

## Values

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Popular opinion notwithstanding, dries, economic rationalists, or the so called New Right are not long on ideology. They are not devotees of gurus, but people who coalesced in response to the perceived economic and political shortcomings of the late 1970s.

Nevertheless, since looking at life in an intellectually consistent way seems a worthwhile thing to do, some friends of the Australian Institute for Public Policy, sat down over a jug or two of ale to list their values. In spite of splendid wit, good company and alcohol, it proved remarkably difficult.

I don't think a similar group of socialists would have found the task as hard. In fact, they would have articulated values in glib but ringing terms before getting down to the real business of each other's heresies. Are utopian ideologies, such as socialism, more easily stated than philosophies which defend rights? Is 'you must' more easily said than 'you may'? Are socialists, who have had most of the debate until the 1980s, simply more practiced at articulating ideological nostrums?

For whatever reason, we failed abjectly to clothe ourselves in ringing phrases but we did manage a few useful generalisations. Like socialists we have an affection for the motherhood terms *liberte, egalite et fraternite* but we use them differently. For instance we define *egalite* so as not to stifle *liberte*. Our account of *liberte* is essentially freedom from restraints rather than guarantee of the resources to do particular things. We share mankind's general desire for security and prosperity and we worry about wars, depressions, and environmental concerns. We found that we did not like the tendency for people in commerce and politics to be less committed to the truth than they used to be, and we regretted the decline of 'the open society' and 'the rule of law'. In short, the dreaded New Right's most cherished goals and values are pretty much everybody's goals and values.

Nevertheless, we approach our goals in a different way from socialists---compared with socialists we were not as concerned with prescribing outcomes and much more concerned with the individual's liberty to choose his own outcomes. We

tended not to talk about an ideal 'society' or about the achievements of groups such as women, aborigines and new migrants, but instead we said a lot about the rights of all people. The averages, aggregates and distributional fractions which so excite social planners did not interest us.

Thus foremost to our *Egalite* is the belief that people are morally equal until they demonstrate otherwise. It follows that in material things we want equality of opportunity rather than outcome. But, recognising that talent and luck are unequally distributed, we also wanted a safety net for those who try but don't make it. We value security and wealth and hope they are within everybody's reach, but say that if you choose to go hang gliding, or don't work, or smoke two packets a day then government has no right to bully you and no obligation to pick up your pieces.

We found *fraternite* more difficult to articulate. John Howard had not introduced 'One Australia' into the political debate at the time, but we noted that a peaceable society, whose members can enjoy the fruits of cooperation, requires solidarity against outsiders and mutual respect amongst insiders. Therefore, *fraternite* requires a certain oneness---core attitudes which nearly everybody adopts. Our objection to the multi-cultural industry, which seeks to preserve cultural divisions artificially, was that it makes *fraternite* less likely. At the same time our respect for *liberte* and *egalite* led us to oppose state discrimination against acceptable cultures. The mafiosi culture is clearly not acceptable but it is difficult to know where to draw the line.

Despite our general preference for pluralism there are aspects of the Australian tradition that we felt were not negotiable. We got into trouble with pluralism itself---could we afford to tolerate intolerance? The rule of law, an independent judiciary and democracy are non-negotiable. So too is the notion that governments hold power only in trust for their citizens and therefore the spoils of office are not politicians' property to bestow upon their mates---the activities of WA Inc. notwithstanding.

We could not escape notions of right and wrong. We believe that there is right and wrong behaviour, for which individuals should be held accountable. This belief divides us from the theorising, if not the practice, of many modern socialists. Festival of Light moralists are a regular pain in the butt, but that is not to say that one cannot make objective moral judgements. It sounds like a Sunday sermon, but who does not think that people who lie, steal, rape, murder or cause wanton injury are bad? No doubt some individuals face more temptation than others and no doubt some enjoy better moral instruction, but individuals are not passive slaves of their environments.

Further, people must bear at least some of the consequences of their own behaviour even when their actions make victims of nobody but themselves. When governments intervene to modify consequences the intervention is not

costless and therefore must be limited. When unemployment, marriage breakdown, and illegitimacy are subsidised we get more of them and when production is taxed we get less of it.

The socialist who blames society for individual failure tends to encourage pauperism by subsidising poverty and by propagating the idea that people are not responsible for their financial condition. That is simply not true and white-collar socialists implicitly admit this by demanding premiums for the skills they have acquired.

The firm belief that individual people are morally responsible beings distinguishes the so called 'New Right' from their opponents as clearly as does the former's relatively greater faith in markets and the latter's greater faith in government.

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