to the State Department, but so far without success.) In more

genteel mode, he put it like this: 'Multilateralism is a synonym for an ineffective and unfocused policy involving internationalism of the lowest common denominator'. See Darfur, the Iranian nukes, the UN's flop response to the tsunami, etc, etc. If it's right to intervene in the Sudan, it's not wrong because the Russian guy declines to stick his hand up at the relevant meeting.

The Howard years saw the emergence of a regional power that, from East Timor to the Solomon Islands, understood its responsibilities at a time when the Euro-Canadian poseurs shrank from theirs.

As a distant observer of Australian affairs, I had some small personal contact with Howard and co. over the years. Merry, feisty, blunt and fair, they were exactly what we need at this moment: happy warriors. I'm saddened that Australians feel differently. But if it's too late to get the US Constitution amended in time for them to run for President this November, the savvier candidates ought to snap 'em up as speechwriters.

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