

The extraordinarily ordinary Mr Howard

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In 2006 the Howard government celebrated 10 years in office. Much was made of Howard's extraordinary ordinariness. His dullness, flat speech, suburban background and modest tastes: all were considered to be evidence of his ordinariness and the essence of his electoral appeal. Yet, little critical attention was directed to his personification of ordinariness or the ordinary Australians to whom he supposedly appealed. This article argues that Howard's ordinary should be understood as a complex process of 'making ordinary'. With deep roots in Australian political culture, this process has transformed the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary Australia and fostered neurotic citizenship.

Keywords: ordinary; Howard; neurotic; citizenship; sociality; populism

Introduction

In 2006 the Howard Government celebrated 10 years in office. Journalists and academics surveyed the government's record and analysed the reasons for its longevity. Supporters and critics differed on many issues, but one point on which there was considerable consensus was that the government's success owed much to the political currency of Howard's ordinariness. Somehow, the extraordinarily ordinary Howard had turned his dull mien into a positive political attribute and point of connection with ordinary Australians. Now in 2007, if the opinion polls are to be credited, Howard's time may well be up and the election later in the year will produce a change of government. However, if this happens, it will not be the end of the story about Howard, politics and the ordinary.

This article argues that the ordinariness of Howard is not reducible to his personality, his style, his homage to suburbia, or his dull speech, even though all of these

aspects contribute to his extraordinary personal ordinariness. Rather, Howard's distinctive articulation of the ordinary, and the political efficacy of that, is symptomatic of a larger cultural and political malaise that precedes him and will linger long after he has packed up the green tracksuit and chuffed off to retirement. It is enabled by long standing trends in Australian cultural history and post 1980s transformations in politics. Howard's ordinariness, which is also a fashioning of the Australian ordinary, can only be explained as a contextualised process of *making ordinary*.

The article is a critical examination of this process of making ordinary. It begins with a review of current interpretations of, and commentaries on, Howard's ordinariness and identifies a number of weakness and gaps in these commentaries. In particular, they overestimate Howard's instincts as a political animal and underestimate his hard-learned political skills and the more general politics of the ordinary that shape his electoral fortunes. The analysis is then advanced through a focus on both the effective and affective dimensions of Howard's ordinary highlighting the expression of these in the idea of, and appeals to, 'the mainstream'. As will be shown, it is through the discursive constitution of the mainstream that modes of exclusion become ordinary. At the same time, Australian citizens are produced as ordinarily fearful. The fearful citizen is not a uniquely Australian phenomenon yet in Australia it takes some distinctive forms — neurotic and paranoid — that are charged with the politics of the ordinary. The final sections of this article brings together the preceding themes with an argument for engaging ordinariness, specifically Howard's ordinariness, as a powerful expression of a political convergence that has, since the 1980s, reconfigured the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary Australia.

Howard's beastly ordinariness

As many commentators have noted, Howard is unremittingly ordinary. Impassioned rhetoric, personal stylishness, excessive outbursts are not, generally, for him. Instead, he is, as Carmen Lawrence stated, 'the most deeply ordinary man I have ever encountered'.¹ His ordinariness is deadly dull; it is boring. As Keating put it, Howard is 'like a lizard on a rock – alive but looking dead'.² Even those who are not political opponents have acknowledged this: writing for *Quadrant*, Switzer reported that an analysis of newspaper

articles revealed that ‘Howard’s name has appeared together with the word “boring” in 1775 articles’.³ And, as the political cartoonist, Bill Leak bemoaned, Howard is a cartoonist’s nightmare: ‘It’s a bit like having to draw something that’s not there’.⁴ Friends and foes alike appear to agree: as politicians go, they do not come much more boring than this.

The interesting question is how Howard’s remorselessly dull version of the ordinary works to his political advantage. Why do people keep coming back for more? McKay believes the answer to this lies in the dark underbelly of the Australian psyche: Howard gives back what Australia wants. Howard ‘...encourages us to be comfortable with some of the baser aspects of our own ordinariness’ – our materialism, prejudices and self-serving tendencies.⁵ So, for McKay, ‘... we have been partners in this entire enterprise. It is in his ability to enforce what is already there – dark as it may be – that the true genius of Howard’s prime ministership lies’.⁶ From this perspective, the secret of Howard’s ordinariness does not emanate from him personally – his style, and his suburb(in)anity – but rather, from how he recognises, intuits and feeds back our ordinariness. It actually originates with the Australian people. As Shanahan put it, Howard ‘instinctively understands [the Australian people’s] concerns, aspirations and interests like few leaders before him’.⁷ Mant remarked that ‘[h]e has the knack, it seems, of knowing what Australians don’t really care about’.⁸ Marks suggested that Howard ‘is a genius of sorts: he looks this country in the face and sees us not as we wish we were, not as one day we might be, but exactly as we are’.⁹

The belief that Howard’s ordinariness is merely an instinctively grasped mirror of the Australian people’s collective ordinariness is unconvincing. The recourse to biological metaphors (instinct, intuition) signals an inability to engage with the politics and history of the ordinary that Howard articulates. After all, much of Howard’s political career, as the self-styled ‘Lazarus with a triple by-pass’, has been shaped by failure, blunders and conflicts. His ordinariness has not always been a roaring success. If, as it is claimed, Howard possesses an uncanny grasp of the contemporary mood and is thus well equipped to give Australia the ordinariness it deserves, this is not due to supernatural insight but to political experience and a now well-honed political judgement. It is a cultural and political intervention that has been steadily worked and re-worked through

the course of his career. His embodiment of the unexceptional may have political utility as he communicates his perspective on Australian ordinariness but it is not the essential ingredient.

Failure to appreciate the extent of Howard's political skills and capacities undercuts the potency of political analysis. Consider the following two examples that were by no means atypical of media commentaries on Howard in 2006. In both instances Howard's grasp of, and response to, contemporary policy challenges was interpreted as stemming from his beastly capacities, his instinctive 'nose' for what to do and where to take Australia. According to Cater, Howard 'instinctively recognised both the threats and opportunities in the spread of global terrorism'.¹⁰ Milne argued that Howard is possessed of a 'political genius' that has enabled him to make an 'instinctive synthesis between two divergent forces – pragmatic but reformist market economics on the one hand and conservative social values on the other'.¹¹ Surely, far from reflecting the intuitive grasp or esoteric instinct of an ordinary man, these indicate the shared convictions and 'insights' of the Right. The first example has been most vigorously exploited by George Bush and the second is a contemporary manifestation of the international ideological shift associated in the 1980s with Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK (and indeed Howard in Australia). The flirtation with the language of biology and instinct signals a retreat from *political* analysis of the ordinary politics of Howard.

The failure to engage the politics of Howard's ordinariness is also illustrated in references to the ordinariness of the Australian people that Howard is alleged to just 'get' through application of his (political) animal cunning. Ordinariness is granted a certain, and independent, status as an individual or collective possession. It is de-historicised and de-contextualised. 'Ordinary Australians' rolls of the lips of political commentators as if those ordinary folk are just there, always have been and always will be. When commentators refer to Howard's capacity to identify and respond to 'ordinary fears in extraordinary times' it seems to make sense: ordinary people have ordinary fears and a good politician will acknowledge these fears and offer direction and comfort.¹² Who are these ordinary people though? What makes them ordinary? Is everyone ordinary? What is an ordinary fear? To what extent are we really living through extraordinary times? These ordinary people, with their ordinary fears and aspirations are anything but self-evident.

As even the slightest of historical analysis reveals, ordinariness, whether individual or collective, always involves processes of *making ordinary*. These processes are cultural and historical, both conscious and unconscious, and actively reconfigure relations of power.

The idea of the ordinary Australian, or Australian ordinariness, is the outcome of relations of power and not something to be simply activated or wielded as political power is mobilised. If some people, characteristics or practices are deemed ordinary then we are impelled to inquire into the production of that ordinariness. How were they *made* ordinary? A neglected part of the answer to this question concerns the technologies through which Howard's ordinary is disseminated and naturalised. The making of the ordinary is not a one-way project and Howard's ordinariness circulates through a techno-human complex in which our eyes, ears and tongues are critical yet complicit actors. His ordinariness is not just an attitude, a style of life or a cluster of values: it requires and reproduces an assemblage of practices and technologies of communication.

The socio-technical substance of Howard's ordinariness is expressed in his physical presence in both rural and urban Australia: '[h]e is the most domestically travelled prime minister in the nation's history – in the regions and in the cities – and is proud of his local knowledge'.¹³ That physical presence, his everyday ruminations and more structured political speeches, are communicated also to those who are not there. His domestic tours are snapped, set-up, filmed, put into print, blog-commentaried, diarised, satirised. His ordinariness is not just a style (or lack thereof), a mode of speech, a beige appearance, or simply ideology: it is also the outcome of the effects of being photographed standing on a particular kind of road, perhaps near particular people or animals, who become available for recruitment (knowingly, willingly or otherwise) into the project of making ordinary. Ordinariness is the culturally and historically specific outcome of particular interactions between humans and also, between humans and diverse non-humans. The latter includes shopping centres, eyebrow trimmers, microphones, car-radios and green synthetic tracksuits. Crucially, Howard's ordinariness takes shape through the use of talkback radio.

Howard is a 'master' of talk back radio and this is pivotal to Howard's ordinariness and its mass dissemination. As Kelly has observed: 'Howard is the

omnipresent uncle, transmitting into every household, unless he is switched off'.¹⁴ Put another way, Howard is a 'master' of the technologies of the ordinary that modulate everyday life. In commenting on Howard's unprecedented Prime Ministerial accessibility Shanahan has argued that Howard's great strength has been his preference for live radio and direct communication with the electorate over that mediated by the Press Gallery and other media professionals.¹⁵

Howard's avuncular presence, his ordinary drifting through the airwaves, is no simple wallowing in a technology with which he feels relaxed and comfortable. It is part of a determined political strategy of containment and control in which political reporting centres on the circulation of transcripts from talkback radio. In an analysis of current trends in political reporting and the relationship between government and journalists, Ester has described a troubling shift under Howard: 'government distributed talkback transcripts are most often the source of the day for political quotes'.¹⁶ The discernible move towards 'three in one' communication with the public – live radio broadcast plus radio-audio transcript plus television coverage – reduces critical scrutiny and journalistic intervention into the process of communication.¹⁷ The increased reliance on talkback radio also changes the character of communication; it accentuates affective connections that foster Howard's ordinariness.

Howard exemplifies a privileged version of the ordinary because we listen, read, watch and consume him being, or doing, that. Through talkback radio, and television, he just 'appears' in our lounge room, in our car on the way to work or sitting waiting for the kids to finish soccer. He would seduce us as fellow travellers in his ordinary vernacular of the everyday and 'Australian values'. As Angel and Gibbs have observed, '[w]e mistake familiarity for intimacy, and predictability for trustworthiness'.¹⁸ And there is no better vehicle for that than talkback radio. It is not that Howard brings an affective dimension to the ordinary through the medium of talkback radio, but that Howard's appearances, and his ordinariness are inseparable from the ordinariness and affectivity through which talkback radio 'works'. Indeed, Howard's talkback radio presence may partly explain how his ordinariness generates a sense of inclusion as well as exclusion. An argument made by Tebbutt provides some insight into this potential:

It is not content that matters but the “performance of opinion” as an affective element to engage an audience. In this sense then contradiction in talkback – as a rhetorical strategy and as an ideological paradox – allows the ongoing generation of opinion from both listeners and the host. Some of the attractiveness of talkback may be in this contrary, shifting, mobile production of opinion, its’ vagaries.¹⁹

Howard’s participation in the allowably contradictory ‘ongoing generation of opinion’, which extends much further than ‘listening to the electorate’ simultaneously positions him as open to the opinions of others (even when he disagrees with them), and just like us, having an opinion too. It is possible to (mis)recognise this as the egalitarian impulse of an ordinary man rather than a particular performance of engagement. This performative constitution of the ordinary affirms the ordinariness of himself and of the audience too. The reflection back of the ordinary is the seduction of inclusion.

Howard’s ordinariness is neither benign nor universally available though and in the following section I further examine the processes of ‘making ordinary’ by focussing on the politically and collectively constitutive dimensions of Australian ordinariness as these intersect with the idea of the ‘mainstream’. This will highlight the exclusionary aspects of Australian ordinariness and illustrate some ways that ordinariness is central to the constitution of local as well as national spaces and identities – its temporal and topographic specificity. It will also bring to the fore other affective and effective currents that charge the evolution of the ordinary.

Howard, ordinariness and the mainstream

The idea of ‘the mainstream’ has been central to Howard’s political message since the 1980s. It has been his shorthand for those who either feel politically excluded or that their interests are never adequately responded to despite the legitimacy of their claims: not

those with ‘special’ interests (such as Aboriginal people, ethnic minorities, lesbians or gays), but those with supposedly universal interests in prosperity and security and recognition of their individual efforts to achieve these things for themselves. In the lead up to the 1996 election, Howard defined the mainstream as the battlers ‘whose political voice is too often muffled or ignored’. The mainstream was:

... the families battling to give their children a break, hard-working employees battling to get ahead, small businesses battling to survive, young Australians battling to get a decent start in their working lives, older Australians battling to present their dignity and security, community organizations battling the seemingly ever-expanding role of intrusive central government.²⁰

As many have noted about Howard, and Howard himself has repeatedly asserted, the mainstream and the national interest (and the mainstream as the expression of the national interest) is defined in contrast to sectional interests, ‘noisy left-wing elites’ and minority groups concerned with social justice.²¹ Dyrenfurth describes Howard’s juxtaposition of mainstream (and national) interests against sectional interests as part of a language of citizenship that has become increasingly exclusionary and ‘moralising’.²² As Dyrenfurth illustrates, the language of citizenship peddled by Howard repeatedly emphasises the ‘threats’ to citizenship. Australian citizenship thus rests on a distinction, or a range of distinctions, between the threatened, mainstream, ordinary citizen and the threatening Other possessed of extraordinary identities and illegitimate claims on the nation state. Refugees, Aboriginal people, Muslims and, to use Hage’s phrase, ‘[t]hird World Looking People’²³ in general have borne the brunt of this making extraordinary.²⁴

The links between the mainstream and the ordinary (that of Howard or Australia) are intensified in the post-Tampa era by the continuing identification of extraordinary threats to the (mainstream) Australian way of life. Of course, assertions of the ordinary are normative and a way of marking boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the proper and the improper. In the contemporary Australian production of the extraordinary, some people, identities and practices have become more extraordinary

than others. In an analysis of the production of the 'Arab Other' in contemporary Australia, Poynting et al argue that the 'innocent "us" versus aggressive "them"' that generates a shifting pool of 'them' that includes Arabic people, Muslims, Lebanese gangs, terrorists, Al Qaeda, refugees, and Middle-Eastern peoples generally, is central to the contemporary articulation of national ordinariness.²⁵

Poynting et al point out that these modes of constituting the Australian ordinary through shifting dynamics of inclusion and exclusion do not unambiguously consolidate the power of those at the centre. As they explain, attempts to

recuperate the morally innocent position of the 'ordinary Australian' ... both sustain and erode white Australian nationalism. In granting agency and causal power to the Other, they create a sense of threat in the suburban heart of the imagined Australian national community, which exacerbates the sense of vulnerability.²⁶

'Ordinary Australians' reproduce their identities as fragile, threatened and fearful. Being part of the ordinary mainstream does not necessarily produce relaxation and comfort. This point is sometimes forgotten in political analysis: exclusionary constitutions of self and other not only position the other but also incite self-formation of *all* within the specific self-other dynamic in particular ways and not others. Johnson has emphasised this point. What she has described as the 'revenge of the mainstream' discourse operates as a form of policing of the centre. It is, she states:

... in a sense, just as much about policing whites and Anglo-Celts, as it is about managing the racial and ethnic 'other'. In other words, it is about encouraging Anglo-Celts, heterosexuals and other members of the 'mainstream' to construct their own identity as unquestioningly central and other identities as 'special interests'. It is about discouraging Anglo-Celts, heterosexuals and others who do not wish to privilege their identity by denouncing them as 'politically correct', elitist, social engineers who are disempowering their compatriots.²⁷

From these perspectives, political expressions of the ordinary such as those that circulate around and through Howard have profound significance for how political identity, citizenship and contemporary political cultures are analysed. He made these connections particularly clear in his Australia Day Address to the National Press Club in 2006 when he equated Australian ordinariness with a ‘balanced’ view of life: ‘Australia is a magnet for people... It harvests the hope of mankind because of the quality of life it offers the ordinary citizen – lives of opportunity and belonging; of growth and balance’.²⁸ The equation of the ordinary with a ‘balanced life’ hints that the ordinary is somehow ‘post-ideological’. Howard’s cultivation of ordinary Australianness and its others, animates a very particular dissolution and reconstitution of public connection. It is a *productive* exercise. Modes of exclusion are reinterpreted or constituted around ‘ordinariness’ in ways that reduce public connection and responsivity to difference. Key to this is the incitement of fearful neurotic citizenship.

Australian ordinariness, ‘neurotic citizenship’ and ‘paranoid nationalism’

As has been demonstrated, in the contemporary Australian context the national ordinary incited by Howard is profoundly animated by fear. On the basis of a fearful ordinariness people are invited to share in narrow, inward-looking, punitive and selfish modes of citizenship. As Angel and Gibbs have suggested, this has generated considerable electoral support for Howard: ‘the success of the Howard government is based on the deployment of negative affect in a global context of fear and uncertainty’. It undermines other more communal and responsive forms of sociality.²⁹ This certainly produces new exclusionary practices and ways of legitimating them but as the work of Poynting et al indicates, it also impacts on the self-constitution of the centre or the ‘mainstream’. Those who can identify with, and coherently position themselves as part of, the ‘mainstream’ are invited to collectivise their ordinariness as *victims*. That is, they are discursively constituted as vulnerable to a range of threats that includes globalisation, ‘politically correct elites’,

terrorists, generalised uncertainty, Muslims, and the 'Aboriginal industry'. What is interesting about this positioning is the relationship to government that it produces and also the concomitant relationship to self.

A consequence of Howard's cultivation of fearful ordinariness is that a central role of government is to be the responsive patriarch and manager of mass affects. It must offer to protect 'us' (i.e. those who are not 'them') from those whom we *should* fear – those who are extraordinarily different. This encourages political passivity yet, ironically, being a victim, or a subject of fear, takes an enormous amount of effort. It requires considerable libidinal investment, vigilance to threats, cultivation of a recriminatory disposition and so on. It is energetic and active yet appears to be at the mercy of external forces. As Nietzsche memorably described it, it is fuelled by *ressentiment*, a reactivity that seeks reasons, and people, to blame for one's own (inevitable) suffering.³⁰ Then, having identified the cause of that suffering, the sufferer/s names that cause evil. It would be incorrect to describe the consequence of this fearful embrace of the ordinary as simply political passivity because it also generates a considerable amount of work on the self.

Government through fear has its limits. As Brett has observed, 'one cannot govern for long on the basis of grievance and negativity'.³¹ Additionally, the government cannot simply retreat into paternalism for modern techniques of governance require 'government through freedom'.³² Modern western democracies thrive on the cultivation of populations of responsabilised individuals who have a duty to create their own lives, shape their own destinies and, most importantly, provide for themselves as a condition of their recognition as free, autonomous and coherent members of a political community. So, this multitude of ordinary victims ('mainstream' Australian citizens) must be instructed in how to take charge of their own destinies; not only by electing a government that understands this, but also through practical steps such as becoming a subject of pedagogy and self-development. Under the title *Let's Look Out for Australia: Protecting Our Way of Life From a Possible Terrorist Threat*, the Howard government's anti-terrorist brochure invited citizens to become part of national security in just this way.³³

Public grievance transformed into a project of self-determination that is ever vigilant about threats to that project (from 'terrorists' and other dangerous individuals) provides a fabulous fund of political capital that can be tapped anew should the situation

arise. These dynamics of government are not confined to Howard's Australia and they should not be interpreted as conspiratorial or deliberate manipulations from above. They are symptomatic of citizenship in modern liberal democracies and signify the rise of what Isin refers to as the 'neurotic citizen'.³⁴ The neurotic citizen does not absolutely displace the rational, responsible citizen of neo-liberal states but the more that fear and a sense of threat and uncertainty pervade public discourse, and are manipulated for political advantage, the more prominent the neurotic relationship to self and the political collective becomes. 'Governing through neurosis' is the contemporary supplement to government through rationality:

Governing through neurosis means that the neurotic subject is incited to make two adjustments in its conduct to render itself a citizen. While on the one hand the neurotic citizen is incited to make social and cultural investments to eliminate various dangers by calibrating its conduct on the basis of its anxieties and insecurities rather than rationalities, it is also invited to consider itself as part of a neurological species and understand itself as an affect structure.³⁵

The neurotic citizen must manage her or his fears as a condition of participation in collective life. S/he is an ordinary person, not an exceptional character. The neurotic 'mainstream' is an endemic feature of contemporary – and ordinary – Australian life. At the same time, 'the object of government is not cure or care but management of neurosis and the anxieties that are its foundations'.³⁶ This is, of course, management of the impossible. Nonetheless, Isin's argument does partially explain the lure of a 'relaxed and comfortable' Australia. What it does not explain though is the local character of the 'anxieties and insecurities' around which individuals must 'calibrate their conduct'. What happens when those anxieties concern other people, other members of the same political community? These 'other people' include both the nervous 'mainstream' and those Othered by the mainstream. The concept of the 'neurotic citizen' offers useful insights but it must be extended, questioned and developed in light of local conditions.

Hage's work on Australian nationalism provides some further routes into interpreting Howard's ordinariness as it intersects with the politics of fear and neurotic citizenship. Hage has identified 'White colonial paranoia' as an enduring phenomenon in Australian history. In this context, 'paranoia' refers to:

... a pathological form of fear based on a conception of the self as excessively fragile, and constantly threatened. It also describes a tendency to perceive a threat where none exists or, if one exists, to inflate its capacity to harm the self. The core element of Australian colonial paranoia is a fear of loss of Europeanness or Whiteness and of the lifestyle and privileges that are seen to emanate directly from that.³⁷

Hage argues that despite positive and affirmative embraces of Australian citizenship and national identity, Australia is haunted by its unresolved colonial history especially, the historical and contemporary treatment, and position, of Indigenous Australians. Additionally, fears of being tainted and 'swamped' by 'uncivilised others' and the 'undomesticatable nature of the Australian outback' have sustained a fearful uncertainty at the heart of White Australian identity.³⁸ Hage also suggests that although 'Whiteness' came to be the marker of 'European civilisation' and is hence the pivot of this uncertainty, it was not a Whiteness that all deemed 'White' could equally access or express. For working class people 'Whiteness' was both a descriptor (in contrast to the non-White) and an only partially attainable ideal. Lacking the material advantages of a 'civilised' lifestyle, a specific dis-ease flourished in the working-class' relationship to Whiteness: 'the more the European working classes were deprived of material access to the "White" civilised lifestyle, the more they relied on symbolic access to Whiteness and the future promise of civilised life it embodied'.³⁹

From the 1980s onwards there has been a resurgence, and mutation, of paranoid nationalism. Hage attributes this to the Hawke Labor government's development of 'multiculturalism as national identity', as well as the effects of economic downturn, increases in Asian immigration, the republic debate and the recognition of native title.⁴⁰ All of these issues, combined with critical media focus on multiculturalism, served to

stimulate uncertainty and fear around a 'sense of White decline'. According to Hage, absolutely central to this paranoia about 'White decline' is

a conception of the self as representing the 'average', the 'mainstream', the 'ordinary' national (this lends a deep legitimacy to one's grievances), and second, a heightened perception of 'minorities', migrants and Indigenous people as a threat to one's own wellbeing.⁴¹

Hage's analysis of paranoid nationalism and the political and cultural effects of fear around White decline allow some historicisation of Howard's ordinariness and his appeal to 'the mainstream'. If it is correct that a fearful, and historically entrenched, spectral presence haunts Australian national identity and Australian ordinariness, then claims about Howard's capacity to 'instinctively respond' to 'ordinary fears in extraordinary times' should receive greater critical scrutiny. How extraordinary are these times and who are they extraordinary for? Hage's argument poses a longer trajectory to the contemporary formulations of the ordinary and the extraordinary. As well, we must inquire into these 'ordinary fears'. They are most often posited as fears about threats to Australia or the Australian way of life or Australian values. But what if one of the features that make the times extraordinary is the development and growth of Islamophobia? And what if the 'ordinary fears' of those who are the targets of Islamophobia stem from the beliefs and actions of 'ordinary Australians' themselves bolstered by the stated views of an extraordinarily ordinary Prime Minister? Howard's ordinariness turns out to be a far more complicated cultural matter than the commentaries of 2006 suggested

Contextualising the ordinary: political convergences and cultural identities

Media commentaries and political analysis suggest that Howard's ordinariness is most intimately 'his': it stems from his use of the vernacular, his boring personae, his lack of flashiness and his suburban identifications. He embodies the ordinary in a way that few

others would be willing to endure. Yet, as the preceding analysis suggests, it cannot be regarded as simply a personal quality or an aspect of public life that will disappear with Howard's retirement. His personal characteristics and his political acuity have facilitated the mobilisation of ordinariness for political advantage but the full meaning of Howard's ordinariness, and its disturbing political appeal, is embedded in Australia's cultural and political history and, in addition to those aspects discussed above, in post-Keating shifts in Australian political culture.

A most significant gap in discussion of Howard's ordinariness concerns the political-cultural context that facilitates the connections between the ordinary, the mainstream and the politics of fear. Much has been made of the contrast between Howard and Keating, between the current government and the Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s, but little has been said about the Labor Party in opposition and its contribution to public discourses of the ordinary. Although Beasley and Crean made little impact, Latham's contribution to these discourses has been noteworthy. Arguably, Latham's speeches, writings and other contributions to public discourse further strengthened Howard's hand and the appearance of naturalness attaching to the lure of the ordinary. Latham went to great lengths to distinguish his politics from those of Howard through, amongst other things, his emphasis on the importance of cultivating the 'ladder of opportunity' and on 'eliminating poverty, early childhood education, reinventing democracy and Australian independence through the Republic'.⁴² In the 2004 election campaign Latham's public commitment to cut funding for elite private schools brought some of the differences between himself and Howard into sharp relief. However, on the point that became central to his political aspirations – 'the politics of personal connection'⁴³ – numerous overlaps between Latham and Howard may be found. It is crucial to acknowledge these because they suggest a growing convergence around Australian ordinariness that has transformed political culture in a way that would have been unthinkable under Keating.

Latham's contribution to public discourses of the ordinary Australian and ordinary Australia was based on his political perspective and self-positioning which he described in *From the Suburbs* as 'an outer suburban perspective' or, a 'resident's view of society'.⁴⁴ In Latham's hands, this perspective questioned the authority and public

power of elites ('left' and 'right') He spoke, he claimed, for 'the outsiders'. Latham argued that 'the outsiders' are those excluded from power: those not from 'the centre', 'the establishment' and the 'big end of town'. The more he fleshed out the details of the supposed beliefs and aspirations of 'the outsiders' though, the more they came to resemble Howard's Anglocentric 'mainstream'. 'The outsiders' exhibit 'the pragmatic beliefs of those who feel disenfranchised by social change'.⁴⁵ They inhabit 'a world without symbolism and dogma' (such as reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?) and 'do not readily accept the need for cultural change or the demands of identity politics' (such as anti-racism? feminism?).⁴⁶ They are change-weary and want to 'reclaim a sense of identity and community'.⁴⁷

On the 'culture wars' Latham argued that

big picture issues simply wash over people, dissolving in the public's distrust of politicians. In this environment of low expectations, the electorate is looking for a sense of shared values: we need to know that our leaders feel the same way that we do, that they share our concerns and aspirations. In short, that they share our culture.⁴⁸

But what is 'our culture'? Given that appeals to 'our common culture' frequently appear as a reassertion of Anglo-Celtic norms and in opposition to multiculturalism, it is very difficult to understand this as anything other than an appeal to the 'traditional' Anglo-Celtic heritage and to homogeneity over heterogeneity. Here, as in numerous other places, Latham betrays his affection for Anglocentric norms and hostility to difference especially politicised difference. His problem with difference includes the politics of gender and sexuality. When he declared that: '[f]eminists identify primarily with the gender politics of affirmative action, while most people – male and female – want a society based on merit and equal opportunity' he demonstrated that he not only had little grasp of feminist politics, but also no understanding of affirmative action in Australia: it has always been based on equal opportunity and the recognition of merit.⁴⁹ This mix of incomprehension and hostility to the politics of the new social movements was further exposed in his diaries. There he stated that in the lead up to the 2004 election there were

six things that he needed to accomplish to ‘get the Party back on its feet’.⁵⁰ One of these was the need to ‘overcome Howard’s wedge’. How? Family values:

We want the children out of the detention centres, not because of UN conventions, but because we care for children and they deserve a better life. We want to say sorry to the Stolen Generations, not because of Indigenous rights, but because of family values. We want to treat same-sex couples fairly not because of their sexuality but because they love and care for each other. It’s about good values.⁵¹

His hostility to those within the ALP who wanted a more ‘humanitarian and compassionate’ response to refugees and asylum seekers was intense: he argued that this was a ‘betrayal of traditional Labor values’ and undermined ‘the rule of law’.⁵² Again and again the claims of minority groups and those who support them were represented by Latham as threats to universalism, to Australian democracy and, it can be argued, to ‘the mainstream’.

By the time that Latham came to public prominence as leader of the opposition Howard’s normative iteration of the ordinary had many enthralled. There were considerable differences between the politics of Howard and Latham. It would be impossible to imagine Howard stating (as Latham did) that: ‘We need to rebuild the public’s belief in the problem-solving power of the state’⁵³ or, that the domestic war on poverty is as important as the international war on terror.⁵⁴ However, on the terrain of the ‘culture wars’ Latham failed to offer a robust alternative to Howard. A good part of the explanation for this lies in his capture by, and no doubt affection for, the hegemonic interpretation of ordinary Australians. Latham not only failed to offer a real alternative to Howard’s ordinary rule, he also furthered the discursive authority of this way of understanding and appealing to the Australian people. It is therefore appropriate to refer to a political convergence around the ordinary and the ordinary Australian (which is not to deny the presence of resistant voices). The question of the electoral appeal of Howard’s ordinariness cannot be answered by focussing simply on his person. Australian

histories and contemporary political culture provide the inescapable context of that ordinariness.

It remains to be seen whether, as leader of the federal opposition, Rudd can or will successfully challenge the parameters of the debate around the ‘mainstream’ and the political and cultural aspirations of ‘ordinary Australians’. Already there are signs in the media of the recuperation of Rudd into a project of ‘making ordinary’. Comparisons between the ordinary Howard and the ordinary Rudd are being made:

Howard has built a career on looking ordinary. It is his strength, allowing him to identify with the battlers and to avoid becoming the sort of tall poppy that Australians determinedly cut down. But this attribute has been neutralised by Rudd’s own ordinariness and political conservatism. Stand them side by side and the similarities are unavoidable. The only real difference - at least at first blush – is in age. Rudd is young. Howard suddenly looks old.⁵⁵

Perhaps Rudd will resist the lure of populist appeals to ordinary Australians. Perhaps he will contribute to a new political language that does not so dangerously impact on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary Australia. It will not be an easy terrain to negotiate.

Conclusion

This article has argued that in order to properly analyse the meaning and political appeal of Howard’s extraordinary ordinariness it is essential to breakthrough the commonplace observations that Howard’s ordinariness is somehow limited to his persona. It is true that his bland style, modest appearance, flat tones and affectless presence contribute to his capacity to embody the ordinary. However, considerably more is involved: the extent to which Howard is able to embody and then ‘use’ ordinariness is dependent upon a

political and cultural context that makes this meaningful. Too little attention has been paid to what that context is composed of. This article is a contribution to that project.

It is often assumed that the mobilisation of ordinariness is the origin of power however it is better understood as the outcome of power – a complex historical and cultural product. Understood in this way attention is directed to Howard’s ordinariness as a local production of *making ordinary*. Although a large-scale historical investigation of Australia and the ordinary is beyond the scope of this article, existing research such as that of Hage, Johnson and Poynting et al makes visible some of the exclusionary relations through which contemporary Australian ordinariness is lived and represented. In 2006 commentaries on Howard’s ordinariness focussed on the effectiveness of that. This research suggests that equal attention should be given to the *affective* dimensions. When attention is paid to the affective dimensions it becomes clear that the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that circulate around the ordinary leave no one untouched. Those at ‘the centre’, part of ‘the mainstream’, are undermined and incited to understand themselves as always threatened, ever vigilant and frightened of difference even though, at the same time, they are encouraged to be ‘relaxed and comfortable’. It is difficult to know what changes in Australian political culture might transform this situation. One thing is clear though: Howard’s ordinariness is larger than his life and it will take more than his retirement to reshape the contemporary politics of the ordinary and the meaning of an ordinary Australian life.

NOTES

- ¹ Matt Price, 'Getting Personal' in Nick Cater (ed.), *The Howard Factor* (Carlton, Victoria, 2006), p.61
- ² Bill Leak, 'Read My Lips' in Cater (ed.), 'Howard Factor' p.192
- ³ Tom Switzer, 'John Howard and the Missing Biographers', *Quadrant Magazine: Politics* Volume XLVIII Number 10, http://www.quadrant.org.au/php/article_view.php?article_id=965 (accessed 13 June, 2006)
- ⁴ Leak, 'Read My Lips', p.192
- ⁵ Hugh McKay, 'Howard: an ordinary bloke who feeds a nation's prejudices' <http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/howard-an-ordinary-bloke-who-feeds-a-nation's-prejudices> (Accessed 13 June 2006)
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Dennis Shanahan, 'Two Howards' in Cater (ed.), 'Howard Factor', p.19
- ⁸ Alistair Mant 'The Master Tactician Stumbles', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 June 2006, p.13
- ⁹ Kathy Marks, 'John Howard: The Dispiriting Face of Middle Australia' <http://eniar.org/news/howard.html> (accessed 13 June 2006)
- ¹⁰ Cater (ed.), 'Howard Factor', p.xv
- ¹¹ Glenn Milne, 'Purpose Driven' in Cater (ed.), 'Howard Factor', p.46
- ¹² Mark Brissenden, 'John Howard: 10 Years at the Top' *The 7.30 Report*, broadcast 02/03/06, TV Program Transcript <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2006/s1582730.htm> (Accessed 13 June 2006), p.2
- ¹³ Paul Kelly, 'How Howard Governs' in Cater (ed.) 'Howard Factor' p.12
- ¹⁴ Cater, 'Howard Factor', p.12
- ¹⁵ Shanahan, in Cater (ed.), 'Howard Factor', p.44
- ¹⁶ Helen Ester, 'The Media' in Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison (eds) *Silencing Dissent: How the Australian Government is Controlling Public Opinion and Stifling Debate* (Sydney, 2007) p.120
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 119 & 120
- ¹⁸ Maria Angel and Anna Gibbs, 'Media, Affect and the Face: Biomediation and the Political Scene', *Southern Review* Vol. 38 (2006), pp.24-39
- ¹⁹ John Tebbutt, 'Formats: Performance and Affect in Talkback Radio', *Southern Review* Vol. 38 (2006), p.92
- ²⁰ Judith Brett, 'The New Liberalism' in Robert Manne (ed.) *The Howard Years*, (Melbourne, 2004), p.81
- ²¹ Nick Dyrenfurth, 'Battlers, Refugees and the Republic: John Howard's Language of Citizenship', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 84 (2005), pp.186-187; Carol Johnson, *Governing Change: Keating to Howard* (Perth, Western Australia, 2000), pp.40-42
- ²² Dyrenfurth, 'Battlers, Refugees and the Republic'.

²³ Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Annandale, New South Wales, 1998) pp.18-19

²⁴ See also: Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (Annandale, New South Wales, 2003); Anthony Burke, *In Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety* (Annandale, New South Wales, 2001); Dyrenfurth, 'Battlers, Refugees and the Republic'; Peter Gale, *The Politics of Fear: Lighting the Wik*, (Frenchs Forest, 2005); Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar, and Jock Collins, *Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other* (Sydney, 2004)

²⁵ Poynting et al, 'Bin Laden in the Suburbs', p.67

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.53

²⁷ Johnson, 'Governing Change', p.42

²⁸ John Howard, 'A Sense of Balance: The Australian Achievement in 2006' *Address to the National Press Club*, (25 January 2006, Canberra), available at <http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2006/speech1754.cfm>

²⁹ Angel and Gibbs, 'Media Affect and the Face', p.35

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* [1887] (New York, 1956).

³¹ Brett, 'The New Liberalism', p.82

³² Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The shaping of the private self*, (London, 1999), p. xxiii

³³ Commonwealth Government, *Let's Look Out for Australia: Protecting Our Way of Life From a Possible Terrorist Threat* (Canberra, February 2003)

³⁴ Engin F. Isin 'The Neurotic Citizen' *Citizenship Studies* Vol. 8 (2004), pp.217-35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.223

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.232

³⁷ Hage, 'Against Paranoid Nationalism', p.49

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.51 & 52

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.50

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.60

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.64-65

⁴² Mark Latham, *The Latham Diaries* (Melbourne, 2005), p.248

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.262

⁴⁴ Mark Latham *From the Suburbs: Building a Nation from our Neighbourhoods* (Annandale, New South Wales, 2003), pp.9 & 20

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.20-21

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.20

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.24

⁴⁹ Mark Latham 'The Moral Foundations of Government' in Peter Botsman and Mark Latham (eds.) *The Enabling State: People Before Bureaucracy* (Annandale, New South Wales, 2001), p.239

⁵⁰ Latham, 'The Latham Diaries', p.260

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.261

⁵² Cited in Michelle Grattan and Cynthia Banham 'ALP soft line treacherous, says Latham', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26-27 January 2006, p.4

⁵³ Latham, 'From the Suburbs', p.25

⁵⁴ Mark Latham 'Latham: My Vision for Australia', <http://australianpolitics.com.au/news/2003/12/03-12-06.shtml> (Accessed 8 April 2004)

⁵⁵ Tony Wright, 'The Year of Voting Dangerously', p.5
<http://bulletin.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=225769> (accessed 2 April 2007)