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Left thought & practice Aotearoa

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The New Zealand Project

By Max Harris, Bridget Williams Books, 2017

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WHEN I WAS a member of the Green Party from 1998-2008, we always felt slightly superior to every other political party because we had Principles.¹ And anyone active in the Greens could recite them, as if they were the Catechism, such was their importance to the policies and processes of the party. I recall a Green MP saying, back in the early 2000s, that if they were confronted with an issue or debate on which the Greens had no collectively established view, they would mentally consult the four principles to determine a sound Green position. New members were inducted into the party by way of these four principles.

1 Ecological wisdom, appropriate decision making, social responsibility, and non-violence.

What has shocked me recently, however, is that I could not find the principles, or any of the supporting documents worked on so carefully—the Green Charter, the vision, values, purpose statements, and our aspirations—on the current Green Party website.² All these fine principles and values don't appear to have been invited to the party in 2017, like some embarrassing family member who speaks their mind a little too freely.

After some further searching I did actually find the documents online, in a set of webpages covered by the following note: 'This website is archived—click here to go to the Green Party website'.³ Who on earth 'archives' their principles and their values? And why would they do such a thing?

My search was a response to reading *The New Zealand Project*. At the start of his book, Max Harris names the problem that he perceives in New Zealand politics. He claims there is 'a lack of values-based politics at the electoral level' in New Zealand.⁴ Having turned to the Greens' website and found their principles have been archived, I started to wonder if Harris might be correct in his assertion.

But there are claims on other party websites that they are operating from a values base. National Party values are not hidden from view; they are boldly proclaimed, summarised by the arrogant certainty of the rubric 'Less debt, more jobs, strong stable government'.⁵ The list of nine values includes: equal citizenship and equal opportunity; individual freedom and choice; personal responsibility; competitive enterprise and reward for

2 Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, "Home Page," accessed June 18, 2017, <https://www.greens.org.nz/>

3 Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, "Our Party," accessed June 18, 2017, <https://home.greens.org.nz/about/ourparty>

4 Max Harris, *The New Zealand Project*, (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books 2017), p. 12.

5 National Party, "Our Values," accessed June 11, 2017, <https://www.national.org.nz/our-values>

achievement; limited government; strong families and caring communities. Assuredly, these are neoliberal values.

David Harvey writes that the word neoliberalism ‘refers to a lot of rhetoric about individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility and the virtues of privatisation, the free market and free trade’.⁶ The National Party website certainly recites all of this. But Harvey also points out that this rhetoric masks something else that is much more disturbing, namely ‘draconian policies designed to restore and consolidate capitalist class power’.⁷ One cannot doubt that the principles of neoliberalism thus understood are fully expressed in the practice of the government of New Zealand right now: National is indeed engaging in class war of the most vindictive, divisive, and destructive kind.

The New Zealand Labour Party doesn’t go for principles; instead it has a vision for us. It’s called the ‘Kiwi dream’, an expression of ‘the things that make us who we are and define our place in the world’, and it is explained as follows:

A home to call our own. Opportunities for everyone’s kids to succeed, no matter where they live. Security and freedom to make our own choices. Pride in our independence and a passion for our environment. That’s the New Zealand we want and deserve.⁸

And that’s it. It’s all they have for us. These few bland lines that could be from a bank advert avoid any explicit statement of basic social-democratic values, such as solidarity and social justice, the heritage that the present-day Labour Party supposedly inherits and the tradition it supposedly represents. The party seems to

6 David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, (London: Profile Books 2011), p. 10.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

8 Labour Party, “Labour Backs the Kiwi Dream,” accessed June 11, 2017, <http://www.labour.org.nz/vision>

embody nothing more than focus-group-driven ultra-pragmatism, a bunch of smiling feel-good statements that for some reason make me feel the exact opposite.

When the two major parties have very little to distinguish themselves from each other, when their policies all rattle on equally emptily about opportunities, freedom, and choice, then maybe framing and spin does matter. Let the battle of the advertising agencies commence. What will you buy: ‘strong stable government’ or ‘the Kiwi dream’?

No wonder people stay away from the polling booths in droves.

As many have already noted, the vacuousness of New Zealand Labour right now stands in sharp contrast to the energy of Jeremy Corbyn’s UK Labour Party, driven as it is both by Corbyn’s long history of principled politics and a policy agenda that firmly repudiates neoliberalism and austerity and returns to what we once knew as social democracy. In describing how Corbyn’s approach radically changed the political landscape during the 2017 general election in the UK, Alex Nunns explained what so many in the media have failed to understand:

They think it’s a game of messaging that is played via broadcasters and newspapers, who can set today’s news agenda, who can score this or that point. It’s played for five years [ie through the UK election cycle] and the party that played most skilfully wins.

That’s not true at all.

Politics is about interests. It’s about conflicting forces. And what was happening was the awakening of a section of society that felt unrepresented, was reeling from the effects of the 2008 financial

crash and wanted something done.⁹

Unfortunately, Labour here in New Zealand is still messing about with messaging.

I am sure that if I questioned any Green or Labour MP they would be very explicit about the values they personally adhere to. But the collectives, the parties they belong to, apparently have no such clarity at all. The foundational values of the parties have been all but air-brushed out. I have a feeling the marketing people have taken over and it's a depressing spectacle.

Max Harris' response is to call for 'a moral framework for determining what politics is for' against the politicians who have 'clung to an unimaginative British-style pragmatism as the guiding principle of their work'.¹⁰ Harris moves quickly to articulate the 'cornerstone progressive values' he would like to see at the heart of New Zealand politics: care, creativity and community.¹¹ It's a formulation which seems to prioritise alliteration—but Harris sidesteps my criticism by outlining the groundwork he has done in conceiving this set of values and his desire to avoid writing an academic tract. The values are the starting point for a policy investigation, not a theoretical end point in themselves, so let's give him the benefit of the doubt on that one.

The three values Harris sets down form the lens through which progressive policy in New Zealand is critiqued and reimaged in the rest of *The New Zealand Project*. Chapters cover health, education, housing, justice, economics, the environment, and more. Harris is analytical, the writing rather lacking in passion as a consequence, perhaps, but he is good at handling detail.

9 Alex Nunns [interviewed by Ben Chacko], 'We Have to Seize This Moment', *The Morning Star*, June 24, 2017, accessed August 16, 2017, <https://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-9d17-We-have-to-seize-this-moment#.WVlphNwIGUk>.

10 Harris, *The New Zealand Project*, 13-14.

11 *Ibid.*, 15.

The most important chapter in this book is the chapter on decolonisation. Without decolonisation, anything aspiring to call itself *The New Zealand Project* is doomed to fail. Indeed, any 21st-century political project in these islands must put constitutional reform and decolonisation at the centre of its thinking. Without addressing these issues, everything else that is put in place by any government will remain contingent, flawed, and probably worthless in the long term, because the fundamental social problem we face is our own history. Until that history is healed, no future can truly grow strong.

The damaging effects of colonisation borne by tangata whenua can be seen in many facets of life. Harris focuses on loss of land, loss of language, and loss of mana as examples, in other words the expropriation or widespread destruction of the cultural, spiritual, emotional, and physical resources of tangata whenua and the resulting inequality and disadvantage. It leads him inexorably to the conclusion that what is required is:

a structural transformation in the position of Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand ... redistribution of public power (including possibly through constitutional change), concerted political action to redress inequalities and strengthen Māori culture and collectives, and policies that shift Pākehā understanding (such as making te reo Māori compulsory in schools).¹²

This is a bold clarion call—I think by far the most radical proposal in the entire book. And if Harris’s book starts a public debate on anything, I hope it is decolonisation.

The emphasis on both structural transformation and shifting Pākehā understanding stresses the institutional nature of the privilege experienced by some at the expense of others in

12 Ibid., 89.

this country. The notion of white privilege inherent in institutional racism is not avoided by Harris, and it is a notion many Pākehā are starting to get to grips with for the first time.¹³ There is a slow dawning of the fact that white privilege is not something that happens only in the United States; it is happening right here, every day. Harris faces up to this reality and what it means. He quotes Ani Mikaere to argue that Pākehā ‘need to take ownership of their history and to take positive steps to redress the situation. Such steps will include learning to let go of some of their power’.¹⁴

The situation of non-European immigrants and citizens descended from non-European immigrants is considered by Harris with some thoughts on the term Pākehā. The generally accepted meaning is, of course, ‘New Zealander of European descent’. Since biculturalism is usually understood to refer to the relationship between Māori and Pākehā, it is problematic for those immigrants or their descendants who do not see themselves as Pākehā. They appear to be excluded from a bicultural Tiriti discourse. The solution Harris proposes is a redefinition of the word Pākehā to mean ‘non-Māori New Zealander’.¹⁵

Adapting language by decree to suit socio-political ends is a dubious proposition in any circumstances, but it seems wholly unnecessary when there are words that are already used to mean ‘non-Māori New Zealander’. One is ‘tauiwi’. But my preference is for the words ‘tangata Tiriti’, the people of the Treaty, who are thus positioned in relation to ‘tangata whenua’ in the context of te Tiriti.¹⁶

13 Virginia Larsson, “White Noise: When White Privilege Drowns Out Reality,” *North & South*, June 2017, accessed June 30, 2017, <http://www.noted.co.nz/currently/social-issues/white-noise-when-white-privilege-drowns-out-reality/>

14 Ani Mikaere, cited in Harris, *The New Zealand Project*, 83.

15 Harris, *The New Zealand Project*, 111.

16 I’d like to acknowledge Treaty educator Moea Armstrong who introduced me to the self-description tangata Tiriti a decade or more ago. Ngā mihi, Moea.

The discussion on decolonisation then proceeds to the redistribution of public power. Through an interview with Moana Jackson, Harris explores the possibilities for constitutional transformation, in particular those set out in the Matike Mai Aotearoa report.¹⁷ There are six indicative constitutional models put forward in the report, and several of them suggest a tricameral arrangement: a separation between the ‘tino rangatiratanga sphere’ (eg an iwi/hapu assembly) and the ‘kāwanatanga sphere’ (the Crown in the Westminster parliamentary tradition), and a third ‘relational sphere’ to connect the first two in joint decision making where necessary.¹⁸

Summarising Jackson’s position, Harris writes that:

there is a strong view—especially from Māori perspectives—that the current Parliament lacks legitimacy, because of the way power was assumed over time despite commitments in the Treaty. The legitimacy problem has not completely disappeared with Treaty settlements. The way forward, then, is for Māori to lead the constitutional conversation. If Māori, as the original people of this land, do not support moves for constitutional change, those moves cannot be pursued. The suggestion of a Māori Constitutional Convention in the Matike Mai Aotearoa report deserves support and further debate. The broader conversation must then draw in other key voices.¹⁹

Any moves in this direction will undoubtedly require Pākehā to acknowledge their privilege and let go of some of their power.

17 Matike Mai Aotearoa, “The Independent Working Group on Constitutional Transformation,” *He Whakaaro Here Whakaamu Mō Aotearoa: The Report of Matike Mai Aotearoa*, January, 2016, accessed June 30, 2017, <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/MatikeMaiAotearoaReport.pdf>

18 *Ibid.*, 104–112.

19 Harris, *The New Zealand Project*, 98.

Are there any leaders in the Pākehā world willing to take those steps? Without a constitutional transformation, nothing else can take root and grow.

The closing chapter suggests that the book and the policies it articulates are non-partisan, that ‘the proposals chime with policies from almost every political party in Parliament in 2017’.²⁰ At this point Harris comes mighty close to claiming his position is ‘beyond left and right’ when he states he has written the book on the assumption that we all cherish the same values of care, community, and creativity.²¹ This sort of wishful thinking about a consensus on values in New Zealand in this final chapter might be intended to provide a warm fuzzy ending to the book, but it achieves the reverse because it avoids the reality of politics. In his book, Harris has reflected on the role and nature of *values* in our politics, but he has perhaps not sufficiently reflected on the role and nature of *politics* itself. I’d like to finish with some thoughts on why this missing component is so important for the other aspects of Harris’s thinking.

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe argues that democratic politics is about conflict, the challenge to established power, and the struggle for hegemony.²² The ‘enemy’ is regarded as a legitimate adversary, but still an enemy. ‘Compromises are, of course, also possible; they are part and parcel of politics; but they should be seen as temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation’.²³ The confrontation between adversaries, Mouffe maintains, should ideally be staged ‘around the diverse conceptions of citizenship’ which include liberal-conservative, social-democratic, neoliberal,

20 Ibid., 280.

21 Ibid., 280.

22 Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin (London: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

23 Ibid., 203.

and radical-democratic,²⁴ and I would also include an indigenuous worldview that is particular to tangata whenua here. Each of these diverse worldviews, Mouffe continues, ‘proposes its own interpretation of the “common good”, and tries to implement a different form of hegemony’.²⁵ That common good is the expression of our values in day-to-day living; Harris’s own set of basic values, and much of the book, make that very clear. Equally clearly, these values are not universally shared; as I have shown above, National has a values base that leads it to engage in class war.

Harris unfortunately chooses to ignore this in his final chapter. I say ‘unfortunately’ because, without accepting the role and nature of politics as a struggle for hegemony, the preceding chapters of his book will remain just so many fine words. Yet Harris is well aware that we desperately need radical change on many fronts. As I have suggested earlier, his chapter on decolonisation and constitutional transformation proclaims that awareness boldly. But in order to translate proposals for change into action for change, we need a clear-eyed view of politics. Wishful thinking will not do.

24 Ibid., 204.

25 Ibid., 204.

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