



WITH IDEAS, LABOR CAN THINK ABOUT WINNING

This is an edited extract of the opening address for the Australian Fabian Society's national policy conference, which starts in Melbourne on Friday.

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"They are massing at the gates of Vaucluse, hoisting the black flag, and while the millionaires tremble in their mansions, they are bellowing out their terrifying demands. 'We are here,' they scream, 'to cut your taxes'."

So writes the American Thomas Frank (with my localisation) in his recent book *What's the Matter with Kansas?* Frank is explaining how US neoconservatives conned an army of ordinary people in middle America to vote against their own economic interests. Think evangelical, vote managerial!

"Strong defence, free markets, lower taxes, smaller government, family values." Ten words (courtesy of the American linguist George Lakoff) that summarise conservative politics the world over. From Washington to Wagga Wagga, these words are so well-known and well-rehearsed we can all unpack their larger meaning.

As we know, family values apparently has nothing to do with helping working families, giving every child a fair chance, stopping domestic violence or preventing one in six children growing up in a jobless household. Apparently it stands for opposition to abortion and homosexuality.

This is not an accident. This is the product of thousands of person years of research, billions of dollars of investment and all the marketing brilliance for which Americans are famous.

Welcome to the world of conservative think tanks. It's big, it's co-ordinated and it's relentless. Opinion pieces in every newspaper, talking heads for every current affairs TV show, and talking points for every politician and talk-radio shock jock. Every day.

Forgive my fascination with American writers, but I've just come back from a few weeks in the US and Britain meeting progressive think tanks and, by implication, learning about their larger, better-funded opponents.

I could do the same in Australia on my lunch break. Clive Hamilton at the Australia Institute is the only person in the entire country employed full-time thinking and writing about progressive politics – and much of that is closer to the Greens than Labor.

By contrast, the Centre for Independent Studies, the Institute of Public Affairs and other conservative equivalents have about 25 people active almost daily in major newspapers and behind the scenes in the Howard Government.

It wasn't always this way. In 1972, Gough Whitlam came armed with a bevy of policies for outer suburban services and universal health care and the values of a modern, tolerant democracy. It was the product of a decade work.

In 1983, as Bob Hawke was ruminating on the wonders of "national reconciliation" in a campaign meeting, he was cut short by Neville Wran's rasping voice: "Bob, if they wanted spirituality, they'd join the F---ing Hare Krishna, give 'em a tax cut!"

Actually, people want both – a sensible set of reforming policies and a coherent set of values that explains them. Hawke brought both. A son of the manse with passionate beliefs about right and wrong and a set of well-crafted policies addressing the challenges of the times – the Accord, Medicare and so on.

With clear values and reforming policies, they did something that has happened less frequently in 60 years than *Makybe Diva* has won Melbourne cups – win Labor a federal election from Opposition.

But this didn't happen in an afternoon, or even in the six months before an election. It was the product of years of work by an army of supporters. Whether it was John Deeble and Richard Scotton developing the original Medibank or Ralph Willis and Bill Kelty working on the Accord, the ideas engine was cranking in the background for a long time before it saw the light of day. And in that sense the health of the ideas engine is always an indicator for Labor's electoral position.

The good news is that the ideas engine is starting to turn over again. Whether it's the top-level policy effort that Kim Beazley has Lindsay Tanner leading or the three think tanks that are in the process of being resourced, the hard work is starting to happen. And to Mark Latham's chagrin, much of it is being led by young people.

This creates opportunities for Labor supporters to get on the train with their minds and their wallets and stoke the boilers, rather than sit on the sidelines and complain. We have a long way to go, but the sooner we start, the sooner we'll finish.



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