

The thinking man's revolutionary

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MARK Davis is no hairy-chested, tub-thumping culture wars warrior. Calm and softly spoken, he would appear to subscribe to the maxim the pen is mightier than the sword. And in his new book, a lament to the fading dream of Australian egalitarianism, he brandishes it with alacrity, taking issue with those who would portray 21st-century Australia as a land of opportunity and equality, all hunky-dory, while drawing a line through some recent assertions about suburbia's so-called aspirational horde.

It's because Davis reckons the veneer of "she'll be right, mate" is wearing thin, a cheery vernacular that will no longer sustain the morale of vast numbers of Australians who — despite a decade of economic boom — are working harder and longer than ever before but are feeling less and less satisfied with their lot in an economy "increasingly tailored not to the needs of its citizens but to the needs of business".

Australia's new prosperity is one "built on half-million-dollar mortgages and redraw facilities," he writes. "A prosperity built on cutbacks to services, on driving down wages and conditions, and increased working hours. A prosperity where inequality is rising, where the super-rich are an identifiable class, and yet where one in 10 is living in poverty."

His contention, broadly, is this: Australia, having been built postwar on two 30-year epochs of, firstly, protectionism and then the notion of free markets, is at a crossroads. While both ideologies served their purpose, both sowed failure. And the time is ripe for new thinking, not a Third Way

a la Tony Blair's New Labour in Britain, "because that was about letting free markets do what the free markets do and we'll mop up the mess," says Davis. "It wasn't about intervening in an intelligent way."

Rather, "new ways of thinking are needed, as is a wholesale evaluation of the last 30 years". And the question he begs, ultimately, is just what is the role of government in this unfolding century?

If stereotypes count for anything, then Davis, 49, wears the hallmarks of a leftist political bent: born of working-class stock, he left school in his teens to work a string of unskilled jobs in factories and elsewhere, before falling into graphic design and publishing, then academia.

To a degree he confirms the image when labelling himself a classic centre-leftist, "a social democrat in some ways", and in *Land of Plenty: Australia in the 2000s* Davis offers the sort of withering demolition of the Howard government's record that would make the left proud: a polemic against Howard supporters who sought comfort in his government's death throes cry that Australians had never had it so good.

On the contrary, asserts Davis, the cherished virtues of what it means to be Australian — "that everyone has the right to lead a good life, and that society should therefore be as fair as possible" — have been undermined by the reforms of recent decades. But he contends that the dream of egalitarianism wasn't simply lost in the milieu of those free-wheeling, free-market times. In fact, it was systematically dismantled. And it was John Howard who was the chief dismantler, presiding over a "fundamentally tragic prime ministership, of wasted opportunities and wasted talent".

"Pessimistic, backwards-looking, the Howard government measured itself by what it ruined," writes Davis, before listing in 45 bullet points examples of how the conservatives doused potential sources of dissent, stymied debate and played to paranoias.

But Davis, sitting quietly over a cuppa in the offices of his publisher overlooking those of his employer, Melbourne University, says he is no Howard-hater. "I'm savage on (his government) because — and this is really an unpopular view — if they hadn't have governed to divide, if they hadn't have got so tied up in the cultural wars, there's no reason why Howard couldn't have been an excellent prime minister. There are a lot of people out there who hate Howard. I don't hate him at all. I just think how sad it was that someone with his political skills, his nous, his know-how ... didn't use his powers to energise and to unite and to create a vision. He could have, and that he didn't was a great waste of political capital and political talent."

Despite the common perception that Howard had ordinary Aussies in his back pocket, Davis asserts that he was anything but representative of them, being instead "a great un-maker of institutions and the like" that had given succour to "the ethical project" that was Australia: built as it was on the planks of a fair go and often "world-first" social enlightenment — the secret ballot, a vote for women, the eight-hour day, the basic wage, freedom of information, Mabo (though he admits "the blind spot was always Aboriginal rights").

This concurs with the epitaph of Howard as nation non-builder who clinged to power at the expense of leadership. Davis characterises Howard's government as having waged "culture-wars-to-the-death".

"At the end of the day, he was an ideological warrior, and I think the time for that type of ideological warfare has passed. You still get them out there, of course, the Andrew Bolts, the Keith Windschuttles ... they're trapped in a narrow ideological world and I find it sad that they should be so defined by those cultural wars and just don't seem able to move beyond."

Ultimately, the Howard government paid lip-service to the notion of the people and the mainstream, but actually didn't do all that much listening except on divisive focus group-tested issues where it could make political mileage.

"One of the reasons they got voted out," he says, "is that they got completely out of touch. Their prosperity message, a message that Peter Costello is talking about even today, was completely out of touch with the reality that was being felt around many kitchen tables in many Australian households."

So what was the reality? Davis cites industrial law changes as having set a tone where workers on the lowest rung no longer enjoyed similar rights to those above them. Another plank of the egalitarian dream, home ownership, was similarly under threat: average house prices are running more than six times the median wage. And universal access to health and education was also being compromised.

"I think on the one hand many people have enjoyed the prosperity of the last few years. But many people have been left out by it. And just about everyone is uneasy in some way or another about some of the changes of the past few years."

But *Land of Plenty* is about more than just average weekly earnings and economic statistics, though it draws on an array of data to articulate what most Australians probably know instinctively — that inequalities are yawning as never before and most Australians seemingly pace a treadmill that occupies more and more of their time. Davis laments the social cost, especially in the regions to where capital city refugees move after cashing up, the "downmarket seachangers" as he describes them, who settle among dying communities that have "fallen off the map", that have little prospects and offer little amenity. "There they'll grow old and get ill and there's no hospitals."

He does not subscribe to the so-called "trickle-down effect", that a booming economy will overflow with financial good health to the point of benefiting those on society's lowest rungs. "The evidence suggests otherwise," he says bluntly. "In every country where unencumbered free-market policies have been introduced, inequality has risen. That's the universal effect."

In Australia, he blames the right for having consciously attacked the foundations of Australian egalitarianism, but also the left for not having been capable of articulating an alternative vision. "The new right in the 1980s and through the '90s and into the 2000s rebadged themselves as neo-conservatives and various other things that were absolutely antipathetic to the idea of egalitarianism, because egalitarianism means introducing mechanisms that impede the operations of free markets, introducing inefficiencies, and they didn't want that.

"They think the free market must be as unencumbered as possible and then it will work its magic, a rising tide that will lift all boats and so on ... But that's not the outcome."

All round him, Davis sees symbols of Australia's fading egalitarianism. One he is quick to nominate is Telstra Dome, with its strata of social filters, subtle barriers that separate social classes — cheap seats in the clouds, expensive eateries on prime mid-levels, elite memberships and special passes. It's not that such filters had not previously existed in Australian life (even the most blue-collar footy grounds such as Collingwood's Victoria Park had a social club), nor that comfortable all-weather stadiums are not welcome, but that the filters have become magnified and amplified and are much more a part of society now. Money provides some access, but not complete access. "Those filters, often, are beautifully hidden, often very subtle," he says.

Land of Plenty is Davis' second major work, coming a decade after his best-selling *Gangland*, a provocative discourse on anti-intellectualism and neo-conservatism that ticked off ageing baby boomers who were sucking the oxygen out of public debate, silencing the voices of younger thinkers and writers. His latest effort draws inspiration from the late Donald Horne's seminal work *The Lucky Country*.

It took Davis a while to find his own voice, though his life experiences were varied, even entrepreneurial: he ran his dying father's education services company in the mid-80s, before selling it and working for publishers Pan Macmillan. He wrote short stories, sending them to *Meanjin* but with a postscript telling the editor that the magazine needed a makeover and better typefaces.

The editor, Jenny Lee, rejected his story, but took him up on his design advice. Later she encouraged him to study. He got a bachelor of arts at Melbourne University, majoring in literature, did an honours year and eventually a PhD. Now, he's Dr Mark Davis, lecturer in publishing and communications. Lee works for the same department.

JUST as his previous work took issue with plenty of heavy hitters, so too does his latest. And he defends the much maligned class of aspirational Australians regularly derided by commentators for their edge-of-city "McMansions" decked with plasma TVs. He argues that for many Australians the McMansion was not simply the result of rampant consumerism, but an obvious and affordable choice. So was the plasma TV, because home entertainment was cheaper than travelling across town to the zoo. "There's policy failure written into this ... there's transport policy failure, there's housing policy failure."

But Davis insists he is hopeful, not a harbinger of miserable times ahead. His book is curiously cathartic: OK, that was then, this is now. He just reckons that governments must re-engage because in free markets money congregates around money, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"In no way, shape or form am I arguing for the return of the postwar era," he says. The book's aim is "really just to do a bit of poking, a dig between the ribs and to say look, we need to intelligently address all these problems".

"It's not a matter of just chucking out the reform, because I'm not against the idea of markets at all. I've run a small business myself, quite successfully. It's good fun. I love the entrepreneurial side of life and I think a lot of people do. People out there are actually enjoying it. There are more people now running small businesses in Australia than there are who belong to unions.

"What I'm saying is: what about the role of government? How can we bring government back in, not in a postwar kind of universal protectionist mode but in a way where governments do start to do the things that markets fail to do. Markets have been failing when it comes to health care, they've been failing when it comes to education, they've been failing when it comes to the environment. There's been all sorts of gaps."

And here's the rub: "For all their embrace of enterprise," writes Davis, "Australians want to live in a fair society — an Australian-style egalitarian society, not a US-style harshly competitive society."

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<http://www.theage.com.au/national/the-thinking-mans-revolutionary-20080905-4aqq.html?skin=text-only>