Us and Them: Anti-Elitism in Australia

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Anti-elitist discourse in Australia: International influences and comparisons

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Introduction.

We live today in a very strange Australia. This is an Australia in which Pauline Hanson can declare that ‘the most downtrodden person in this country is the white Anglo-Saxon male.’¹ This is an Australia in which the Prime Minister of the country can depict himself as the victim of elite opinion and confess that his desire to win a third election is partly driven by the need to vindicate himself: ‘I am scorned by the elites and held in such disdain...it will be harder for my critics to write me down if I win.’² Meanwhile, Keith Windschuttle’s vitriolic attack on so-called ‘black-armband’ historians is reportedly fuelled by his feeling that he’d been marginalised by entrenched academic ‘elites’.³ This is an Australia where the Republic debate could see Princess Diana depicted as one of ‘us’ and elected politicians as an elitist ‘them’.⁴ However, it only seems a strange Australia to those, like the current author, who have an alternative, and arguably more traditionally left, view of class, racial and gender inequality — views influenced by welfare liberalism, social democracy, socialism, trade unionism and the social movements. To us, Australia is a society which still privileges white, anglo-saxon males; in which Prime Ministers are powerful; in which non-white, non-anglo, non-male Australians are still substantially under-represented in business and political elites; in which old colonial-settler orthodoxies about the treatment of aboriginal peoples are still influential. For us, Princess Diana was a media celebrity and member of the British aristocracy. For us, Australia is a society in which the resistance of those in power means that feminists, ethnic organisations, Aboriginal organisations and so on have only won a small part of the agendas they have struggled for. Consequently, the arguments regarding elites can seem perplexing, to say the least.

Yet, the views that see inequality as arising from the inequities of capitalism or the privileged position of whites, anglo-celts, males or heterosexuals, are increasingly marginalised. Alternative views on disadvantage have gained the political ascendancy both here and in many countries overseas. They are views in which a reversal takes place and groups which advocates of class politics or of the social movements would see as disadvantaged are reconstructed as powerful; while the groups the old left would see as

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¹ Hanson, *Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend Magazine*, 30 November 1996, p. 22.
³ Cadzow, ‘Who’s right now, then’, *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) Good Weekend Magazine*, May 17 2003, pp. 21, 23.
⁴ Cited in Alan Ramsey, ‘Nasty politics of division’, *SMH*, 29.10.97, p. 15.
powerful become the victims of politically correct, special interest groups. It will be argued here that these Australian perspectives on elitism need to be seen in an international context. While the specific content of our populist discourse is Australian, they still show the influence of global influences. These influences take three main forms: (a) the influence of neo-liberal discourse (b) the influence of a politics of identity related to privileged western identities being challenged by forces ranging from globalisation to migration (c) more recently, the influence of western Islamophobia. Overall, there are complex intersections between economic discourse, cultural discourse, power/knowledge relations and the politics of identity.

Because this paper covers a very wide range of countries and parties, it is not possible to give a detailed account here of the electoral strength of populism in those countries, or of the policies of such a large number of parties. Rather, this paper focuses around a discussion of key Australian examples of populist discourse on elites, and constructions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, comparing and contrasting those forms with examples from Canada, the U.K. and Europe and also drawing attention to some U.S. influences. The analysis will also be confined to parties of the right and far right.5

**International influences: neo-liberal economic discourse.**

In traditional left views, class inequality arises from the market, in which, for example, wealthy bosses exploit workers and consumers. Other disadvantaged groups such as women or Aboriginal people are over-represented in low paid jobs in the labour market, due to forms of social and economic discrimination. The interests of the people, in the form of workers or racial and other minorities are therefore not economically opposed but intersect in social justice agendas. Indeed, ordinary workers are potential supporters of other oppressed groups. However, in the neo-liberal view (which was imported into Australia via the media, the work of various New Right think tanks and contact with U.S. and U.K. political parties), citizens are not disadvantaged or exploited by the market. Quite the contrary, in that view ordinary citizens have been increasingly exploited by elite ‘special interest groups’ who rip off the money of hard-working taxpayers. These elite special interest groups include social movement advocacy organisations and bureaucrats whose salaries are paid out of taxes. The market, far from being a source of inequality, is a source of society’s wealth. Due to what Adam Smith (and contemporary American Republicans) call ‘the invisible hand’, the wealth generated by entrepreneurs in the market eventually trickles

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5 For a discussion of the sense in which populist parties are ‘right’ see Betz, ‘Introduction’ in Betz and Immerfall eds, *The New Politics of the Right: Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies*. 
down to everyone. Excessive government intervention merely distorts the market, preventing market corrections and causing low economic growth, unemployment and an internationally uncompetitive economy. So, private enterprise is in the general interest.

Neo-liberals argue that the public sector is the main source of inequity as elite special interest groups capture the ears of government, politicians and bureaucracies, in order to acquire the taxes of hard-working businessmen and ordinary wage-earning taxpayers. So, for example, David Laycock writes of the far right Canadian Reform Party:

Following the definition provided by their new right counterparts in Britain and the U.S., Reform identified as elites all those who advocate or participate in social decision-making procedures that do not follow the logic and practices of market transactions....a ‘special interest’ is any group that asks for or benefits from government agencies’ efforts to offset the market’s distribution of benefits and opportunities... This definition of ‘special interest’ has been a staple of the American new right since it captured the Republican Party in the late 1970s.

Laycock explains that ‘special interests’ were seen to cover everyone from feminists to indigenous organisations and unions. Nor were such arguments confined to the extreme right in Canada as the Mulroney government also argued that the ‘ordinary Canadian’ was being disadvantaged by ‘special interests’. As Laycock suggests, such views were also common components of Thatcherism and Reaganism.

Laycock’s list is very similar to that in Australia where John Howard has at various times characterised feminist, ethnic, aboriginal organisations and trade unions as ‘special interests’. As Pamela Williams has pointed out, the 1996 Liberal election campaign which brought the Howard Government to power was devised ‘around the concept of “We” and “Them”... with “we” representing the whole community... and ‘them’ representing the special interest groups associated with Keating.’ In the 1998 election campaign Howard argued that: ‘we’re certainly not owned by any elite politically correct pressure group. What we are owned by is a driving ambition to serve the interests of all of the Australian people.’ In the 2001 election campaign, Howard again reiterated his 1996 election night pledge that his

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6 Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada*, p. 56
7 Laycock, p. 57
8 Brodie, *Politics on the Margins: Restructuring the Canadian Women’s Movement*, p. *
9 See Johnson, *Governing Change: from Keating to Howard*, chapter 3, particularly p. 43.
11 Howard, ‘Transcript of Address at the Leaders’ Breakfast, The Liberal Party National Convention.’
government was not beholden to sectional interests. However, the conservative discourse of the American and British right was adapted to Australian circumstances. Hence Howard’s characterisation of aboriginal advocates as the ‘aboriginal industry’ is very similar to the Thatcher government’s denouncement of the ‘race relations industry’ in Britain even though the British issues did not involve issues of indigenous politics such as native title and the stolen generations. Nonetheless, the content of Howard’s critique (and the fears of land grabs and massive compensation bills that he mobilised) were Australian. Howard’s views were also developed in the context of critiquing a Labor government that had encouraged socially inclusive forms of neo-liberalism. Labor both argued that cultural difference contributed to free market success and combined economic rationalism with a social democratic recognition of the need for government to provide support for socially disadvantaged groups. Indeed, Keating saw aboriginal, ethnic, union and feminist advocacy groups as legitimate representatives of sections of the Australian people. His views have since been rejected by some Labor figures who have suggested that Labor does indeed need to distance itself from elites and special interests. However, since this paper is focusing on parties of the right, such views will not be analysed in depth here.

**Neo-liberal influences versus international anti-globalisation discourse.**

The Howard government’s neo-liberal views share some similarities not only with major right-wing U.K. Canadian and U.S. parties but also with much more extreme far right populist parties in Europe. Such parties may advocate extreme measures such as repatriation or halts to immigration, however, they also tend to share an ‘ideological construct based on the image of a society which pits the productive majority of taxpayers against a minority of politicians, bureaucrats, and their clients, which consumes the fruits of the majority’s labour.’ As Marc Morjé Howard points out, such populist parties tend to be economically of the right in their support for the property relations of capitalism’. Nonetheless, that does not mean that they necessarily endorse neo-liberal arguments in favour of free trade and globalisation. There are Australian comparisons here. Like John Howard, Hanson constantly argued that elite special interests had gained the ear of government and mainstream Australians were being disadvantaged, although she went much further in her attacks on

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13 Mitchell and Russell, ‘Race and Racism’.
14 See Sawer’s paper in this collection and Johnson “Labor and the Left”. The latest Labor attack on elites and insiders is Latham’s, *From The Suburbs*, see pp. 12-13, 20-23.
15 Betz, ‘Introduction’, p. 5
16 Marc Morjé Howard, ‘Can Populism be Suppressed in a Democracy/ Australia, Germany and the European Union’, East European Politics and Societies, 14 (2), p. 20
Aboriginal people and Asian immigration. However, Hansonism also strongly opposed the forces of globalisation and deregulation. The Hanson Support movement book *The Truth* argued that like ‘an organism whose immune system has been destroyed, Australian ruling elites have lost the capacity to distinguish between self and non-self. The inevitable result will be the triumph of the non-self.’\(^{17}\) The business elite was betraying Australia to the forces of globalisation while Australian parliamentarians were licking ‘the boots of... foreign imperialists’.\(^{18}\) The ruling elite now espoused ‘a new religion of internationalism — of anti-white racism, multiculturalism, feminism and Asianisation’. Their ‘new religion’ attracted groups ranging from dreadlocked students to business-suited economic rationalists. What all these groups had in common was the fact that ‘they hate old Anglo-Australia and wish to see it destroyed.’\(^{19}\) Hanson was clear that she wanted ‘the chance to stand against those who have betrayed our country, and would destroy our identity by forcing upon us the cultures of others.’\(^{20}\) In such views international capitalists (as opposed to small business people like Pauline Hanson) are constructed as a global, cosmopolitan elite who are selling out their own country. Neo-liberalism is seen as a central part of this process because of its support for globalisation, free trade, deregulation and the removal of protection for national industries. Meanwhile, workers and small business people who have lost state benefits and protections due to neo-liberalism may feel particularly hostile to ethnic, racial or other groups who still argue that they have a case for state benefits and protection at a time when workers have lost their claims to be a oppressed group.

In its opposition to globalisation, Hansonism had similarities with Le Pen’s Front National (National Front) in France since, as Liz Feket has pointed out, ‘rather like Pauline Hanson and the One Nation party, Le Pen campaigns on a platform of economic protectionism and the abolition of multiculturalism, openly linking opposition to globalisation with an agenda of racial discrimination’.\(^ {21}\) Le Pen too is critical of the elites, which he sees as having sold the French out to the forces of multiculturalism, globalisation and the European Union. The National Front argues that political and media leaders have demonstrated their hostility to national values and their support for ‘mondialisme’.\(^ {22}\) Mondialisme is not just characterised by support for cosmopolitan, multicultural ‘worldvalues’. Rather, as Hans-Georg Betz has noted, Le Pen describes mondialisme as ‘a

\(^{17}\) Anonymous contributor, Hanson, *The Truth*, p. 65.

\(^{18}\) Anonymous contributor, Hanson, *The Truth*, p. 77.

\(^{19}\) Anonymous contributor, Hanson, *The Truth*, p. 92.

\(^{20}\) Hanson, Speech, Launch of One Nation, 11th April 1997.

\(^{21}\) Fekete, ‘Popular racism in corporate Europe’, p. 192.

\(^{22}\) Programme du Front National, L’immigration: des menaces mortelles pour la France at les Français.
totalitarian utopia’ which used ‘the globalisation of information and exchange’ in order to dominate the planet and destroy national identities. Similarly, Beirich and Woods argue that the Italian Lega Nord’s (Northern League’s) supporters arguments for ‘federalism and northern independence have been shaped by an anxiety factor associated with the forces of globalisation. It is the perception that only by reinforcing local and regional autonomy will these voters be able to defend their economic interests from outside pressures. However, there are major differences with Hansonism, one of Le Pen’s fears is that globalisation will see the imposition of Anglo-Saxon culture on French society. The Lega Nord also cites ‘mondialismo’ (and its global anglophone commercial culture) as one of the enemies of Italian and European identity. By contrast Hanson constructed the elites as enemies of Anglo-Saxon values. The National Front’s and Northern League’s fears of anglicisation draws attention to the diverse social and cultural factors at work. Globalisation can be seen as a threat to national identity and it is to a discussion of populism as a politics of identity that we will now turn.

**Populism and the politics of identity — international comparisons.**

The discourse of the socially conservative right has developed at a time when privileged identities in the west are increasingly under challenge. Factors contributing to feelings of insecurity include the decline of colonial empires and the impact of the social movements on traditional conceptions of masculine, racial, ethnic and social privilege and identity. The growth of an information economy is further marginalising the less educated while global communications and media industries further threaten ‘national’ cultures. In particular, privileged ethnic groups, associated with traditional forms of national identity, are feeling threatened by globalisation, regional trade blocks such as the EU, and by multicultural and multiracial migration.

Nationalism, and the association of nationalism with particular forms of ethnic identity is therefore a crucial issue in this time of uncertainty. Minkenberg argues that the radical right appropriates ‘the dominant concept of nation and nationhood’ and attempts ‘to

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25 Fekete, ‘Popular Racism...’ p. 192
present this appropriation in opposition to the established elite’s understanding of nation’.\textsuperscript{27} Hans-Georg Betz goes further, arguing that the emphasis on national and cultural identity has transformed the radical right into parties of identity politics.

In recent years, the radical right has increasingly gone beyond exclusionary populism to adopt a new form of cultural nativism, which, rather than promoting traditional right-wing extremist notions of ethnic and ethnocultural superiority, aims at the protection of indigenous culture, customs, and way of life.\textemdash the radical right has increasingly shifted its focus to questions of national and cultural identity. In the process, contemporary right-wing politics has become identity politics.\textsuperscript{28}

Betz’s comments read strangely for those of us from colonial-settler societies. However, ‘indigenous’ culture for Betz means here the national cultures of peoples who ethnically identify as French, German, Belgian or anglo Australian. Herein lies the source of both Le Pen’s rejection of Anglo-Saxon elements and Hanson’s support for Anglo-Saxon identity. Indeed, there are particular reasons why anglo-celts living in an increasingly multicultural, multi-racial, colonial-settler society adjacent to Asia, should feel insecure.\textsuperscript{29} Betz argues that the radical right has reworked issues of social justice, identity and recognition, capitalising on feelings of insecurity, resentment against resident aliens and disenchantment towards political and intellectual elites.\textsuperscript{30}

There are obvious comparisons with arguments in Australia. I have argued elsewhere that a socially conservative politics of ethnic and gender identity has been a crucial part of Howard’s policy and electoral strategy.\textsuperscript{31} In other words, the socially conservative populist opposition to special interests derives not just from a neo-liberal belief that they are ripping off taxpayers’ funds, but also from claims, as demonstrated by Hanson’s, Howard’s and Windschuttle’s arguments at the beginning of this chapter, that the vast majority of the population is being disadvantaged by vocal minorities in a culture war. This disadvantage takes the form both of ‘politically correct’ attacks on the identity of ‘mainstream’ groups and

\textsuperscript{28} Betz, ‘Xenophobia...’, p. 195.
\textsuperscript{30} Betz, ‘Xenophobia’, p. 205
\textsuperscript{31} See Johnson, Governing Change, chapters 3, 4. and 5.
the seizing of taxpayer funds due to allegedly false claims that particular groups are hard
done by. An ideological economy is being constructed here in which winning particular
arguments is constructed as also winning government revenue.

However, non-economic power/knowledge relations are also crucial. That is why
John Howard feels a victim of accusations of racism.\textsuperscript{32} Despite his own relative privilege, he
is appealing to all of those, such as many One Nation supporters, who felt they could not
compete with the authoritative voices of the tertiary educated middle class. Feminists,
aboriginal advocates and non anglo-celtic ethnic organisations might believe that they are
still marginalised in Australian culture and that the groups they are advocates for are
underrepresented in political and business elites. There may indeed be international
evidence that political elites have facilitated, rather than blocked, anti-immigration
discourse.\textsuperscript{33} However, the point is that Labor governments’ (or social scientists’) mere
acceptance of the legitimacy of arguments that women or aboriginal people or non-Anglo-
celtic ethnic groups or gays and lesbians were still being discriminated against is constructed
as evidence of the elite, cultural power of those groups. So, elites are being constructed not
just in terms of economic wealth, or in terms of the actual social composition of business or
parliamentary elites, but in terms of complex arguments about power/knowledge relations.
Note that the politics of constructing ‘us’ is just as important as the politics of constructing
‘them’ in such formulations. For example, in Australia, forms of anglo-celtic identity that are
more sympathetic to reconciliation or multiculturalism were attacked in favour of narrower
forms of anglo-celtic identity. Indeed, a crucial function of populist discourses is precisely to
deny empathy to ‘other’ groups that are constructed a self-serving and powerful. The denial
of empathy, rather than as commentators such as Ghassan Hage suggest, a deficit of Hope, is
I’d suggest, one of the central features of these discourses.\textsuperscript{34}

The crucial importance of the politics of identity should not be underrated, it
explains, for example, why the Howard government has sometimes been able to capture the
Hansonite vote despite Hanson’s critique of the government’s support for free trade and
regulation. The debate is constructed in such a way that merely not agreeing with what is
asserted to be the view of the ‘ordinary’ person, automatically constructs one as a member of
the elite. Indeed, one is accused of seeing ordinary people as stupid. In the process, the
‘ordinary’ person is constructed as having socially conservative views on national identity,
race and immigration (rather than being potentially supportive of other oppressed groups).

\textsuperscript{32} Johnson, \textit{Governing Change}, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{33} Karapin, ‘The Politics of Immigration Control in Britain and Germany’, p. 438.
\textsuperscript{34} Hage, \textit{Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society}, p. 9.
The following passage from Howard (which also acknowledges the American influences on his thought) makes such arguments clear:

You’ve read the book, *The Revolt of the Elites*, haven’t you? It was written by Christopher Lasch, an American social commentator. His theory is - and I think he’s right and I certainly find it here in Australia - that a lot of, for want of a better expression, mainstream people resent the fact that there’s a bit of a political elite which includes a lot of people in the press who, in effect, are saying there are certain issues that you, the public, are too stupid to be trusted to even talk about. We’ll decide it for you and we’ll tell you what’s good. A lot of Australians feel that issues related to immigration and multiculturalism fall into that category.35

Similar populist perspectives were also raised during the debate on the Republic, which raised underlying issues regarding Australia’s relationship with Britain and Anglo-Celtic culture. A blueprint for the later Referendum campaign against the elitist, so-called ‘Politicians’ Republic’ was set out in a 1997 letter written by one of Howard’s speechwriters, Gerry Wheeler, to Kerry Jones, head of the monarchist movement. (Kerry Jones, it should be noted, is a member of the hugely wealthy, but legally disputatious, Moran family). Wheeler proposed an election strategy for monarchist candidates to the 1998 Constitutional Convention:

I see this election essentially as a battle between the mainstream and the elites. In other words ‘us’ against ‘them’. We should therefore turn the republican strategy of espousing prominent republicans on its head. The more politicians, artistic figures, academics, journalists and businessmen are seen to be outed as republicans, the more we should say that the rest of us (mainstream Australia) need a voice and this is what [our] candidates can provide.

We need to reveal all those qualities of the [republican] candidates which set them apart from the mainstream - their wealth, their backgrounds, their elitist interests - and show how mainstream we are in comparison.... This ballot should be presented as real Australians’ greatest chance ever to vote against all the politicians, journalists, radical university students, welfare rorters, academics, the arts community and the rich that, deep down, they’ve always hated.’

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The extent to which the republicans have exploited the death of Diana has been a disgrace...We should be prepared to retaliate along the following lines: Diana was one of us, now they want one of them.... Just think, that we could wake up one morning and all the monarchy will be gone. And what we’ll be left with is just another politician.36

The list of hated elites sounded remarkably similar to the list in Hanson’s *The Truth*. John Howard’s office denied that he had had any role in producing the memos.37 However, Howard later argued that the NO case won the subsequent 1999 Republican Referendum because the Republican YES cause had a low priority for the ‘mainstream’ and the NO case had more of a ‘grassroots’ feel.38 Arguably, the elites versus mainstream argument had worked so well that at least some lower income people identified with the supporters of a monarchy as a populist ‘us’ and the republicans as an elite ‘them’. (Meanwhile, monarchist politicians could depict themselves as anti-politicians).

There are numerous similarities between the Australian populist discourse and discourse in other countries. The reworking of the monarchy as a populist ‘we’ as opposed to a republican ‘elite’ should not surprise us given international comparisons. After all, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, leader of the National Movement Simeon II, campaigned as a representative of the Bulgarian people against the Bulgarian elites whom he accused of bungling the post-communist transition. Yet he’d been King of Bulgaria as a child and had become a successful businessman while exiled in Spain.39 There are also other similarities with arguments from parties overseas. The Howard government’s electoral mobilisation of populist social conservatism on issues from race to the Republic reflects a long international history of major parties drawing on watered-down versions of the policies of more extreme parties. For example, Michael Minkenberg argues that major German parties such as the CDU/CSU and the SPD co-opted ‘the new radical right’s agenda...and...moved the political spectrum towards the right....The handling of the asylum debate by the major parties in 1992/3 demonstrated this shift most tellingly’.40 The 2001 Australian election was therefore hardly an aberration. The populist content of the Australian discourse is also very similar to that in many other countries. In a recent (March 2003) survey of European parties ranging

36 Cited in Alan Ramsey, ‘Nasty politics of division’, *SMH*, 29.10.97, p. 15.
39 Fieschi and Jones, ‘Capitalism, Consensus and the Electoral Successes of the Far Right’, pp. 17,21, 23
from the French National Front, the Dutch List Pim Fortuyn, the Italian Northern league, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Bulgarian National Movement Simeon II, Catherine Feischer and Erik Jones have noted the following common features:

Using the most useful definitions of populism we can argue that all the movements we examine present the following traits attributable to populist parties or movements: They claim to represent the ‘common man’, the average voter whose voice has long been lost; They claim to be able to return to a golden, more innocent age of politics during which politics and political decisions rested in the hands of those who contribute most significantly to the everyday life of the nation by their labour; they claim to have identified a gap between the leader and the led and that political power has been usurped by an undeserving, spoilt and corrupt elite whose aim is to govern for its own benefit while reaping and withholding the political, social and economic rewards which rightly belong to the people; Above all they abhor what they regard as the gratuitous professionalisation and intellectualism of the political realm which has led to its corruption and the subsequent exclusion from it of those it claims to represent.41

Arguably, both Howard’s arguments that the Keating government had listened to ‘special interests’ rather than ‘mainstream’ Australia; the monarchists argument that elites were seeking to create a Politician’s Republic and the Hansonites’ denouncement of the various elites betraying anglo Australia all involve elements of such arguments.

However, needless to say, such populist arguments can take radically different forms in different countries. So, the Italian Lega Nord’s denounces the Rome elite and the political class and for allegedly transferring resources from the ‘productive’ north to the South.42 As Beirich and Woods point out: ‘The us/them dichotomy so typical of populist movements is used to contrast the Lombards with several outside evils including the Mafia and parasitism of the south, Rome’s corrupt politicians and threatening global forces.’43 Sometimes the forms of populism can be explicitly anti-democratic, for example in the Belgian Vlaams Blok’s preference for an ordered society in which: ‘Politics must be withdrawn from the atmosphere of small-mindedness, cliques, and base calculation in which it has currently been

41 Feischer and Jones, ‘Capitalism....’, p. 6.
marooned by democracy and the malady of parliamentarism. On the other hand, parties of the right frequently advocate forms of radical popular democracy. For example, the Canadian reform Party, like many other populist parties, advocated citizen initiated referenda as a way of seizing power from the political elite and putting it back in the hands of the people.

Despite the national differences, the argument that racial minorities are getting special treatment and that ordinary people are not being listened to by elites is one of the most common populist arguments. For example, British National Party supporters, speaking after their candidate defeated the deputy leader of Burnley Council in the 2003 council elections, stated that the BNP

actually seem to speak up for local people. It’s not a question of them being racist or of us being racist. ...I’m not a racist, absolutely not. I’ve no problem with Asians. What I hate is the preferential treatment they get. Around here, I can’t even take my lad to the park because it’s full of glass. But you go down to Stoneyhome, and everything is done for them. It’s just not fair.

According to another voter:

All I want is fairness, just like everyone else around here. The trouble is that Burnley council is very one-sided towards the Asians. They get all the money, but if anyone says anything, they cry, ‘Racist’. It’s only the BNP who are sticking up for us....I am just fed up with not being listened to, and I’m fed up with feeling we’re a minority in our own country.

Such comments remind one very much of Hanson’s claim that she wasn’t racist but just wanted a fair go for ordinary Australians. They remind us of her claim that Aboriginal people were gaining special benefits at the expense of mainstream Australians. Howard appealed to such arguments more discreetly in his comments about the benefits gained by

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46 cited in Nigel Bunyan, ‘BNP built success on white voter’s resentment’, Daily Telegraph, filed 03/05/03, www.telgraph.co.uk/core/Content...ws%2F2003%2F05%2F03%2Fnbnp03.xml&sites, accessed 28/05/03.
47 cited in Bunyan, ‘BNP built success...’
48 Hanson, The Truth, pp. 3, 4, 36-54.
‘special interests’ and his argument that elites weren’t listening to the people on issues of immigration and were accusing them of being racist. The constant denial of the ‘racism’ tag, is also consistent with Betz’s comments regarding the ways in which the far right is moving beyond explicit statements of biological racial superiority to depict themselves as defenders of besieged national cultures. In Britain, as in Australia, such views are not confined to extreme right minority parties. Former Conservative Party leader, William Hague, had visited Australia to learn more about how Howard had defeated a sitting Labor government. The Conservative Party’s 2000-2001 election campaign subsequently depicted the British Labour government as politically correct, elitist and neglecting ‘mainstream’ opinion in a way that was very similar to Howard’s depiction of the Keating government. Hague mobilised a conservative politics of British identity.49

However, the politics of identity and populist constructions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are arguably being reworked in the current international context of western Islamophobia and it is to that issue that I now wish to turn.

Islamophobia – a new western populist discourse?

In the wake of September 11 and the Bali bombing, the West obviously has legitimate reason to feel concerned at the dangers posed by small groups of terrorists claiming to be devout Muslims. However, Islamophobia refers to a broader fear in which all Muslims are constructed as a potential threat. The views of the assassinated Dutch politician, Pim Fortuyn are particularly relevant here, for Pim Fortuyn attempted to build up a broad populist alliance that included calls for small ‘I’ liberal support against the ‘intolerance’ of Islam. Pim Fortuyn criticised the Dutch elites for supporting a consensus politics which excluded the common people while supporting immigration by groups, such as Muslims, which threatened traditional Dutch values of tolerance and assimilation.50

Christianity and Judaism have gone through the laundromat of humanism and enlightenment, but that is not the case with Islam. Modern society places an emphasis on individual responsibility, whereas Islam places an emphasis on collective responsibility and the family. We have a separation of state and church. The laws of the country are not subject to the Koran. We have equality of men and

50 Fieschi et al, pp. 6 and . 23
women in Western society, whereas in Islamic culture women are inferior to men.

Fortuyn’s open homosexuality was an asset used to contrast Dutch tolerance with Islamic values — in which all of Islam was constructed as fundamentalist, opposed to gender equality and homophobic. Fortuyn argued that ‘in Holland, homosexuality is treated the same way as heterosexuality. In what Islamic country does that happen?’ He stated that ‘Muslims have a very bad attitude to homosexuality, they’re very intolerant.’ Legal action was even taken against homosexuals in more liberal Islamic countries such as Egypt.

Fortuyn’s prejudice is clearly displayed in his depiction of Muslims in general as fundamentalist. Fortuyn also conveniently overlooks the fact that Dutch society is far more progressive in its attitudes towards recognition of same-sex relationships than most other Western countries. There is also a long history of discrimination against homosexuals in the West and in Christianity. The far right American Christian, Jerry Falwell, actually argued that September 11th was due to the wrath of God at American debauchery, including the prevalence of homosexuality. Similarly, Cas Mudde has argued that Extreme Right Parties, particularly in Catholic countries, tended to see homosexuality as a threat, not just because it was a symbol of left-wing permissiveness but because it was seen to threaten the heterosexual family, birth-rates, and therefore national survival. The mainstream right also has a history of homophobia. The Bush government has consistently opposed homosexual rights arguments as has the Howard government (despite Howard’s claims of ‘tolerance’). Australia has a record of being particularly unsympathetic to gay and lesbian refugees — including those from Muslim countries where Sharia law is practised. Yet, it is precisely Fortuyn’s break with the more usual homophobia of the right that is of interest because

52 Fortuyn cited in Hooper, ‘The twisty politics...’
54 Fortuyn, ‘De dreiging van de Islam’.
56 Burack, ‘Getting What ‘We’ Deserve: Terrorism, Tolerance, Sexuality, and the Christian Right.’
59 Millbank, ‘Imagining Otherness: Refugee Claims on the Basis of Sexuality in Canada and Australia’.
Fortuyn’s statements illustrate just how broad the populist alliances against Islam can be, including appeals to groups such as feminists or homosexuals who would normally be constructed as special interests.

Betz argues that Islamophobia now plays a crucial role in the right-wing politics of difference by becoming ‘the other’ against which ‘western’ values are constructed. Consequently, ‘starting from the claim that Europe’s identity and cultural diversity are fundamentally threatened, the radical right now promotes itself as the defender of difference and the fundamental right to cultural identity’... The cultural identities being championed are white and associated with dominant ethnic groups and national identities. Fortuyn was not alone in his Islamophobia. The Swiss People’s Party has also argued that Islam is a barrier to ‘integration’ and that Muslims oppose independence of church and state and equality between men and women. The Danish People’s Party made similar arguments, arguing that Islam was opposed to values such as tolerance and mutual understanding. The National Front sees the French political and media elites as having been soft on Muslim immigrants and underestimating the threat which Islam poses to French values. The Front argues that Islam sees no clear division between church and state and its views on the position of women, daily life and social rights are all incompatible with French civilisation.

The Italian Northern League has also espoused a similar opposition to Islam.

There are some signs that broad alliances against Islam are beginning to be forged in Australian politics, although they don’t take the form of Fortuyn’s arguments in respect to homosexuality. The success of the 2001 election slogan: ‘We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’ lay in its ability to include the broadest definition of ‘we’ in its arguments against asylum-seekers. The ‘we’ could be interpreted narrowly enough to attract the Hansonite vote against all racial or ethnic ‘others’ and interpreted broadly enough to attract multi-ethnic, multi-racial immigrants who could see themselves affirmed as the legitimate, legal, desired immigrants. Part of Howard’s dog-whistle politics on the asylum issue was the fact that so many of these Iraqi and Afghan asylum-seekers were Muslims—a point signalled by government accusations that asylum-seekers could include (Islamic) Terrorists. Labor could be depicted as not tough enough on asylum seekers (presumably just as they had been captured by other ‘special interests’). Meanwhile, ‘illegal’ immigrants were depicted as, in effect, themselves an elite because of

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60 Betz, ‘Xenophobia...’ p. 196
61 Betz, ‘Xenophobia...’, pp. 198-200
62 Section on ‘Non à l’islamisation de la France’, in Front National, Programme du Front National.
63 Betz, ‘Xenophobia...’, p. 201.
government arguments that they were the wealthy ones who could afford to pay people smugglers.\(^{64}\)

Admittedly, Howard has repeatedly stated that he is not anti-Islamic and has made numerous statements differentiating between the vast majority of ‘moderate’ Muslims and Islamic terrorist extremists. He has made it clear that he considers neighbours such as Indonesia to be moderate Muslim countries. He has argued that neither Australia’s participation in the war against Afghanistan or Iraq were anti-Islamic. He has also made clear statements that Australian Muslims should be incorporated in Australian identity and that Australians generally should be ‘tolerant’ of Islam. Nonetheless, in echoes of European and U.S. populist discourse, Howard has also argued that Islamic terrorists hate western ‘civilisation’ and that Australians would have a problem with any religious belief that saw women as unequal.\(^{65}\) The issue of who is seen to be an ‘extreme’ Muslim is also highly contentious and open to a variety of interpretations by the electorate. Furthermore, Howard has been prepared to suggest that Muslims are sometimes less easily ‘integrated’ into Australian society than other groups such as Asians and Southern Europeans because of ‘different mores’.\(^{66}\) Howard’s comments reinforce Ghassan Hage’s perception that ‘in the last couple of years... probably to the relief of “Asians”, White paranoia has shifted its gaze towards a more global threat: “Muslims” and “Islam”. Muslims have now become the Australian “other”.\(^{67}\)  Needless to say, given that many Asians are Muslims, Islamophobia can still sometimes operate as a screen for anti-Asian sentiment, just as the movement of middle-eastern and central Asian asylum seekers via Indonesia could still play upon older fears of the yellow peril. Here, as elsewhere, Islamophobia can be used to trigger broader fears of ‘others’, rather than replacing previous forms.

Given the decline of far right parties such as One Nation, there have not been the same opportunities for the explicit mobilisation of Islamophobia in Australia that have been encountered in Europe. The government is also anxious to manage relations with our immediate Muslim neighbours, including the world’s largest Muslim nation, Indonesia. Australia’s geographic position may temper some more extreme versions of Islamophobia by conservative major parties, while fuelling popular fears. Nonetheless, Hanifa Deen has argued that Australian Muslims were already feeling threatened in the early nineties but

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\(^{64}\) See further Mares, *Borderline: Australia’s response to refugees and asylum seekers in the wake of Tampa.*

\(^{65}\) Howard, transcript of question and answer at APEC CEO summit, Los Cebos, Mexico; Howard, transcript of interview with John Laws, Radio 2UE, 21 November 2002.


that, since September 11, the Sydney gang rapes and Tampa: ‘Australian Muslims were under siege and saw themselves lumped together as ‘the enemy’’. In words that seem particularly appropriate given our participation in the (predominantly Anglophone) war against Iraq, Rachel Bloul has drawn attention to ‘Western antagonism to the Islamic world, paralleling efforts by Muslim countries to increase their participation in world affairs. Australia’s share of this antagonism is increased by close ties to the USA and the UK.’

The War against Terrorism does indeed provide opportunities for populist Islamophobia to be mobilised even if through dog-whistle politics or attacking, ambiguously defined, ‘extreme’ Muslims. This is particularly the case since Islamophobia draws on such a long history in western culture, going back to the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In short, the racial ‘other’ may be increasingly constructed in Islamic form, with whiteness also being reconstructed to exclude, for example, people who are Turkish or (Islamic) Lebanese. Opposition political ‘elites’ may be accused of being soft on the Islamic ‘threat’.

Conclusion.

Islamophobia is just the latest form that international influences on Australian populism, and constructions of ‘them’ and ‘us’ have taken. It has been argued in this paper that, despite their Australian content, Australian forms of populism also need to be situated within the broader international context of neo-liberal discourse, opposition to globalisation and the increasing challenges to previously privileged forms of identity in the west. As the international examples show, populism can take a huge variety of forms. It can be espoused both by established parties and extreme, minority ones. It can involve arguments for or against elements of neo-liberalism. It can involve complex intersections of the economic and power/knowledge relations. It takes different national forms. Above all, populism involves a very complex politics of identity in constructing who is ‘elite’, who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them’.

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68 Deen, Caravanserai: Journey Among Australian Muslims, p. 272.
69 Bloul, ‘Being Muslim in the West: The Case of Australian Muslims’, Islamic countries are also sites themselves, of course, for a very complex politics of identity but that is beyond the scope of the current paper.
70 Said, Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient, pp. 286-7. See further Saikal, Islam and the West: Conflict or Cooperation?, particularly chapter 2.
71 See e.g. the table ‘whiter than white’ in The Australian, 9 May 2002, p. 13, which excludes people of Middle Eastern origin.


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