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The Treaty Process and the limits of Australian Liberalism

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I understand that this series is about the Treaty process and obstacles to that process moving forward. I think everyone would agree that one of the major obstacles in the current political circumstances is the Liberal Party and the current Prime Minister. What I want to do, in a sense, is to talk about that in terms of the Liberal Party's view of Indigenous issues, of which the Treaty process is a part. So I am not going to talk about the Treaty process so much as about the way in which the Liberal Party approaches Indigenous issues, in terms of things which I think lie deep in the philosophical heritage of the current party.

This comes out of a larger project that I have been working on for longer than I like to remember, on the political imagination of Australian Liberals. It begins with Alfred Deakin and ends with John Howard, and it is partly a story of the exhaustion of a political tradition. In this context I have been thinking a great deal about the difficulties that the current Liberal Party has been having in developing a morally adequate response to the political demands of Indigenous Australians – a response which goes beyond the demands for equal citizenship, with which they can deal.

There are many ways in which you can ask why they cannot develop a morally adequate response, and some of them may be answers in terms of material self-interest, the links between the Liberal Party and the mining and the pastoral industries, but that is not a line of argument that I particularly want to develop. That is not to say that it might not have a lot in it, but it is not what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about, in a sense, the deep philosophical heritage on which the current Liberal Party is drawing.

Moral adequacy is important to contemporary Liberals. In their self-understanding, it has been the Liberal Party's commitment to principles and values that has distinguished it from both the Labor Party and the Country Party, which the Liberal Party conceptualises as parties that are concerned with the pursuit of sectional self-interest. Yet, as I am sure everybody here agrees, in the area of Indigenous policy the current Liberal Parties have been struggling to formulate policies and positions which are morally acceptable to Indigenous and to many non-Indigenous Australians.

Much of the discussion of the reason for this is focused on race. Andrew Markus has published a recent book on *Race and the Howard Government*. What I want to argue today is that I think the difficulties actually are deeper than this – or that, rather, from the Liberals' perspective they do not perceive the problem as being one of race. Race is part of the problem but I do not think it is the core issue for them. In this sense I think that the Liberals are genuine in their own terms when they claim they are not racist. Since the 1960s, settler liberalism has accommodated the demand for non-racially discriminatory citizenship. The problem is that it cannot move beyond this to respond to demands based on either prior occupancy, such as the demand for a Treaty, or demands based on Indigenous peoples' particular experiences of suffering and discrimination which resulted from their status as 'dispossessed people' – that is, experiences of suffering which are different from those of other Australians.

I want to present two lines of argument about the deep reasons for the Liberal Party's problems with this. The first is the way in which the liberalism carried by the Liberal Party conceives of the relationship between the individual, the group and the society. The second is in what I am calling settler liberalism's temporal imagination.

On the first line of argument, regarding the individual, group and society, liberalism is the political thinking which is associated with the broad historical process whereby people were driven, prised or attracted away from various traditional group based identities and social formations, and reconstituted as individuals bearing certain rights and obligations, with the capacity to choose various aspects of their life circumstances. Its historic mission, then, was to free individuals from the obligations and superstitious practices of traditional societies, in order that they and their land might participate in the rational markets of capitalist society.

So liberalism is the philosophy of individualism, and, if followed through, some of its tenets lead to a sort of libertarian anarchism. But in practice it has exerted most of its influence inside bounded nation-states, where it has had to supplement its commitment to the rights and freedoms of the individuals with commitments to various types of group formation. This supplementation takes place at two levels. First, as a key component in the thinking of national governments, liberalism has been supplemented with various forms of nationalism, which legitimate the application of liberal principles to the people inside the state and make them less relevant to those outside. This is an inherently very unstable process, because liberalism's implicit universalism is always in tension with the particularism of the spheres of its application. (The current government is finding this at the moment in terms of trying to manage a stable immigration policy which it is able to defend in coherent terms. But that is not the issue that I want to think about so much as the second.)

The second issue is that inside bounded nation-states, however that boundary is defined – whatever the theories of the nation or the race or the ethnic group that are used to define the boundary – liberalism needs some explanation of what it is that binds people together into a society. Mrs Thatcher's claim that there is no such thing as society is so obviously hyperbolic and counter-factual that it is not politically tenable for most purposes. So modern political philosophies have to reconcile our sense of ourselves as individuals with our membership of our society, our need for identity and autonomy with our need for an interdependence with others. Liberalism's resolution starts with the individual, whose separateness is taken to be self-evident, and it then has to explain the existence of society and justify the demands that society makes on the individual.

Liberalism tackles this problem in two different ways. It relies on the rule of law to provide a basic legal framework to protect individuals' rights from each other and from a potentially invasive and tyrannical state, and it relies on a shared, overarching symbolic structure to hold individuals together in order to maintain and express the unified social order. Isolated individuals become one through shared feelings of loyalty to unifying symbols, such as the race, the monarch or the nation.

I am not going to say anything about the rule of law and ideas of contracting in constructing a liberal society. I am not a legal historian and I am sure you can get better people. It is not the area of liberalism I have been thinking about. What I want to do is talk about how liberalism responds to the symbolic need for social unity.

In the past, Australians across the political spectrum drew on the interlinked discourses of race and ethnicity to define and control the nation's membership and to provide part of the answer to the question of what it is that binds the individual members of the nation-state together. Australia was a white British nation, and this was a self-evident description of the basis of its unity. Since the 1970s, such discourses have been abandoned, with varying degrees of conviction, and we now have a discourse of shared citizenship which is racially neutral. In the past too the shared loyalty to and feelings of affection for the British monarchy provided important symbolic glue. (Though that glue has hardened, or melted or passed its use-by date, whatever glue does.) So what we are left with is the nation as the only potentially unifying symbol to hold together the individual citizens with their individual rights and freedoms to choose their lives.

Since the 1980s we have had a revival of traditional Australian nationalist imagery, and a couple of national jamborees – the 1988 Bicentennial and more recently the Olympics. This revival of nationalist discourse is in part the result of the intensifying of the language of competitive economic liberalism, which increased the need for a compensating language of social unity, and it is in part the result of the collapse of the previously available unifying discourses of race and monarchy. What I want to talk about is the fate of group identifications within this revised language of nationalism.

As I indicated earlier, I accept to some extent that the Liberal Party and Howard are sincere in their commitment to non-racial policy. The problem, I think, lies in their deep-seated difficulties in dealing with group based identities. And here race reappears as one of a possible range of group based identities, which also includes gender, religion, class and ethnicity. Liberalism has problems with all of these, and I want to say something about the ways in which Liberalism has dealt with the problems it has in relationship to some of these other group based identities, to try to illuminate the problems it has with Indigeneity as a group based identity, if you like.

If we look at the Liberal Party's 1988 policy manifesto, *Future Directions* – which I think is actually very useful for understanding the Howard government, because it was produced when they were not under the pressure of government and before the *Mabo* decision changed the terrain of Indigenous politics and led them to have to do more shuffling – we see in that a general dismissal of group identities. *Future Directions* brings multiculturalism and Indigenous issues together under the heading 'Building One Australia', and the theme that runs through the section is that individuals in different social locations should have equal rights and access to entitlements. These, it is clear, are on the basis of their rights as individual citizens, not as members of groups. So the document is as critical of multicultural programs, which 'ensnare individuals in ethnic communities, denying them the opportunity to fully participate in Australian society', as it is critical of what it calls 'the absurd proposition that government can make a treaty with itself in favour of some of the citizens it is elected to serve at the expense of others'. And it has various other well-worn tracks with which it responds to the Treaty.

In that quotation, 'multicultural programs, which ensnare individuals in ethnic communities', I want to draw attention to the word 'ensnare', which is used to describe an individual's relationship to their ethnic community. People's group identifications are not seen as a necessary and inalienable part of their identity formation nor as a source of strength, but as a potential trap, holding them back from full participation in mainstream life, just as liberalism has generally seen traditional society as an impediment to people's participation in modernity. It echoes a comment of Paul Hasluck's – to which Tim Rowse has drawn everybody's attention in various articles – in 1959 in the presidential address to the Anthropology Section of ANZAAS, when Hasluck was struggling to reconcile his own genuine commitment to improving the lives of Indigenous Australians with his deeply held Liberal convictions. I will read you the quotation:

> Looked at from one point of view, the weakness of the old Aboriginal society and of the present-day groups of Aborigines is an advantage. The more it crumbles, the more readily may its fragments be mingled with the rest of the people living in Australia.
>
> From this perspective, the grouping together of Aboriginal people may be become one of the most serious obstacles to social change, creating a handicap in which they are entangled in their own distressing situation like flies on sticky paper. They could fly if only they could get clear of their surroundings, lift themselves free of their past, leaving behind them their present life.

For Hasluck, we see, it is both the group and the past which prevent individuals from reaching their potential for freedom, as the Liberal imagination relegates group based identities to a pre-modern

past.

Future Directions was launched to a country-style theme song. It had a chorus line which reassured a plain man who was bewildered in a rapidly changing world with this recurring theme, 'Son, you're Australian. That's enough for anyone to be.' At one level this seems to be just a rather simplistic exhortation to patriotism, but at another, and I think more significant for my argument, it is a denial of the relevance of identification and affiliations with groups larger than the family and smaller than the nation. Being an Australian and a son, a member of the nation and a member of a family, is enough. It provides all you need in terms of social bonds and group memberships.

It is not only, as I said, Indigenous Australians whose demands are difficult to recognise from this perspective. Race is only one of a possible range of group based identities which Liberalism rejects, including gender, religion, class and ethnicity. The rejection is a rejection of social formations of the individual, for a view of the individual's social formation which is based on notions of agency, choice and personal responsibility. It is a view of individual self-formation which is determinedly pre-sociological and is determined to, in a sense, stay in that pre-sociological space.

The ideal Liberal polity is one in which independent, free-thinking citizens organise together on the basis of shared principles and commitments to the national interest. So again you have individuals and you have the nation. People may have different and legitimate views about what will advance the national interest, but the goal of their political action, to be legitimate according to Liberal Party thinking, is that it must advance the interests of the whole, not the part. And so from this perspective any overt organisation of the part or the group or the section is in some ways illegitimate. In 20th century Australia, the most important target for Liberalism's attacks on illegitimate sectional interest has been organised labour and the Labor Party, which in turn has attacked the Liberals' claims to represent the interests of the whole as a thinly veiled rationalisation for the defence of the special interests of the rich and powerful.

When the demands of second-wave feminism, of non-English speaking Australians and their descendants, and of Aboriginal Australians entered the political agenda in something like their current form in the early 1970s, they were demands based on arguments about structures of domination and inequality in Australia other than class. However, they shared with the earlier working-class politics an attention to the social basis of individuals' identities and life chances. They focused on the way existing legal and social structures limited individuals' capacities for self-fulfilment and they demanded state action to reform these limitations. But they did not see people's social circumstances simply in terms of limitations on their capacities to develop. They also saw them as the basis of their identities and as a source of strength, as in the language of solidarity that the new social movements took from the older labour movement. So demands for reform and for state action were accompanied by a politics of identity in which women, gays, blacks and, before them, workers proudly claimed their shared identities.

In this sense the social movements of the '60s found their natural home in the Labor Party. This is not simply, I am arguing, because Labor is the natural party of reform and challenge in Australia, which is the way the social movement's place in Labor politics is often understood. There is something to that, but I think deeper than that it is because the Labor Party's origins in the politics of class based identity mean that it already has a space to accommodate politics of other forms of social identity. As well as that, Labor was experienced in countering Australian Liberals' arguments about the illegitimacy of sectional interests.

I want to say a little bit more in a minute about the difference between the Labor and Liberal parties in their abilities to recognise group based identities, but I just want to say something briefly about the way the Liberal Party has been able to accommodate the recognition of ethnic identity, because it seems to me it has had not very much problem with this at all.

Since the advent of multiculturalism, Australian settler liberalism has been able to assimilate non-British and then non-European immigrants fairly smoothly into its narrative of a nation built by migrants seeking better lives for themselves and their families, away from the entrenched conflicts

and limited opportunities of old-world societies. To some extent the act of migration had already shorn the immigrants of their traditional affiliations, just as it did for the 19th century British settlers who came to Australia. For some of them, it was a freely chosen journey into modernity; for others, it was a change from one modern location to another.

For the most part, the cultural differences that remained provide no fundamental challenge to the individualism of settler nationalism. The migrations are the result of individual or family decisions, and the new settlers pursue their lives essentially within the framework of possessive individualism – getting jobs, starting families, building homes and businesses, amassing assets, building mainstream modern lives with slightly different accents. The cultural differences which remain are expressed in their home and community organisations, but they do not impinge on the fundamental values and structures of society. And where they do, as in attitudes to women in some of the communities, there is very little support for the rights of the groups to maintain their traditional practices and values.

So the Liberal Party has been fairly easily able to accommodate the claims of ethnic communities by talking about cultural rights, which are then reconceptualised as individual rights – the rights of individuals to maintain or choose their cultural lifestyle. This accommodation it does not seem to me has particularly helped them to respond adequately to Indigenous political demands, but it has increased their own moral conviction that they are neither racist nor ethnocentric, but have in fact embraced a rich racial, ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary Australia.

I will describe my work on Liberal Party philosophy as, in a sense, a work of excavation. I am aiming to uncover the deep structures of emotional conviction which shaped the way the contemporary Liberal Party approaches contemporary issues and, in this instance, the deep reasons for their failure to recognise the moral force of many Indigenous political demands. So excavating down through the Liberal Party's attitude to ethnic difference and social movements of the 1960s, and then further down to another layer, the opposition between middle-class individualism and the class politics of the Labor Party, one comes to what I want to argue is the bedrock of the Liberal imagination, which is Protestantism.

(This bit is very condensed and will probably sound as if it is a bit out of left field, because I have not actually published any of this stuff yet, and it is moderately speculative. So I am actually quite interested in hearing people's response to it.)

The general work that I have been doing on Australian Liberalism includes an argument about the religious foundations of the Australian party system, in which certain of the vices which Protestants attributed to the Roman Catholic Church slipped easily over onto the ALP. This slippage was based on the organisational demands the ALP made on its members, and was later confirmed by the party's visible Catholic membership. I argue that the Australian Liberal imagination is Protestant, but even for those who are not conscious churchgoers, the way they understand the individual's relationship to society and to the group draws on deep Protestant foundations. And this religious underpinning helps explain the strength of their resistance to group based political demands.

In some ways the first group in Australian history with which Protestants had to deal were Irish Catholics, and by looking at that interaction I think we get insight into the current impasse in Liberal Party imagining and thinking about the claims of Indigenous people. The British liberalism on which Australian Liberals drew had a Protestant history. Unlike the secularist, anti-clerical European liberalism, it was not concerned with freedom from religion but with freedom to follow the religions of one's own conviction, and this meant dissenting Protestantism. Chief among British liberal virtues was that liberals were independent, and whenever this claim was made, religious meanings were brought into play – the argument here really being that British liberalism is intertwined with Protestantism in a way that the European liberalism and religion are, in a sense, kept much more separate. So that whenever a British liberal talks about independence, the independence of religious choice is not far in the background. Claims and statements, I would argue, about the rights of individuals carry an implicit anti-Catholicism which drew on deep-seated

Protestant attitudes to the integrity of individual conscience, hostility to the traditional authority of Catholic priests, and suspicion of Catholicism as superstitious idolatry. Catholics were pre-modern in their religious identifications, and their inability to shed these made their claims to citizenship suspect.

An editorial in the *Vigilant*, which was the monthly magazine of the Australian Protestant Federation, put the Protestant liberal attitude to Catholics very clearly:

> In this respect Roman Catholicism stands alone. Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists and other Protestants go into public life as citizens. They are to be found in all parties. They do not combine for sectional or sectarian purposes, but Romanists do.

In terms of the argument I have been putting, it would be that to be a Presbyterian, a Methodist or an Anglican is to be an individual in one's religious life in a way that to be a Catholic isn't. And so that form of religious identification does not challenge the Liberal notion that there are citizens and there is the polity as a whole, and that is all that you need to make up your imagined political world.

So from this perspective, the social experience and beliefs which shaped the Protestant centre are invisible, while the secular liberal language of citizenship is deployed to render illegitimate the group based claims and identity of Catholics. The *Vigilant* is an Orange publication but it was financed in the 1920s and '30s by Alfred Deakin's son-in-law Herbert Brooks, who was also an important donor to the Nationalists and to the United Australia Party. So I think in a sense, although he is much more explicitly open about the Protestant foundations, the actual logic of the thinking is found right through the Liberal Party and its predecessors, really until the '70s. And I think the thinking is still there. The presence of Catholics in it now has got more to do with the changes in the nature of religion, I think, in some ways. Anyway, we might want to talk about that.

I just want to say a little bit more in relationship to today's argument on the deep narratives which Protestantism and Catholicism carry about the relationship of the individual to the group and to the sacred. For Catholicism, with its roots in the pre-modern rural world, the individual relates to God as a member of a community, whereas for Protestantism the individual seeks and establishes his own individual relationship with God, outside of the community. For Catholicism the individual, however flawed, is embedded in social networks which already contain and reveal God, whereas for the Protestant imagination the individual flounders in a godless world until saved by his own individual acts of faith. For Catholicism, to leave the community, to be excommunicated, is to lose the connection with God, but the Protestant must always be prepared to defy the community to find God. For Protestants, then, belief is deeply a matter of choice in a way that for Catholicism it is not. These differences, I suggest, are embedded in the deep narrative structures of people's self-understandings, whether they are consciously religious or not. And, I am wanting to argue, that sort of Protestant narrative of the relationship between the self, the group and the sacred is deeply embedded in the way the Liberal Party understands the relationship between individuals and groups. (I am not an anthropologist, but I think the deep religious narratives that the Liberal Party is carrying also help explain why it seems to be totally blind to the discourse about the sacred that is part of Indigenous claims – it actually cannot hear those narratives, in the way it has not been able to ever hear Catholic religious narratives. It is one of the big dialogues of the deaf, if you like, that have defined our Western history.)

The underlying logic of Protestant Liberalism, with its emphasis of free-thinking, independent men, then, makes it impossible to recognise group based identities as legitimate, as other than traps for the weak-minded and ignorant or excuses for those who lack the strength of will and moral courage to take a stand. So generally what I am just wanting to argue is that the political philosophy that the Liberals carry, based on the fiction that society is a free association of individuals, has no easy place for identity politics, for political demands which flow from social differences, which they always regard as secondary and never primary and whose assertion is thus taken as a threat to the logic

which underpins the polity as a whole.

So the fundamental position of individual choice and moral agency in the Protestant imagination makes it pre-sociological in a way that the Catholic imagination is not. It is interesting, in thinking about this line of argument, to notice the important role that Catholic lawyers have played in Indigenous politics. There seems to be a basic sympathy of understanding there, and the Protestant legal establishment seems to be essentially out of sympathy, as is the Liberal Party.

The second line of argument – which is not as complicated or as long – about deep impediments in the Liberal Party thinking is about the temporal imagination which is carried by the Liberal Party. As I said earlier, liberalism's historic mission was to prise individuals out of their traditional societies and free them to participate in the relationships directed towards material and technological progress. Liberalism is an optimistic creed, which sets its face resolutely to the future and the benefits of progress. It developed in societies in which the past was all around people, and in which a deep-rooted conservatism had rival ways of connecting the past with the present and future. Transported to a new country, to a country without history as far as the colonisers were concerned, liberalism's arguments for the rights of the future became the country's common sense and flourished unchallenged for the first 180 years of settlement. (In some ways, that is an adaption of Louis Hart's fragment thesis.)

So running right through Australian settler liberalism is the belief that the future is more real and more exciting than the past or present, that in a new, young country we should put the past behind us and keep our eyes fixed firmly forward. This belief made a great deal of psychological sense in a country of immigrants, who had indeed put their past behind them, and for most of whom in the 19th century there was no going back. I think there is a deep psychological need to make a line between the past and the future that Australian settler society was based on.

Faced with contemporary Indigenous Australians' demands, it is very difficult for contemporary Liberals not to see the pre-modern traditions as holding people back rather than as sources of strength with the potential to change and adapt. If we add to this the axiomatic belief in the virtues of material progress that characterises the liberalism of British settler societies, we see the difficulty at the level of the temporal imagination which Liberals have in understanding the position from which Indigenous Australians are coming. It is very difficult, it seems to me, no matter what they say, for contemporary Liberals not to think that Aboriginal society is backward – as we see in the regular lapses of Liberal and National Party spokespeople into comments about the failure of Aborigines to develop farming or the wheel. It is almost impossible from this perspective for them to recognise that Indigenous culture has anything to offer contemporary Australia.

That, it seems to me, is the latent meaning of Howard's continual stress on the term 'disadvantage', which is very overused by him. It is partly that he has phrases which he uses all the time, but it seems to me that as he has learnt that he has to say that there is richness in traditional society and there are contributions to be made, he also continues to use the term 'disadvantage', and that it carries a latent meaning. Again and again he says nobody can deny the disadvantage still experienced by many Aboriginal Australians. The word 'disadvantage' tolls like a bell through his statements, insistently repeated such that it seems to carry two meanings. One is the ostensible reference to health, housing and employment, to the practical problems amenable to practical solutions. But I think the other meaning is that the Aboriginal people were and are disadvantaged and backward people who need help to be brought up to 'our' standards and take their place in the modern world.

Australian settler liberalism has set its eyes firmly on the future and the benefits of progress, and it has been little challenged by rival ways of understanding time, by strong, well-argued claims for the benefits of preserving and conserving aspects of existing experience, nor by claims based on historic wrongs. Faced for the first time with such claims and arguments being strongly put, settler liberalism has found it very difficult to respond and, under the pressure of the demand to think hard about the past, it seems to me to have almost lost the ability to think about the future at all.

This is most dramatised by John Howard's very public struggle to hang on to accepted versions of Australian history, and some of this difficulty may be actually particular to him. (It may be that when he goes and is replaced it will change. It may not; I am not convinced about that.) It has been John Howard's fate to become Prime Minister at a period in the nation's history when the past is pressing heavily on the present, when Indigenous peoples' historically based claims are refusing to go away. So Howard has been forced to think about the past and about Australian history, and it is not something he would have ever chosen to do, in my view. If you look at him before he becomes Prime Minister, he never says anything about history – only as he becomes Prime Minister and circumstances force him to think about the past. And in the main his response has been to focus on and reinforce the idealised past of the Australian nation, and to see the history as one of a triumph of progress and peaceful settlement, much as it was taught to him in school in the '40s and '50s. As he said in one place, 'I take a more optimistic view of our past than some do.'

Howard's preferred stance is the normal one of facing the future with optimism. The past, I think, for Liberalism is generally there just to lend teleological momentum to the present and to provide heroes like Menzies and Don Bradman to grace commemorative occasions and to refer to in headmasters' addresses and such things, but that is about it. Had John Howard been a little more psychologically literate and careful – we could, I think, only be 'optimistic' about the future – he might have said, 'Well, if I have to think about the past, then I will prefer to have it idealised.' It has become clear as Howard's Prime Ministership has progressed just how much he has invested in the idealised past to which he is linked by his own family's history: the battlefields of World War I and the boom years of the 1950s. And although he has no obvious family links to 19th century pioneers who laid the basis of today's rural communities, he understands their descendants' need to hang on to an idealised past.

Since he became Prime Minister he has worked very hard to protect his idealised past from contamination by the new awareness of the history of Australia's Indigenous people. The cost, though, I think has been not just an impoverished understanding of the past but, at the moment, a loss of the capacity to imagine the future, as we saw in his flat, uninspired performance during the Federation Convention and as we saw in the recent Budget, which was more concerned with rewarding the efforts of the deserving elderly than with offering any assistance to people attempting to build futures in economic circumstances much, much more difficult than those faced by their parents and grandparents.

So in this, in a sense, blanking out of the future that seems to me to be a characteristic of the current Liberal Party, I think we can see an ironic reversal of the problem the paper was mainly concerned to address, which was the obstacle settler liberalism presents to the Treaty process. The Treaty process, or more broadly the demand for an accommodation between settler and Indigenous understandings of the past, has actually now become an obstacle to settler liberalism. Expending so much energy attempting to maintain its idealised past, it has lost its ability to imagine the future.

Discussion Session

Tim Rowse: My comment is directed at your reading of the Liberal imagination through a Protestant formation. It is a really interesting idea, but I must say my first thoughts about it were to think of ways in which your account would have to be complicated to accommodate some awkward facts. One of them is that some of the earliest, strongest and most publicly reputable critiques of assimilationism in practice in the 1960s came from Protestant clergy or from people who were affiliated with the Protestant churches. I have in mind Strehlow, who is not a clergyman but who is definitely a strong Lutheran and worked for the Lutheran Church with Aborigines. That is one point.

What I might be pointing to here is what might be some of the sources for ideological renewal

within Liberalism, because Protestantism is perhaps more various in its manifestations. One contemporary manifestation, if you like, of a different kind of Protestantism from the one that you outlined is the way in which the public discussion on the apology and national forgiveness has drawn on Christian ideas of confession, redemption, and that sort of thing. It seems to me that the Christian formation of the debate about Australia's past and future has more manifestations than those that you noted in that particular alignment of a certain Protestantism with a certain Liberalism.

Judith Brett: I would agree with that. What I presented here is an incredibly condensed part of an argument which suggests that, at the time of the formation of the party system, 1900 to 1910, a particular form of Protestantism was absolutely crucial for laying the imaginative and philosophical groundwork of the current Liberal Party. Postwar the Protestant churches change a great deal and the ecumenical movement means that there is a moral renewal within Protestantism. It is more that prewar 'respectable' Protestantism I am thinking of, which I think is still carried in certain sorts of psychological identity formations of people like Howard. But the notions of confession and redemption and forgiveness come much more strongly out of Catholic traditions than they come out of Protestant traditions. Protestants are not that great on forgiveness.

Tim Rowse: I agree they have a deeper historical resonance with Catholicism, that's for certain.

Judith Brett: Do you think it is Catholics or Protestants that have brought those terms into public life more?

Tim Rowse: I would say that it is both at the moment. Ronald Wilson, of course, is by no stretch of the imagination a Catholic. And the Uniting Church has been very strong on examining its own past and, if you like, making an historical reckoning that is implicitly a demand for forgiveness and atonement. So I think that it comes from both sides.

Judith Brett: But those churches are now, it seems to me, reasonably alienated from the contemporary Liberal Party.

Tim Rowse: Oh yes. That's true.

Christine Winter: I think Lutheranism is the odd one out. Especially in the formation of the nation-states there are different responses of Protestantism to the nation and to being an individual within a worldly authority. Calvinism has a very positive attitude towards the nation, because the church is the centre of the nation. Anglicanism also is embedded within the nation-state, the individual and his freedom in the nation-state accommodate that religion. Lutherans, especially the ones who have come here have had a completely different experience of alienation from authority and the nation, bringing with them a group identity as being marginalised within the nation-state – that is the 'reffos' here from Prussia. They are bringing with them an ethnic identity which is based in religion and language.

Judith Brett: Yes, and it is one of the few actual group migrations.

Christine Winter: Absolutely. Their religion, their language is their ethnicity.

But I was interested when you were saying that in the Catholic system it is the sacred which binds the group, and in Protestantism it is the individual defying the community. I think you can also say that in Protestantism, especially in Methodism, it is morality which glues the group. It is the sacredness in your heart, in your conscience, and this is how you relate to God. What is important is morality, ethics, and this is where the group or your church or your village will judge you. So equality, homogeneity, ethics, law, are already in there in Protestantism. With Protestantism it is in public acting, I think, which glues you into society.

Richard Davis: If you had been giving your paper say 40 or 50 years ago, would you address different strands of liberalism? I am harking back to Tim's comment about what strands of liberalism you draw on. I guess I was constantly thinking, 'Where do institutions or authority and tradition sit in this discourse?' You pitched it at the individual and the nation inaudible] but in fact people realise themselves through the institutional structures they were engaged with. In liberalism

there are strong strands of adherence to particular forms of authority.

The reason I ask is that it seems to me that by working on those themes you can actually enter into some dialogue with Aboriginal social formations, through the recognition of particular forms of authority, particular institutional forms. Why that has not occurred, or where it has occurred, why has it been silenced?

Judith Brett: I would answer that by saying that one of the problems in doing this work is that liberalism is basically the political common sense within which all Australian political thinking takes place, but it is a much richer tradition than that which is carried forward by the Liberal Party. I am trying to just write about the Australian Liberal Party and its predecessors, not Australian liberalism more broadly. A lot of liberal thinking is actually in the Labor Party. So what I would have said 40 or 50 years ago …

Richard Davis: Would you have talked about institutions and authority?

Judith Brett: Yes. The Liberal Party, when you read it, does not say very much about institutional authority. What do you think, Tim? You are the other person here who has thought about these issues.

Tim Rowse: I suppose the authority of the nation-state to make certain demands on its citizens and then to publish them represents such authority.

Judith Brett: Yes. They are much more worried about your obeying the law, but they do not talk particularly about institutions. Although Howard now says they are also conservatives, I don't know that they have been such strong conservatives, in an articulated way that would be recognisable as conservative political thinking. They do not back authority for its own sake; they will back it in terms of the rule of law and constitutionalism. They see themselves as the party of the Constitution and of parliament and of the government's rights to do certain things as an elected government. But they do not put forward arguments about other sorts of traditional institutions. The Labor Party probably does more – the Labor Party is much more prepared to recognise the authority that an organisation can hold over its members.

Tim Rowse: Perhaps one form of authority that does trouble liberalism here is parental authority. One of the things that are most potent in the Stolen Generations story is that it is the state interfering with what parents properly are doing. It seems to me that makes it a very, very difficult task ideologically for Liberalism to respond to that narrative of Australia's history – which I think is why it has put a hell of a lot of resources into trying to make a response. Through the courts, of course, some of the response has ended up being rather technical about what is justiciable and what is not. The only moral narrative that it can respond with is that it was ultimately to the benefit of Aboriginal children that their families were treated in this harsh way.

Judith Brett: Yes, because the family is the only social unit that liberalism is easily able to recognise the authority of. In every other case, institutions are potentially constraining of individual choice.

Richard Davis: So where would the Liberal Party have sat in relation to the monarchy? Where does that wellspring …

Judith Brett: Well, the monarchy becomes part of what provides the overarching national symbolic framework. Individuals are loyal to it and can join voluntary associations to express that loyalty. But I think that it is not like the British Conservative Party, where there is much more of a sense of institutions which are embedded in social history and embedded in people's identities. Somehow, in the process of migration all we got was liberalism. I don't think we got any conservatism at all. When people talk about Australian conservatism, it makes sense in the Australian context but it does not bear any relationship to what conservatism means in any other societies. Maybe it is starting to now, with Howard. Maybe now there is something that he can be trying to preserve in terms of the memory of World War I, but I think this is fairly new.

Phil Home?: I found your talk interesting too. In a sense I also found it a little depressing, because if carried through it would suggest that, for example, the prospect of getting the requisite majority in a referendum would be very remote indeed. Then I started to wonder whether you were really talking about Protestantism or whether you were talking about the Anglican establishment, which is a small part of Protestantism. When the discussion focused on individuals – Tim made reference to Sir Ronald Wilson – I started to think of other Protestants in the Liberal Party. You talked a lot about Howard, but Costello comes from a Protestant family also, and he has been quite happy to make clear his different perception of issues such as reconciliation. I wonder whether it isn't generational or simply Howard's, whether you are too sweeping in making these generalisations about Protestantism, particularly when one looks, for example, at Costello.

Judith Brett: One of the things I would argue is that this argument is about the party, not the bulk of the Australian people. It may be that I have been captured by the shape of the century and want to give a compelling narrative shape to the fin de siecle exhaustions of tradition. From Deakin to Howard does seem to be something about a philosophical tradition which once worked and increasingly doesn't. So I am aware that I might be seeing a narrative shape for the purposes of literary form.

The other thing to point out is that the sociological is now part of Australia's common sense. I think most people understand themselves partly sociologically, and I think that is why there is a big response at a popular level to a need for reconciliation. There is a reasonable amount of popular sympathy, in sections, to Indigenous political demands, because people understand themselves as socially formed. There is a huge public, discourse on that. You only have to listen to Geraldine Doogue.

I don't want to make too much of Protestantism, except to say that I think at a deep level in somebody like Howard there are notions of agency and responsibility. It may be that the problem is that, while there is a sociological discourse, you can't live your life in terms of sociological understandings of yourself. Living your life you have to be an agent and you have to operate with understandings of responsibility and agency and choice. There is a very unstable and difficult relationship between these in public policy formation, as there is in how individual people se their lives. I think that is the sort of terrain that the debate about the Treaty and Indigenous Australians is on. It is as if those claims force people to think more sociologically than they necessarily are able to.

I also want to say that Protestantism is a living tradition. People can think different things out of it and can use different parts of the tradition. It has moral discourses that can be renewed. I don't know enough about Peter Costello. I can't read him, really. But clearly the Liberal Party is blocked at the moment, and everybody must realise they have got to do something. Somebody will come up as a circuit-breaker and may be able to regenerate the traditions of liberalism carried by the party. (So I just want to get my book finished before they do!)

Melinda Hinkson: Just following on from that point on the description of personalities, I wonder if you might say a little bit about Malcolm Fraser in relation to Howard, in terms of the trajectory of the Liberal Party's approach. We hear that we have reached a particularly antagonistic moment, and there appear to be a lot of people sprinkled around John Howard almost waiting for the pressure valve to go – for a new emergence of a fresh perspective.

Judith Brett: That is interesting, because I have been realising recently that I have got to think more about Fraser. I think he is really interesting, because it is as if when he was in the leadership of the party he was locked into these adversarial modes of thinking which our parliamentary system locks people into. Somehow, once he got out of the position of power, he has been able to think much more openly and freely. He clearly thinks that there are capacities within the Liberal Party tradition to deal with these sorts of issues. It may be that the party is just going through a dry patch, as Labor did. One of the difficulties in doing this work is that, if you write about the Labor Party, you actually have various people who have had a go at trying to map the ups and downs of the party; you have a century-long account with some ideas that you can play off. It is very difficult writing

about the other side because we have got so little to go on, in a way.

Lisa Strelein: I think it makes the study of the party and traditions of the party very important. I think that some of the things that you have explained show that not all politicians think about their personal ideology and where that fits, and how they arrived at it. And when they are up on parliament hill they are thinking in terms of the adversarial, in terms of, 'How is this part of the Liberal Party's position directly compared to the Labor Party's?' So I think the traditions of the parties are very important when you are talking about that dynamic of identifying your ideology with the traditions of the party, not necessarily thought through in terms of actually studying the traditions of the party. They are developed from a sense of what they assume the traditions of the party are.

Judith Brett: I think that's right. I think it is also the way political language operates. They have these little phrases which at some level have some connection with party tradition. Political parties' philosophies are just like language in action, in a way. They can end up saying things and committing themselves to positions that they have not actually thought through particularly well.

Partly in answer to Melinda's question as well, I was thinking: the Labor Party was as implicated in White Australia Policy as the Liberal Party, so how does one explain that the Labor Party has been able to actually move much more quickly and adeptly and creatively on this, in a way the Liberal Party just hasn't been? It has been stuck since the 1960s, as far as I can see. That is why I started working on this, trying to understand why Labor was able to move. It was as racist as the others; they all were. Probably the Liberals were actually less racist than Labor in many ways, so how did the Liberals get themselves so stuck in a corner?

Lisa Strelein: Fraser had quite a good position on race while he was Prime Minister, in terms of the work he did for the Commonwealth. I think one of the interesting things about looking at him might be to see why that wasn't a schism in Liberal Party tradition, the way that …

Judith Brett: That Whitlam was for Labor. Yes, that's an interesting point.

Lisa Strelein: His Prime Ministership wasn't defined by that; it was defined more by his opposition to Whitlam, in terms of establishing traditions in the party.

David Campbell: Your paper, with which I concurred, was most exciting. It made me reflect back to my family life in rural western Victorian and discussions there in that time. It made me as well on a book by Anderson in regard to the Cuban missile crisis. He looked at three basic models of decision-making. At the end of the day he brought in another element which I think is important, given what you are saying and the discussions that have been going on here. The decision occurs at the onus of individuals. During the Cuban missile crisis the decisions that were made tended to be dependent on individuals. I think a lot of the elements of different streams within Protestantism come from who is carrying the message, so what elements did they pick up of that Protestant stream to proceed to the argument? I suspect that to explain some of these things that are going on and to overcome some of the apparent inconsistencies may depend on looking at the individuals involved.

Lisa Strelein: That may be one reason why Howard is that epitome of the Liberal Party. I always see him as fairly unimaginative and not visionary in terms of his personal vision, of what he wants to achieve as Prime Minister. Not going in there with an agenda means that those …

Judith Brett: Well, I think he did have an agenda, but it was about tax and fiscal things. He made a couple of comments on history as he was shaping the '96 election, but I think he was interested in economic issues. He had been Treasurer. But because they got rid of all their social liberals in the '80s, I think that partly explains why in party terms they were in such trouble once they got into parliament. He didn't have any people who had thought about this. I don't think any of them had thought about it. That's my sense.

Geoff Gray: Just following on from some of the things that have been said: Tim started out on reconciliation, and I see reconciliation as entirely Catholic agenda. It has all that Catholic language

about it – redemption and sorrow. And it *is* driven by Dodson and a Jesuit priest, Brennan, and of course the Catholic Prime Minister. I think also, that Howard is talking against Keating so often. I'm stunned by the way that he still talks against Keating. Keating is so prominent in his mind, in terms of the narrative that he wants to develop about Australia's past. He returns to it time and time again. He doesn't like history; he will talk about [inaudible].

Judith Brett: This probably sounds hyperbolic, but I thought that the whole political-correctness discourse was a deeply Protestant discourse. And the way those people like Blainey and Paddy McGuinness, even Gerard Henderson – I don't know how these Catholics became so Protestant!

Geoff Gray: It is like Robert Manne. He is such a Protestant it is embarrassing to read him.

Judith Brett: But they all started complaining about how they had to stand out against oppressive voices. There was a discourse of persecution that went along with that stuff on political correctness, which I always saw as partly like the 'Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone'. You could hear it in the back of Blainey's head, it seemed to me, as he faced yet another round of people attacking him.

I just wondered if any of the people here or at any other organisation have done any poll work on whether religious differences show up in the attitudes to reconciliation, or whether, like in other stuff now, the big difference is in whether people are churchgoers or not. My sense would be that now through the churches they are all pretty committed to reconciliation, and so what you are getting is a sort of residual Protestantism carried in the personality.

Lisa Strelein: I think that is something that can drive the ecumenical side of it. It is one of the things that the churches can agree on. So I don't think the churches would be the most likely place to do that sort of polling, and I don't know where because it's not necessarily supportive.

Judith Brett: Yes, they wouldn't want to know.

Christine Winter: Reconciliation, I think, if you look at the South African context and even the German context after World War II, seems to need and benefit from the involvement of churches. It is a bit like an umpire on the playing field. It seems the churches were able to reassure people about the direction or the possibility of reconciliation. I am not surprised that reconciliation over here has a lot of spiritual symbols but also church involvement, because you need an Überbau to reconcile to.

Russell Taylor: There being no other questions, it falls to me on your behalf to thank Judy. It was a very interesting and, I might add, different approach to issues surrounding the Treaty. For me it went part of the way to explain perhaps why the Liberal-Coalition government respond to some Indigenous voices and not others, and I think that is worthy of exploration and further research as well. Judy, on behalf of the group and on behalf of the Institute, can I say thank you very much indeed.

Judith Brett: Thank you for inviting me.