

An exercise in delusion: Murdoch lauds a new “golden age” of the “free market”

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation selected media tycoon and billionaire Rupert Murdoch to deliver this year's Boyer Lectures, in what was something of a coup for the media baron. First held in 1959, the annual lecture series is intended to allow "a prominent Australian to present their thoughts and ideas on major social, scientific or cultural issues through a series of six radio lectures". Murdoch's presentation, pompously titled "The Golden Age of Freedom" and broadcast between November 2 and December 7, has since been released by the ABC's publishing arm as a book as well as a two-CD audio set.

Much of the News Corporation chief's six hours of publicly-funded airtime consisted of self-serving and platitudinous musings on topics ranging from the significance of information technology, the future of newspapers, and proposed school and higher education reforms.

Murdoch is a thoroughly uncultured individual, and his general ignorance and limited intellectual outlook was evident throughout the series. Remarkably, his six lectures' sole reference to the unfolding world economic crisis was one passing gibe about stock brokers being thrown out of work, and a complacent reference to the "Wall Street mayhem" being "a symptom of an excess that the system is purging". That Murdoch had nothing to say about the most severe capitalist breakdown since the 1930s can perhaps be explained by the fact that the crisis stands as a direct and crushing refutation of one of his lecture series' central themes—that the profit system and the extension of the global "free market" has created a "golden age" which is bringing prosperity to the world's population.

From the standpoint of gaining insight into world political and economic developments, then, there is little to be gained by listening to the Boyer Lectures. But Murdoch, of course, is no mere commentator. His international network of newspapers and cable and satellite televisions networks, which all faithfully echo his political outlook, wield enormous influence over countless national governments—and few more so than the Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

The agenda developed in Murdoch's Boyer Lectures was clearly elaborated in the first lecture, titled, "Aussie rules: bring back the

pioneer". He began by evoking in the most lurid terms the threat to Australia emanating from the rising Asian economies, particularly China and India. "These are people who have known deprivation," he declared. "These are people intent on developing their skills, improving their lives and showing what they can do. And they live right in Australia's neighbourhood."

Murdoch left no doubt that he regarded the only effective response to this threat was to rid Australia and Australians of "welfare dependence". "While a safety net is warranted for those in genuine need, we must avoid institutionalising idleness," he thundered. "The bludger should not be our national icon."

The billionaire's denunciation of "idleness" and "bludgers" is nothing short of obscene. While countless ordinary people now face the prospect of losing their jobs or having their wages cut as a result of the deepening world recession, Murdoch demands the effective destruction of what remains of the welfare state. For the News Corp CEO, as for the corporate elite as a whole, social security represents an unproductive siphoning-off of corporate profits via taxation. The demand for the slashing of company taxes and income taxes for the ultra-wealthy is the other side of the anti-welfare coin.

During the 2007 federal election campaign, Murdoch's press empire swung decisively behind the Labor Party, after concluding that Kevin Rudd was better placed than John Howard to deliver the next wave of pro-business economic reform. Murdoch confirmed his support for Prime Minister Rudd in his lectures. "Traditionally the Liberals have been more free market in their outlook than their opponents," he declared. "But the Labor Party has also recognised that central planning does not work... That is why earlier this year we heard a Labor prime minister, Kevin Rudd, declaring that his government is unashamedly pro-market, pro-business and pro-globalisation." He warned, however, that the time had come for the government to deliver: "That's a good start," he said, referring to Rudd's rhetoric. "But being pro-market, pro-business and pro-globalisation means working for a society where citizens are not dependent on the government."

So the Rudd government has been put on notice. Having criticised Howard from the right, and pledged himself to "fiscal conservatism" the Labor prime minister's period of grace with the

financial elite has just about expired. For his part, Rudd has made clear he intends to deliver.

The "pioneer" revamped

Murdoch declared in his inaugural lecture: "We need to revive the sense of Australia as a frontier country, and to cultivate Australia as a great centre of excellence. Unlike our parents and grandparents, this new frontier has little to do with the bush and the outback. Today the frontier that needs sorting out is the wider world. And complacency is our chief enemy."

The origins of this reactionary appeal to a so-called "pioneering spirit" lie in the early 1890s, when sections of the Australian working class began to collectively organise for better wages and conditions and for political representation. Miners, dock workers, sheep shearers and others engaged in ferocious class struggles and protracted strikes. In response to the growing social divide, the nascent Australian bourgeoisie fostered the idea of a unifying "national identity" that transcended class divisions.

The larrikin "swagman" (itinerant worker carrying his belongings on his back) was a stereotype invoked frequently by Australian nationalist writers (Banjo Patterson, Henry Lawson, Norman Lindsay) in the latter part of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth, but the pioneer had an even more central role. The pioneer was in large part derived from the "selector" — a settler, often an ex-miner of the 1850s gold rush, who, under the auspices of the 1860s Land Acts, was permitted to go bush and freely select a plot of land. In the schema of popular Australian history, selectors were the antithesis of the early Australian landed gentry ("the squattocracy") who, by the time of selection were, because of the wool boom of the mid-nineteenth century, relatively wealthy. The selector was above all an individualist, pitted against nature—not the ruling class or the state.

Murdoch's call for the revival of this "pioneer spirit" in the twenty-first century is, on the face of it, absurd, given that Australia has among the most urbanised population of any country, not to mention the fact that there is no more "unconquered" land to be claimed. But, as in the 1890s, the purpose of such nationalist demagoguery is to conceal the enormous social gulf between the working class and the financial elite. Murdoch hopes to fashion an Australian equivalent of the American myth of the "rugged individualist", thereby creating the justification for US-style social conditions—with all restraints on the accumulation of private wealth and profit abolished—to be deepened in Australia.

There is also another element in Murdoch's pioneer revivalism. At the same time as the "pioneer" was first promoted in the 1890s, the foundations were being laid for the "White Australia" policy.

And while the Australian ruling elite has since concluded that such a racist immigration policy has become incompatible with its international standing and its domestic need for a skilled and cheap labour force, Murdoch's denunciation of the complacency of ordinary Australians in face of the threat posed by the Indian and Chinese economies smacks of the old "yellow peril" rhetoric.

Murdoch bases his reinvention of Australia as a pioneer state on the *praetorian* model—facing the region, rifles raised, with a kind of fearful belligerence. "It still troubles me that our citizens do not seem to appreciate the sacrifices of those who serve in our armed forces, at least not the way they do in America," he complained.

For good measure, Murdoch threw into his lectures the "war on terror" bogey, a defence of colonialism ("British colonialism was in many ways successful ... [they] ruled with a light touch and they helped bring prosperity and the rule of law to those under its dominion"), and open, ferocious anticommunism.

In the crude and deceitful manner typical of right-wing ideologists, Murdoch made an amalgam of Stalinism and communism, and identified "freedom" with capitalism. "After decades of punishing wealth and suppressing human capital, the Chinese have been liberated," he crowed, after describing the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre as a "setback". Citing Karl Marx's 1848 observation that the spectre of communism was haunting Europe, Murdoch triumphantly concluded that "his prediction could not have been more off target".

This, it appears, is a case of the billionaire protesting too much. As masses of ordinary people face the devastating consequences of the unravelling of the capitalist market, the unresolved political and historical questions of the twentieth century—above all that of Stalinism and its betrayal of genuine socialist internationalism—will inevitably emerge anew. While revolutionary periods, such as the one we are now entering, have historically been accompanied by an intellectual re-awakening among the most serious and thoughtful sections of the population, they also inevitably witness profound political and intellectual disarray within ruling circles. In this sense, the disorientation evident in Murdoch's Boyer Lectures is itself a symptom of the times.



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