

## DEMOCRACY AND DIVERSITY

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### Abstract

The New Zealand Labour Party has embraced the politics of diversity wholeheartedly and with little self-criticism since the 1970s. This presentation explains the 'cultural turn of the Left' and its unintended and damaging consequences. I conclude by asking is there an alternative to culturalism that could re-invigorate the Party's commitment to redistributive politics.

### 1. Introduction

This talk is about the Cultural Turn of the post-war liberals and how that Turn has undermined an institution fundamental to democracy. The institution is the 'public' – all the people, regardless of their diverse origins, united into one political system and served by that system. Without the idea of the public, there is no constituted political system that unites society, no public ownership and no fair public distribution of the fruits of national resource ownership.

Until the shift to biculturalism, both the social democratic Labour Party and the social liberal National Party agreed that the public comprises all the people in a modern democratic nation - the *demos*.

In addition the Labour Party held strongly to the idea that the public ownership and control of resources gives material substance to building and maintaining the public. These are the resources that everyone needs.

The very act of public ownership of resources such as water, the foreshore and seabed, the forests, rivers and lakes, the electromagnetic spectrum, flora and fauna, the wilderness, and the infrastructure such as electricity generation and water distribution that enables those resources to be used, is more than the sum of its parts.

The public ownership of essential resources is more than an act of ownership. In that act of ownership, the public itself is created, built and strengthened. The public ownership of the nation's resources is the invisible web that forms deep feelings of belonging to a people and to a place – to New Zealand.

Given the nation's short history the depth of these bonds of belonging and unity may seem surprising. We are a diverse population, sharing no common history and land, yet until the bicultural era, we were willing to take that modernist leap of faith into a shared future.

It was a leap of faith based on a commitment to democratic ideals grounded in two material conditions. One is the existence of strong democratic institutions: the constitution, parliament, the judiciary, and the various other institutions of government – all established early in our history and jealously guarded – that is, until the shift to bicultural politics.

The second material condition is that of shared public resources.

The commitment to a shared future by people united as a new type of 'public' was possible because it was based on the modern notion of universalism. This is the idea of *demos* not *ethnos*, of the human being replacing the ethnic/race being as the political subject.

The baffling question is this: Why has a political party comprised of those with a steadfast commitment to the democratic ideals of social justice for working people abandoned its commitment to universalism, the idea upon which democracy is founded?

Why has this commitment been exchanged for a return to race as the foundational identity, to tribe as the political category, and to 'culture' as the social authority. Why did the liberal-Left and the Liberal-right make the Cultural Turn?

It was a regressive turn with hugely damaging consequences. It is steadily weakening the idea of the public and weakening the constituted institutions of democracy. The current move to co-governance arrangements at local and national level between a democratic public on the one hand and a race group on the other is profoundly subversive of democracy.

For the Labour Party in particular, with its commitment to the unifying force of public resource ownership, the Cultural Turn is an act of self-destruction. By weakening the idea that national resources should be owned by the public, the idea that follows - that those resources are available for use by all people - particularly to provide employment - is similarly weakened.

By taking the Cultural Turn, the National Party also corrupted its founding liberal philosophy. Its liberal ideals of the free individual who is responsible for the good of the public sphere is corrupted by the distortion of liberalism into 'neoliberalism'. In losing the idea of the 'public' for the 'private', the National Party has lost one of the twin poles of its philosophy - the common public sphere for which we all are responsible. No wonder the philosophical remnants of that party exist only in habits of pragmatism.

I could say more about the philosophical implosion of the National Party but this talk is about the Labour Party. The same philosophical implosion occurred although it took a different form.

Labour's distributory politics also need the concept of the people as a united public. But it has a further step. It also needs the public ownership of the nation's resources as the material resource for a distributory economy.

## **2. The Cultural Turn**

So why did it happen? What did the Labour Party abandon the universalism upon which its entire ethos is based? In explaining this conundrum, we need to look at the new professional class who took the Cultural Turn - those biculturalists of the last four decades. Who were they and why did they subvert their own politics?

During the 1970s, many in the post-war new professional class embraced the idea of 'culture' as a panacea for the encroaching insecurities of a contracting global economy. They were well-educated people, both Maori and non-Maori, both liberals of Left and

Right political persuasion, who turned from the class politics of their parents to cultural politics. More will be said about these people later.

But firstly, what is cultural politics and the belief system of culturalism (known in New Zealand as biculturalism) that seeks to replace universalism.

'Culture' is considered to be a person's primary identity. You are essentially a Maori, a Jew, a Celt, a Slav, and so on. The social practices, ideas, and beliefs of your group, in other words, the 'culture', is believed to be determined by your descent from an ethnic or race group. (Just to note - I use 'race' in its social meaning [it is not a scientific concept] to refer to descent from a common ancestral group usually marked by physical features.

What is the problem with that? For a liberal democracy like New Zealand's - nothing. Civil society is comprised of all sorts of groups to which people identify - religions, lifestyle groups, groups based on sexual orientation, on political interests, on hobbies, on sport, on heritage . . . the list is endless. So too is the way people identify.

Take those who identify as Maori for example. That identification may be total - all that one does, thinks and feels is 'being Maori'. For others, the identification may weaken or strengthen at different stages of life. Many urban youth of mixed ancestry are not particularly interested in identifying ethnically, hence the difficulty in signing them up to the Maori electoral roll. They have much more exciting identities to pursue. Some in this group may never take up a Maori identity. Others may become staunchly Maori when they become parents or when they become old. And yet others, may give a brief nod to their Maori ancestry and leave it at that. This all sounds very reasonable - very liberal, very modern . . . we choose who we are . . .

But take another step and culturalism takes on a new and disturbing dimension. This occurs when the belief in culture as a foundational identity is used to justify that identity group being recognised as a political category. Culture is no longer about your chosen racial identity and lifestyle. Race becomes a political category to which only those of that ancestry can belong. Such exclusivity is justified in claims that those belonging to that culture or race have interests that cannot be addressed by other political parties.

Biculturalism was this fundamental shift in New Zealand politics. It brought race into politics in a new way.

The democratic subject - the citizen - is based on universal criteria. You can be a citizen regardless of things about you that are fixed in your genetic heritage and cannot be changed.

Culturalism brings in a new type of political subject - a racialised one. You either have the genetic connection to an ancestral group or you don't. In the New Zealand case, you either have a Maori ancestor or you don't. This exclusivity is what makes a racial ideology. Political categories are now defined in race terms.

Yet even the existence of political parties focused on the interests of a race group can be tolerated in a democracy. After all it is no different from other single-interest political parties that is, of course, if full membership does include people of different races.

The point at which culturalism cannot be tolerated is when these beliefs make the next shift in the Cultural Turn. This occurs when the race category is taken into our

democratic institutions, right into the very constitution of democracy itself. There is a range of mechanisms for this. The recent idea that the Treaty of Waitangi is a partnership with principles is the most effective, despite being wrong. Along with a self-interested 'history' promulgated by the Waitangi Tribunal, the inclusion of Treaty principles in legislation have effectively ensured that all areas of government policy and practice are racialised. And the new professional class in both the Labour and National parties not only allowed this to happen but were the ones who did it.

How can this complete turn from universalism to racialisation occur in a country that took justifiable pride in its democratic character? What other developed country has taken the Orwellian step of treating tribalism as progressive?

It is a bewildering state of affairs and cannot be easily answered. I have spent two decades applying a sociological analysis to this bizarre phenomenon. According to this analysis, one that I am not alone in holding, the answer lies in the nature of biculturalism as a myth, a belief system, and in the people who needed that belief system.

Explaining biculturalism as a political movement is insufficient. Its evangelical character, its refusal to accept criticism even in the face of evidence that shows its social justice ideals were mistaken, provides some clues.

Biculturalism is a religious retreat for the secularised ex-socialist and the newly conservative 'liberal' alike. By understanding biculturalism as a belief system one can explain why it doesn't need to be logical (beliefs by their very nature are not subject to the rules of logic) and why it has become so pervasive despite meaning different things to different people.

If biculturalism were logical, the evidence that it has not led to social justice and racial inclusion would have seen it criticised and abandoned. (The emergence of the neotribal elite, the growth of Maori in poverty, the failure of Maori language policy are all indicators that the progressive ideals of the early biculturalists have failed.)

If illogical, the answer must lie outside logic – in an act of faith that does not require justifying – it simply is. And this is where biculturalism is now – something that pervades our public institutions but because it is immune to criticism and rejection, is fundamentally anti-democratic. Like religion, biculturalism can remain a belief system for those who want to believe in it but again like religion it should not be part of our secular political system.

### **3. A loss of nerve**

Who were the liberals of both the Left and the Right who embraced biculturalism with such religious-like commitment? They were a professional class with opportunities that have never existed before in history and may never exist again. Raised in the prosperous and peaceful decades of the 50s and 60s, with free university education as a right, they encountered a deep and irresolvable paradox. Their universalist ideals were attuned to the struggles of all working people who went before in laying the foundations for the fair and just society these babyboomers now enjoyed. But - their economic interests were fundamentally at odds with those ideals.

Middle class in education, lifestyle, and ambition but with origins in the memories of their working-class parents' Depression and war days, the new professional class avoided confronting the paradox of "doing good by doing well" by taking the decisive side-step from class to culture. By the 1980s they had become the governing class with

the power to put distributory politics into practice. But retaining a class perspective would have forced them to see the extent of their own economic self-interest so they left their commitment to distributory politics behind and took up the cudgels on behalf of 'culture'.

As the 1970s' global economic downturn began affecting the new professional class, the moral certainty that has previously been reserved for class politics found an equally fulfilling outlet in the politics of race, religion and tradition. Shifting the focus from the class politics of economic distribution to identity, to ethnicity, to gender, to sexuality, to conservation, enabled this class to maintain the moral highground in social justice claims. But those claims remained hollow. The only means to social justice, as the Labour Party used to know, is in the ownership and control of public resources and the use of those resources for distributory politics. Employment and wages – the fundamental interests of Labour – went off the agenda.

Commentators such as Russell Jacoby could confidently announce the death of a class that had been over a century in the making. In his words: 'We are witnessing not simply the defeat of the Left, but its conversion and perhaps inversion'. It was a philosophical betrayal of mammoth proportions. Here was the only generation to enjoy the full fruits of the centuries-old struggle for democracy. At the height of their wealth and power the new professional class took the money and ran. As they did they abandoned those left in a decimated and impoverished working and under-class to the full force of the market. They also left the next generation to that uncontrolled market: to uncertain employment, to out-of-control house prices, and to a corrupted political philosophy.

What were the different responses to the liberal guilt caused by this failure of intellectual nerve? For some Labour's embarrassingly hasty embrace of market politics in the 80s offered a quick way out. The move from Labour to Act was not actually a great leap after all. Others, who stayed with the older ideals of social justice through distributive politics resolved their guilt in the Cultural Turn.

Such a total turn-about from democratic modernism to the reactionary modernism of tribalism and race can not be explained by one cause alone however. It was not just the professional class' new economic interests as a middle class that are sufficient to explain the shift from class to culture. The Cultural Turn was too great a shift from the democratic universalism into which the new professional class was born and from which it profited so richly to be so easily explained.

So why did they do it? The explanation is complex. There were a number of causal factors that came together at this particular historical movement. One factor was that this was a *new* middle class. The vulnerability of that newness was not helped by the insecurity that was already eating round the edges of their prosperity. Jobs for life, regularly increasing salaries, comfortable superannuation – all those entitlements of a privileged class seemed less permanent as the 1970s decade came to an end. Their parents' Depression memories, jokingly mocked in the halcyon 60s earned a new respect.

A second factor was the existential angst of the modern individual – one long recognised by sociologists. It is not easy being modern – where each person is his or her own moral and intellectual authority. Throwing off the priest, the patriarch, and the parent comes at a cost. In his great 1784 essay 'What is Enlightenment', Immanuel Kant had urged people to throw off the tutelage of others and 'Dare to Know'. But daring to know requires courage. It is easier to be told what to think. The call of the traditional as a

romanticised Arcadia is an easy drug. It softens the hard task of being a rational individual responsible for the modern public space and its democratic politics.

The “hankering for an Arcadia” is not confined to the post-war new middle class. Marx saw how the similar 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romantics were easy prey to the romantic drug. Today’s romanticism has a contemporary form in digital utopianism. Substituting technology for civilisation is not new of course. Goebbels’ reactionary modernism contained this same mixture of ethnic romanticism and modern technology. The neotribal corporations take a similar approach.

A third factor was the new professional class’ very intellectualism. Like the cynics of Ancient Greece, the postmodernists of the 1980s and beyond exhibit the same cynicism as, losing their intellectual nerve, they turn against the objectivity of science. The provisional truth of science is replaced by various “knowledges”. “Who knows” takes precedence over “what is known” – the justification for emptying out knowledge from the New Zealand curriculum and for using the curriculum to promote biculturalism.

History is demoted from an academic discipline with its justifying procedures and methods to self-interested “narratives” that mix truth, half-truths, and opinion foregoing the scrutiny and criticism to which real historical inquiry must be subjected. The Waitangi Tribunal stands guilty of this as its interpretation of our past provides biculturalism’s creed.

And finally, the new professional class was undone by the “personal is political” mantra. The very existence of the “public” in modern democracies requires the separation of public and private, of religion and state. Collapsing one into the other weakens both. Secular civil society is essential to safe-guarding the public realm. Once belief systems cross over into the public space and enter our political institutions, the essential character of those institutions is weakened.

Belief systems are not available for criticism – you either believe or you don’t. Democratic institutions, on the other hand, are based not on belief but on the modern commitment to rationality and all that that involves – criticism, accountable authority, change.

Bringing biculturalism, a belief system, into those institutions has subverted that rationality and with it, the democratic political system based upon rational concepts: the public, the secular, the citizen, the universal . . .

#### **4. Conclusion**

The problem with biculturalism is not that it has not delivered the promised social justice – that was never going to happen. The problem is that it became a belief system for a new professional class that lost its intellectual nerve and its political way. The Cultural Turn of the Labour Party follows from that as does the shallow pragmatism of the National Party. Both parties have betrayed their philosophies although my interest today is to focus only on the Labour Party.

That party’s social democratic ideals require the concepts of 1. universalism, 2. The public (*demos* not *ethnos*), and 3. The material resources that make the ideal of the public a reality. It gave those away in the Cultural Turn. Only with a foundation in a unified New Zealand public can the distributive ideals of the Labour Party make sense. The New Zealand population may consist of diverse peoples but the public consists of

one people. That unity justifies the public ownership of the country's resources and the fair distribution of the products of those resources – products that include employment and fair wages and conditions – the basis of Labour politics.