

Murdoch's Politics—An ex-Stalinist in awe of Rupert Murdoch, Part II

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3 February 2014

The following is the conclusion of a two-part review, the last essay written by Dave Hyland before his untimely death on December 8. The first part was posted February 1.

McKnight implies that Rupert Murdoch, the \$6 billion media magnate, zigzagged politically from left to right when his media operations remained rooted in Australia, but that once it grew internationally he came under the influence of right-wing British and US politics.

In reality, Murdoch did not have to transform his “core values and beliefs” to make his shift rightwards. Moreover, the global processes that gave rise to this shift were in evidence in Australia, just as much as in Britain and America. The media tycoon has always been fundamentally hostile to the interests of the working class. Any political shifts were purely tactical from the standpoint of which of the parties could best serve his interests at any point.

McKnight highlights the political alliances made by the News Corp boss since the mid-1970s with figures from Richard Nixon through to Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and fascistic elements like Nicaraguan Contra leader Adolfo Calero, but does so to portray the last 40 years as the onward triumphant march of reaction.

His concentration on the machinations of various unsavoury right-wing figures is an attempt to divert attention from the role played by the social democrats and trade union bureaucrats in enabling the ascendancy of the right and securing its victories.

Murdoch's intimate connections with the labour bureaucracy are indicative.

As noted in the first part of the review, McKnight describes how Murdoch inherited the *Adelaide News* on his father's unexpected death in 1952, where he developed the kind of populist and sensationalist journalism that was to become his trademark. The newspaper would campaign over instances of poor people being exploited by a rich cultured “elite”, helping push up sales in the poorer areas of the working class.

He explains that in the late 1950s and early 1960s Murdoch had cultivated relations with the Australian Labor Party, and was singing the praises of Cuba's Fidel Castro (p. 46). McKnight contrasts this with Murdoch's later “single-minded campaign to destroy” the Labor government of Edward Gough Whitlam, in power between 1972 and 1975, as symptomatic of “a deep political transformation in his values and beliefs whose causes are little understood but have been central to his political ideology ever since” (p. 57).

On November 6, 1975, in what has become known as the Canberra Coup, Australia's ruling class organised a trap around budgetary rules that allowed it to call in the Queen's governor general, Sir John Kerr, and remove the elected Labor government from office. Murdoch was a major cheerleader for this sordid manoeuvre. But what McKnight describes as Murdoch's “great transformation” was bound up with the escalating crisis of global capitalism that erupted in that period, and which provoked struggles of a revolutionary character all over the world.

From 1968 through to 1975, the working class in one country after another launched an offensive against the ruling elites of revolutionary dimensions, only to come face to face with the rotten character of the reformist and Stalinist political parties and trade unions to which they still gave their allegiance.

The response of Murdoch was of a piece with that of the most reactionary layer of the bourgeoisie internationally, who rejected all political nostrums based upon class compromise and Keynesian economic policies of market regulation, in favour of a brutal political and social counteroffensive epitomised by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

What McKnight fails to explain is that the self-same rightward lurch began with and was then facilitated by the social democratic parties and trade unions, which ditched their old reformist programmes and themselves adopted a barely concealed form of Thatcherite economic and social nostrums. It was that which enabled Murdoch to hold former Labour leader Tony Blair in as high regard as he once held Thatcher—even making him godfather to his child.

McKnight claims that “to imagine that News Corporation is a *typical* global media giant would be a big mistake; it is a unique business” (p. 18).

Murdoch is portrayed as almost single-handedly destroying the political fortunes of what McKnight fraudulently portrays as the “left” and liberal establishment.

He writes, “The treatment meted by Fox to Barack Obama has been similar to the hate raised on the former British Labour leader Neil Kinnock by the *Sun* in the early 1990s. And just as Fox News supported George W. Bush, so the *Sun* shone on Tony Blair” (p. 19).

The fact is that neither Obama nor Kinnock did anything other than prostrate themselves before Murdoch and the social interests he represents—something that places them in the same camp as Bush and Blair.

McKnight's portrayal of events is typical of a social layer of former "lefts", who are themselves in thrall to the Murdochs of this world, and which have moved to the right in lockstep with the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies to which they were formerly oriented.

McKnight came into politics in Sydney at the time of the 1968 anti-Vietnam War protests. This was a period when the most class conscious workers, youth and intellectuals, moved by the struggle of the colonial masses and the growing militant movement of the working class in Australia, were attracted to the political perspective of world socialist revolution fought for by the towering Russian revolutionary leader and founder of the Fourth International, Leon Trotsky, which found expression in the formation of the Socialist Labour League as the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1972.

McKnight took the diametrically opposed political road, joining the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia (CPA) under the leadership of Laurie Aarons.

After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the CPA attempted to make an appeal to the anti-war youth movement and criticised the invasion. This led to a split in the CPA with a pro-Moscow party, the Socialist Party of Australia, established in 1970. It took with it sections of the Stalinist apparatus in the trade unions. McKnight joined the Aarons-led party.

But the criticisms of the Aarons group of Moscow were very much from the right, as they sought to further develop an Australian national orientation. They opposed any discussion of the crisis of the CPA from the standpoint of the struggle waged by Trotsky against Stalinism and insisted that the main problem to be overcome was the imposition of foreign models on other parties.

McKnight became a writer for the party's newspaper, *Tribune*. He wrote an article criticising the *Sydney Morning Herald* for bias, in that it did not employ left-wing journalists. This became his way in and he got a job on the paper shortly afterwards.

McKnight left the CPA just as the party collapsed after the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe and the liquidation of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

He responded by joining the chorus of all those who criticise any attempt to base politics on the working class.

In *Beyond Right and Left: New Politics and the Culture War* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney: 2005), McKnight insists that class ideology is redundant because it "means the main political task is a fight against material inequalities of the redistribution of wealth. In its most common form it supported government regulation and intervention, and in its most extreme form, it involved the abolition of capitalism. This ideology had a powerful resonance for a long time because of widespread problems of deprivation. While Labor was never socialist, its ideas were grounded in this paradigm of material deprivation. It captured an essential part of the reality of much of 20th century Australia and inspired a great deal of Labor's idealism" (p. 11).

According to McKnight, writing as a privileged and affluent petty bourgeois, "this world view has been under siege for a long time. For many decades capitalism has proved to be more dynamic and innovative than most imagined. One result has been the achievement of high living standards and a degree of everyday

affluence unimaginable even by trade unionists and leftists in the 1950s" (ibid). Just three years after he wrote these words the 2008 global banking crisis erupted and capitalism entered the greatest economic upheaval in its history. This again is proof positive that no one has greater faith in the historical longevity of the capitalist system than an ex-Stalinist hack.

Similarly, in his response to the crisis facing News Corp, McKnight is defending his own wealthy middle class lifestyle. It is to sow illusions that the Murdoch media empire can be once again lined up in support for a "progressive" political agenda, by which he means nothing other than the various hobby horses of the satiated middle class and ... President Barack Obama.

He speaks of the "greatest potential" in the present situation coming in the form of the ascendancy of Murdoch's children, who "grew up in the different political era to their father. Murdoch's politics were forged in the Cold War and by opposition to the social changes in the 1960s. He scorned the new ideas and social customs of feminism, environmentalism and gay liberation as 'political correctness'. His children have grown up in a different world where many of these ideas are accepted" (p. 217).

Murdoch has six children, only four of whom can inherit the company—his eldest son and heir apparent Lachlan, James, Elisabeth and Mary. Lachlan left the New York offices some years ago and does not appear to speak to his father. McKnight grades James and Elisabeth individually on the basis of their openness to the new ideas and social customs associated with identity politics.

In assessing James, McKnight says; "However, the overtly political side of James Murdoch is markedly different from that of his father. He has been a supporter of Clinton and Al Gore.... But it is on climate change that he most differs from his father.... James understands the science of climate change and in a revealing 2009 interview warned that 'all of the climate prediction models suggest we are on a worst case trajectory and some cases worse than the worst case. That's my depressing take on it'" (pp. 219-20).

McKnight recognises James is the favourite to succeed their father, but it is Elisabeth he favours as "the child whose political views are most clearly different from her father. In April 2008, she hosted a party in her London home that raised over \$500,000 for Barack Obama's campaign for the democratic nomination for the US presidency. This was no passing fad: after Obama had won the nomination and the presidency, she hosted a party in a London cinema at which guests watched the Washington inauguration ceremony live on screen. Elisabeth said she found Obama 'very inspiring'" (p. 218).

Concluded



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