

The rise of the religious right in Australia

God Under Howard by Marion Maddox

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A recently published book charting the rise of Christian fundamentalism in Australia offers a timely examination of what has become a striking feature of contemporary political life. Marion Maddox, a religious studies scholar at New Zealand's Victoria University, looks at the creeping influence of the religious right and its role in the political "success" of Prime Minister John Howard.

God Under Howard tackles something of a political conundrum: why have the nostrums of the religious right—re-branded as "family values"—gathered support for a government whose economic policies are ranged squarely against the interests of the vast majority of the population?

In its own way, Maddox's book is reflective of broad sentiments of opposition to the promotion of right-wing theology and obscurantism. Only two months ago, 70,000 scientists, teachers and academics published an Open Letter in Australian newspapers calling on the Howard government to block creationism—or "intelligent design"—from inclusion in high school science curricula. The teaching of creationism threatened to "throw open the door of science classes to similarly unscientific world views—be they astrology, spoon-bending, flat-earth cosmology or alien abductions—and crowd out the teaching of real science."

Maddox's book seeks to raise the alarm, exposing the significant influence that the Christian right now exercises over official politics. While Catholic and Protestant church congregations have shrunk, new evangelical mega-churches like Hillsong have tapped into widespread economic uncertainty, finding followers among layers of the population who are leading an increasingly precarious existence.

God Under Howard establishes that the high profile enjoyed by religion under the Howard government is motivated by definite political—not religious—concerns.

Since his Liberal-National coalition first rode to office on the back of an historic anti-Labor vote at the 1996 federal election, Howard has molded an unstable constituency for his own government on the basis of a grab-bag of slogans and prejudices carefully defined as "mainstream values". Anti-immigrant racism, tightening censorship codes, discriminatory policies against same-sex marriages, the gutting of welfare under the banner of "mutual obligation" and the prosecution of illegal war in Afghanistan and Iraq under the auspices of a dubious "war on terror," have been hallmarks of his government.

Religion is just one of the many cards played by Howard to try and deflect the emergence of a class based response to the growth of social inequality and war.

Maddox demolishes Howard's "white picket fence" mythology. Her book refutes the benign image promoted by liberal political commentators and academics that Howard's reactionary social policies are a product of his traditional Methodist upbringing. Such an image is comforting, writes Maddox, because its advocates can believe that his policies will simply disappear with Howard's eventual departure from office.

God Under Howard demonstrates that the Methodist church of

Howard's boyhood bears scant resemblance to the conservative social values espoused by the Liberal Party of today. The Methodist church of the 1950s and 1960s was associated with far more "inclusive" policies. It embraced, in line with layers of the Australian bourgeoisie, opposition to the "White Australia" policy and support for international co-operation and Aboriginal reconciliation, while expressing concerns about the unfettered operation of the capitalist market.

Maddox's detailed research reveals a Howard family background opposed in its views to those of the Methodist church. The family's credo was the type of material self-advancement advocated in the pages of the *Saturday Evening Post*, which was delivered to Howard's parents, owners of a suburban garage, each week and read religiously in their Earlwood home. Maddox writes: "Their politics had more to do with small business. The garage, which had been in the family since the 1930s, was coming into its own, as family cars became the emblem of a secure, prosperous future. The 1949 promise to end petrol rationing was surely not the only bond between Menzies and this nuclear unit of his 'forgotten people'—rather it stood for a range of shared commitments: hard work, family pulling together, suspicion of those who want 'something for nothing'."

The true constant in John Howard's political evolution, as Maddox makes clear, is his commitment to free market policies. Her chapter on Howard's tortuous climb to the Liberal leadership (he won and then lost the parliamentary party's top post during the mid-80s before finally reclaiming the leadership in 1995) makes the point that social conservatism was not initially Howard's defining feature. As Treasurer in the Fraser government between 1977 and 1982, then Deputy PM until the Fraser government's 1983 defeat, Howard's public profile was forged in financial portfolios. Indeed this was the central problem that Howard had to confront: how to establish a firm political base for his advocacy of right-wing economic policies, both within the party and, more problematically, in the electorate at large.

Maddox examines Howard's rise within the context of the transformation of the Liberal Party during the 1980s and early 90s. While the Labor Party and trade unions were shedding the last vestige of their previous reformist programs, a no less thoroughgoing change was being effected in the ranks of the conservatives. The 1980s saw the purge of party "wets" and the ascendancy of the Liberal "dry" faction, a process culminating in the 1990 election of Dr John Hewson to the Liberal leadership. Hewson's aggressive *Fightback!* program, including a broad-based consumption tax, hefty corporate tax cuts and regressive industrial relations reforms, served as the party's 1993 election campaign platform. The result was a third consecutive defeat for the conservatives in what had been widely regarded as an "unloseable" election. Hewson's naked advocacy of free market policies was denounced as "divisive" by powerful sections of the ruling class and Howard was foremost among those who realised that economic reform required substantial re-packaging.

“Selling the dry agenda is challenging,” writes Maddox. “To voters, even by the early 1990s, it had come to mean relentless pressure and increasing insecurity. Terms like ‘change’, ‘reform’ and ‘efficiency’ suddenly took on new meanings, all seemingly euphemisms for fewer permanent jobs, more contract work, longer hours and the threat of unemployment if you didn’t play along... If the Liberal Party members expressed little dissent about the agenda itself, divisions emerged over how to inoculate the people against its effects.”

Hewson’s attempt at combining right-wing economic policies with support for abortion, gay rights and working mothers fell flat. Based as they were on an underlying defence of widening economic and social inequality, such policies made their appeal to relatively small and privileged social layers.

From the mid-1980s, Howard sought to develop “a particular brand of social cohesion as the counterbalance to the insecurities fostered by globalisation”. This was behind his 1985 campaign for cuts to the Asian migration intake on the grounds that the Australian population did not have the “capacity to absorb change”. But, Maddox argues, in 1985 such overt racism smacked of extremism and was successfully marginalised, with Howard himself removed from the Liberal leadership.

How did Howard pass, in the space of a decade, from the “policy fringe” to the Lodge (the prime minister’s Canberra residence)? Maddox argues the religious right played a central—though widely unacknowledged—role. Right-wing Christian organisations launched “a series of carefully engineered controversies, which brought the social conservative agenda to prominence”.

As in the United States, the rise of Australia’s religious right has coincided with its successful exploitation of a series of “wedge” or “values” issues that have seen it seize political turf, portraying itself as the defender of a silent majority, wronged by politically correct and selfish elites. “The emphasis on ‘family’, ‘values’ and ‘social stability’,” Maddox writes, “played a key role in rebranding far-right social conservatism as ‘mainstream’.”

Maddox shows how the Lyons Forum, established by conservative Christian MPs (and backed by figures such as mining magnate Hugh Morgan), tapped into widespread anger and resentment toward the Labor government and its pro-business agenda, seeking to divert these sentiments in a right-wing direction. *God Under Howard* chronicles the list of wedge issues manufactured by the Lyons Forum to re-package and smuggle in right-wing economic policies.

While Maddox sets out to examine the “intersection between religion and politics” she is unable to grasp the essential cause of the growth of the religious right, which lies in the utter collapse and prostration of the Labor and trade union bureaucracies. The supposed strength of the religious right is, in fact, a contradictory expression of a gaping political vacuum, resulting from the disintegration of Labor reformism.

The very existence of a disenfranchised, confused and alienated public was the outcome of Labor’s far-reaching assault on the gains and social conditions of the working class, particularly during the 13 years of the Hawke and Keating governments from 1983 to 1996. Moreover, if anti-immigrant sentiment were suddenly more saleable in the mid-1990s, as a result of economic insecurity, this was largely because the Labor government had already made the connection loud and clear. Keating established a mandatory detention regime for “illegal” immigrants and introduced pre-dawn immigration swoops on homes and workplaces. The trade unions supported these and other measures, demanding large cuts to immigration under the banner of protecting “Aussie jobs” (a campaign aimed at covering up its own collaboration with employers in large-scale job destruction). The Keating government’s measures were introduced in the midst of the 1990-91 recession when unemployment hit double-digit figures for the first time in the post-war era.

So decrepit is the Labor Party, lacking support in the working class, that

its leaders, including opposition leader Kim Beazley, have begun loudly proclaiming their own “religious faith”, attempting to court the same evangelical constituency as Howard.

Maddox recounts that Labor MPs, stretching back to the early 1990s, rendered crucial support to the Lyons Forum, which became a key player in the emergence of Australia’s religious right.

Founded in 1992 by disaffected Liberals including Senator John Herron, Kevin Andrews, Alan Cadman and Chris Miles, the Forum’s initial 60 members included Peter Costello (now Treasurer), Tony Abbot (Health Minister) and Nick Minchin (Finance Minister). Its early designation by press gallery reporters as a “the Coalition’s ultra-conservative Christian faction” was based on the well-known religious affiliations of its leading lights. Yet, Maddox explains, Forum members deliberately downplayed their religious connections. The approach emulated that of the American religious right whose “1980s Moral Majority-style pulpit-thumping gave way during the 1990s to a more strategic, neutral rhetoric. Successor organisations to the Moral Majority, such as Focus on the Family and the American Christian Coalition, began to advise their officers and members to avoid explicitly religious language as potentially alienating to secular voters.”

The Forum received ideological support from the ALP a number of key fronts. Its first major salvo, a 1993 petition for a ban on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation broadcast of the Gay Mardi Gras during “family viewing time,” won backing from a group of 20 Labor MPs led by Mary Easson. This issue helped the Lyons Forum in its bid to oust Hewson from the Liberal leadership and to sideline that party’s few remaining social liberals. Simultaneously, it assisted in the construction of the Forum’s “mainstream” image.

The rise of the Christian-fundamentalist-backed Howard faction is a story of abject capitulation by the Labor Party. Both in government and opposition, Labor established a well-worn pattern of falling in line with pet projects of the Christian right. By 2000, Maddox writes, “the Lyons Forum members wisely kept quiet and let the ALP conservatives write the wish-list.” Items on this “wish-list” included stripping back access to IVF treatment, and “a rethink of such comparatively long-established practices as legal abortion”.

Maddox argues that the Christian right’s “number one theological goal” has been the construction of a “religious case for capitalism”. She exposes a network of right-wing think-tanks and religious organisations whose activities, prayer breakfasts, lecture tours, conventions and publications are backed by substantial corporate interests.

Emblematic of the growth of the evangelical movement are the Pentecostal mega-churches like Hillsong, in Sydney’s north-western Hills district, which boasts a weekly congregation of 13,000. While Catholic and Anglican churches continue to register shrinking attendance figures, Pentecostal membership has grown 30 percent in the past decade.

The new churches preach a “prosperity gospel”. Believers see wealth as a mark of God’s favour, and poverty as a sign that the poor have strayed from the path of righteousness—and thus deserving of their fate. Many of the new religious orders, like the Oxford Falls Christian City Church, administer business courses offering “fundamental Biblical principles that will determine the success or otherwise of any successful business.” Hillsong’s senior pastor Brian Houston authored his own book, *You need more Money*, promising to tell “why you need more money and secondly how to get more money”. His regular sermons borrow heavily from the stock-in-trade techniques of motivational speakers and business coaches, with Jesus recast in the image of a money-focussed travelling salesman.

“On the face of it,” writes Maddox, “regressive taxation, reduced welfare and cut-throat competition contradict Christian compassion, altruism and advocacy for the downtrodden. ‘Sell all you have and give the money to the poor’, Jesus instructed a rich man inquiring after salvation. Many Christians were dismayed to find Jesus co-opted in

support of lower taxes for the rich and harsher demands on the poor. It is not immediately apparent why Christian activists would support such campaigns. For the Christian Coalition, a conservative ‘family’ agenda proved a crucial component of its economic activism, but not necessarily because of any obvious connection between social conservatism and economic liberalism. Rather, the former provided a more readily graspable *raison d’être* for right-wing Christian political activism. The economic agenda was then able to follow, less startlingly, in its wake.”

The devastation and uncertainty for masses of people wreaked by Wall Street, requires the comforting certainties promised by “Main Street” social conservatism. As Maddox points out, Wall Street’s Market God “sabotages family and community life and tears away safety nets. It has had to make Olympian room for another deity, one who brings ‘Us’ a renewed sense of the security the Market God took away. The repressive God of racism, authoritarian ‘family values’ and exclusion tries to make ‘Us’ feel secure by turning our anxieties upon ‘Them’... Main Street’s God turns us in on ourselves, distracting us from the hard face on Wall St.”

The Wall Street-Main Street fusion of the fundamentalist churches provided “a philosophical framework which reconciled the apparently contradictory goals of getting government regulation out of the economy and, simultaneously, into the home”.

Maddox’s account unmasks the regressive and anti-democratic agenda behind the public pronouncements on “family vales”. Ross Cameron, the former Liberal MP for Parramatta and once a leading light in the Australian prayer-breakfast circuit, is a case in point. He cut a high public profile “encouraging Aussie men to commit to their women” and “for couples to resist ‘no-fault’ divorce” before he was engulfed in scandal over his own marital infidelity. His more enduring beliefs are those concerning the unfettered sway of the market:

“I’m against the welfare state on humanitarian and religious grounds. The early church had welfare, but it was also tough—Paul said ‘Whoever does not work, does not eat’ [2 Thessalonians 3:10]. I’d pretty much repudiate the concept of social justice, it does more harm than good.... I visited an Aboriginal community five hundred kilometres west of Alice Springs—the dependency I saw there was produced by the strategy of social justice. I’d almost call it evil.”

These medieval views are by no means isolated. The rise of Christian fundamentalist thought from the political fringe to the inner sanctums of government, in both the US and Australia, is a product of intractable social and economic contradictions for which the ruling class has no progressive solution.

It is no accident, for example, that the origins of the prayer-breakfast movement—a major player in the American religious right—can be traced back to explicitly anti-socialist aims. “Prayer Breakfasts began in Seattle in 1935,” Maddox writes, “when evangelist Abraham Vereide was worried that socialists were poised to take over the government. Vereide dreamed of bringing religion to the powerful, turning from Christianity’s historic mission to reach the down and out to minister instead to what he called the ‘up and out’.”

But the dominant policy of the American ruling class in Vereide’s day was expressed in Roosevelt’s New Deal. Its social reforms, aimed at the preservation of capitalist rule, were underpinned by the dominant economic position of American imperialism. Today, the loss of American global hegemony has seen a corresponding rise of religious right organisations throughout the central corridors of the US executive, legislature and judiciary.

Maddox outlines the leading strains of Christian fundamentalist thought, including Dominionism and Reconstructionism, whose zealots, according to one insider, ‘consider democracy a manifestation of ungodly pride’. Dominionists (who believe ‘chosen’ Christians must capture all leading public offices in anticipation of Christ’s second coming) and

Reconstructionists, (who want the Constitution replacement by strict Biblical law) are influential doctrines with well-documented connections to the Bush-Cheney White House. Former Attorney-General John Ashcroft is a Dominionist, while Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia offers opinion, and legal rulings, clearly influenced by tenets of Reconstructionist thought. (In a 2002 article “God’s Justice and Ours”, from which Maddox quotes, Scalia attacked opponents of the death penalty, denouncing democracy’s tendency to obscure “the divine authority behind government”).

As a serious examination of the growth of the religious right, *God Under Howard* is worthwhile reading. Maddox’s own standpoint is that of a humanitarian and her conclusion is essentially an ethical one, appealing to the victory of reason and good sense, rather than the conscious prosecution of the proletarian class struggle: “Howard and the market God have served each other well” she writes, “[u]nderstanding their relationship and how Australia has fallen under their thrall, we can reject market idolatry and reclaim more inclusive, loving ways of life.”

In the final analysis, the growing influence of the anti-democratic nostrums of the religious right reflects the advanced decay of the traditional mechanisms of bourgeois democracy in the face of mounting social inequality. Unable to win mass support for the economic program of Wall St, sections of the bourgeoisie are seeking to build a political movement based on religious obscurantism, social backwardness and deception. But the Devil is in the detail and the program of the religious right aims to deepen the very social distress which it seeks to exploit. A politically independent movement of the working class, fighting for social equality and inspired by the most advanced social and political ideas—that is, scientific socialism—is, in fact, the only sound basis to oppose the growth of Christian fundamentalism and the threat that it poses to the democratic rights of all working people.



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