

26 August 2008

Mark Davis identifies a widespread community concern that mediocrity and self-interest dominate the governments and institutions that control our society. In spite of the apparent prosperity of the last 13 years, there is a sense of disappointment that 'something fundamental has changed in Australian life, that something has gone wrong'.

In the mid-70s, a quiet revolution began when the intellectual force of the New Right influenced the policies of both major parties. The idea that the market could best allocate resources, with only a minor role for governments, became dominant – especially during the Howard years. Davis's contentious argument is that the Right used race to gain back-door support for a political agenda that included the abandonment of a progressive tax system and the undermining of traditional health, education and welfare systems.

Under Howard, NGOs were dismantled or marginalised; the welfare, health and education systems were pushed towards corporatisation; environmental issues were either ignored or dismissed, and in the public institutions that remained, followers of the prevailing orthodoxy were installed in their governing bodies. Howard's period of leadership was one of spent opportunity. He had the political ability and historical opportunity to develop and implement a coherent reform plan to put Australia in a position to face the problems of the twenty-first century. Instead, he wasted energy on 'divisive and unnecessary culture wars' and 'exploited the politics of fear and resentment' for his election wins. 'His was the leadership of the hurt man, seeking revenge over old foes and old humiliations.'

In Davis's view, both sides of politics have failed. The most spectacular failure of the left has been 'its inability to formulate a credible economic alternative to free-market orthodoxy that simply doesn't attempt to reinvent the past'. The Right's market-fundamentalist doctrines 'failed to generate genuine sustainable prosperity or to address problems of inequality'. The market cannot be relied upon to get things right; that governments should intervene to provide vision and leadership on behalf of the people.

When every human interaction is monetarised, society loses its soul and its way. Davis argues that we need 'to craft new narratives that speak to the complex demands of economic and cultural globalisation ... and a new social compact based on a more equitable partnership between government, markets and individuals.' He pays homage to Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country*; ultimately *The Land of Plenty* is an optimistic book that acknowledges the basic decency of Australian society, but points to the failure of the Left (and more recently, the Right) to honour that decency. One hopes that it's read and discussed by many; I await the next instalment.

This story was found at:

<http://www.readings.com.au/review/the-land-of-plenty-australia-in-the-2000s-mark-davis>