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Australian social democracy: capitalist constraints and the challenges of equality, in *Why the left loses: the decline of the centre-left in comparative perspective*, 2018 / Manwaring, R., Kennedy, P. (ed./s), pp.69-84, Bristol, Policy Press, 2018

This is a post-peer review, pre-copy edited version of a chapter published in 'Why the Left Loses: The Decline of the Centre-Left in Comparative Perspective'. Details of the definitive published version and how to purchase it are available online at:

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Chapter 5: Australian Social Democracy: Capitalist constraints and the challenges of equality

Carol Johnson

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It will be argued in this chapter that the experience of the Australian Rudd and Gillard governments (2007-2013) reflects deeper problems faced by social democratic governments and that the Australian experience therefore has relevance for social democracy internationally.¹ In particular, an analysis of why the left (so often) loses in Australia needs to look not just at specific national features but also at longer term problems and dilemmas which social democracy has faced in regard to managing capitalist economies and attempting to mitigate diverse forms of inequality. This chapter will therefore focus on the attempts of the Australian Rudd and Gillard governments to tackle some of these issues. In doing so, it does not aim to give detailed analyses of their legislative programmes, nor the multiple factors that contributed to their electoral difficulties.² Rather, given the focus of this collection, it intends to concentrate on identifying some key issues that have a broader relevance.

Institutional factors and democratic constraints.

¹ This chapter incorporates some material produced as part of an ARC-funded project (DP140100168) entitled: "Expanding equality: A historical perspective on developments and dilemmas in contemporary Australian social democracy."

² See e.g. Johnson and Wanna with Lee (2015) for a detailed analysis of the multiple factors leading to the electoral defeat of the final Rudd Labor government.

At first sight, Australian political institutions should provide favourable contexts for electing social democratic governments. Indeed, Australia was a pioneer of electoral reforms (Sawer, 2001) that facilitated working class voting. Australia elected its first state Labor government in 1899 and a (brief) federal Labor government in 1904, thereby arguably forming both the first labour government anywhere in the world and also the first national one (Murphy, 1971; McMullin, 2006). Nonetheless, the issue of ‘Why the Left Loses’ is, particularly relevant for Australia. For, despite such a promising start, as of the 2016 election, Labor had won only 14 of the 45 federal elections held since Australia became a nation in 1901.

Consequently, it is worth noting that Australia’s political institutions have also posed some difficulties for Labor nationally. A preferential voting system helped keep Labor out of power in the nineteen fifties and sixties when the preferences of a conservative, catholic-influenced, anti-communist, party formed after a split in Labor, assisted the Liberal Party (Australia’s equivalent of the British Conservatives) in winning office. However, in more recent years the preferential voting system has allowed preferences from left-wing voters, such as Greens supporters, to flow to Labor for key House of Representatives seats, where government is formed, thereby partly compensating for a major drop in Labor’s primary vote and making Labor’s electoral competition with other parties marginally less of an issue than in first-past-the-post systems such as Britain’s (see e.g. Bale, 2015: 268-9). Nonetheless, Australia’s proportional representation system in the Senate has facilitated the election of minor party and independents to the upper house because of the small proportion of votes required to fill a Senate quota.³ As we shall see, Labor governments have sometimes faced problems with enacting their legislative agenda when the Greens hold the balance of power in the Senate.

³ The quota to obtain a Senate seat is normally 14.29% in a half senate election, though this reduces even further to 7.69% on the rare occasions when the whole of the Senate stands for

There have also been institutional issues with the internal structure of the Labor Party. The ongoing influence of affiliated unions in the Labor Party, which still accounts for 50% of elected delegates, has been used by right-wing opponents to suggest that Labor is union-dominated though the extent of union influence has been disputed (see Markey, 2016). Up until 2013, Labor leaders (including Prime Ministers) could be replaced by a simple vote of Labor politicians (the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party or FPLP). Factional leaders, often closely associated with influential unions affiliated to the Labor party, did influence how some politicians voted.⁴ As we shall see, this structural issue contributed to significant leadership instability when Labor governments faced difficulties during the Rudd and Gillard period. Under new Constitutional rules, the leader is elected by both Labor politicians and the general party membership with both having equal weight (ALP, 2015: 20). Under a 2013 FPLP decision, such an election could only be triggered by a leader resigning; an election loss or 75% of federal Labor politicians petitioning for a leadership change when in government and 60% when in opposition. However, these latter provisions were not enshrined in the Labor Party's Constitution.

Importantly, the Australian Labor Party has also faced more fundamental challenges, common to social democratic parties internationally, that arise from the nature of liberal democratic institutions in capitalist societies. For liberal democracy both enables the election of social democratic governments and puts constraints on their power. While liberal democracy provides absolutely crucial freedoms of speech and association and electoral rights, the actual practice of representative democracy is largely confined to the

election. On Australia's voting system, see Ward (2012: 171-2; 195-197) and Australian Electoral Commission (2016) on the latest changes to preferential voting in the Senate.

⁴ Further information on the role of factions is given in Rob Manwaring's chapter on state Labor governments.

parliamentary sphere and severely limited in the economic sphere. For example, there is a lack of workplace democracy; a lack of control over the decisions made by private companies and (especially in English-speaking countries) limits to the degree in which it is seen as desirable for the state to interfere in the private sector, either via regulation or public sector provision.

Consequently, social democracy has always battled with the constraints of managing a capitalist economy. As Adam Przeworski amongst others has pointed out, private enterprise has a privileged and powerful position in capitalist economies (Przeworski, 1985: 7-46, 139). Such economies largely depend upon private investment in order to employ workers. That investment in turn depends upon the profitability of the private sector. So governments need to ensure private profitability and thereby face structural constraints when it comes to regulating, taxing or replacing the private sector, or ensuring excellent pay and working conditions. Measures which are seen as too adverse by the private sector can result in capital strikes in respect to new investment; threats to move investment offshore to more favourable regimes and well-funded campaigns against proposed reforming legislation. Not only will governments then appear to be poor economic managers but, more importantly, they risk losing the support of a significant proportion of voters whose employment depends, directly or indirectly, upon the relative prosperity of the private sector.

Overall, private enterprise has a structural position in the economy that provides it with tremendous power that reforming social democratic governments have to negotiate.

Arguably, it is these constraints, rather than, as Escalone et al. suggest, a particularly benign post-war period of capitalism, that helps explain the lack of fundamental transformation of capitalist political and economic structures (Escalone et al., 2013: 15-16). Berman (2006) is

correct to identify a belief in the primacy of politics as a key feature of social democracy. However, Berman doesn't adequately address the economic constraints, including economic power relations and opposition from capital, that social democratic parties may encounter when they try to exercise their political will. Furthermore, many of the problems governments are forced to deal with result from economic factors that are often largely out of a national government's control, including the impact of international economic crises on government revenue and private sector employment, competition from industries in countries with lower levels of wages and regulation, and the investment decisions made by footloose international capital.

Ideology, practice and structural constraints.

From the mid twentieth century on, social democratic governments, particularly in the English-speaking world, have had two main economic strategies for attempting to negotiate those economic structural constraints (both involving a partial denial of the structural power of capital). One is to embrace broadly Keynesian-influenced strategies which argue that state action and the public sector can be highly beneficial to the private sector, particularly in time of economic downturn. The state is therefore justified in going into temporary deficit when required but also in ensuring that it has sufficient revenue. In this view, the state can assist the private sector by helping to smooth out the cycles of boom and bust that plague capitalist economies and there is therefore a perceived harmony of interests between the public and private sectors. For example,, state intervention can help to keep up levels of consumption of private sector goods in times of economic downturn through providing adequate welfare income for the unemployed, employing people in public works and, if necessary, directly releasing money to consumers. . The Curtin and Chifley Labor governments of 1941 to 1949 played a central role in introducing such Keynesian-influenced policies to Australia (see

Battin, 1997: 33-51). As we shall see, the Rudd and Gillard governments of 2007-2013 were also influenced by Keynesianism.

The second way in which social democrats have tried to deal with (and sometimes wish away) the problem of capitalist structural constraints is via the partial embrace of neoliberal arguments which draw on the arguments of Keynes' free market opponents. In this view, which the Hawke and Keating Labor governments (1983-96) played a major role in introducing to Australia, also influencing Blairite conceptions of the Third Way, market mechanisms were not seen as being in fundamental tension with social democracy's egalitarian objectives (Johnson & Tonkiss, 2002; Scott, 2000; Manwaring, 2014: 85-102). On the contrary, it was argued that market mechanisms could help constrain the power of capital (by ensuring competition between capitalists) and market delivery mechanisms could be used to provide egalitarian outcomes. Governments should therefore restrict their role and government debt while facilitating markets via deregulation and privatisation (see e.g. Latham, 2003; Keating, 1993; Johnson, 2011; Escalone et al., 2013: 17). However, as we shall see, endorsing such views on the benefits of markets can then pose policy legitimization problems for subsequent Labor governments.

Labor governments and the economy in practice 2007- 2013: Ideas and leadership

The experience of the Rudd and Gillard governments illustrates that such longer term problems and dilemmas about how to manage a capitalist economy are not abstract ones. Indeed, it will be argued below that they were one of the factors that contributed to the leadership instability that plagued Labor during the Rudd and Gillard years. Admittedly, other factors that contributed to that leadership instability included then party rules that made it relatively easy to remove a Labor Prime Minister, sometimes legitimate concerns about

both Rudd and Gillard's performance, by negative poll results and the relentless campaigning of an often hostile media.⁵

Unfortunately for their successors, a consequence of Hawke and Keating's turn to the market was that it helped to undermine a central argument as to why one needed social democratic governments. The traditional role of social democracy had been to mitigate the effects of markets by humanising capitalism, including by lessening inequality (Marliere, 2014: 99). Underlying that mission was the belief that markets needed regulating because otherwise they led to injustice, hardship, cycles of boom and recession, and market failure. Consequently, suggesting that market mechanisms were allies in the fight for social justice and social inclusion made it much harder to argue that social democratic governments had an important role to play in reforming modern societies, particularly in tackling the forms of structural inequality that arose from capitalist markets, even in times of high economic growth.

Rudd was less enamoured with free market-influenced policies than Hawke and Keating. He had provided significant critiques of extreme neo-liberalism before coming into office, arguing that it reduced essential health, education and welfare services and increased inequality (Rudd, 2006a; Rudd, 2006b). Nonetheless, given the ongoing influence of neo-liberal ideas on voters' views, Rudd declared during the 2007 election that he would be a 'fiscal conservative' – though he added the important (Keynesian-influenced) rider that he would balance the budget across the business cycle (ALP, 2007). Soon after coming into office, the Rudd government's resolve to balance budgets was sorely tested by the global financial crisis. The government resorted to a Keynesian-influenced counter-cyclical policy,

⁵ On the important role of leadership in state Labor governments, see Manwaring's chapter in this volume.

which Joseph Stiglitz has described as ‘one of the best-designed Keynesian stimulus packages of any country’ (Stiglitz , 2010).⁶

However, Labor had great difficulty convincing the Australian electorate that it was necessary to increase debt in order to fund a stimulus package. This was despite the stimulus helping to prevent the Australian economy going into recession; despite the size of the deficit being partly due to major falls in revenue; and despite the government’s debt being relatively low internationally (see e.g. Swan, 2012; Rudd, 2013). Labor’s task was made all the harder by the previous Hawke and Keating governments’ embrace of economic rationalist agendas which had reinforced key aspects of neoliberal arguments against government debt. Labor’s ‘budget crisis’ and perceived poor economic management were to be major election issues in both the 2010 and 2013 elections (Wanna and Simms, 2012; Johnson and Wanna with Lee, 2015).

Meanwhile, Labor’s difficulties in addressing government debt issues were exacerbated by the opposition they encountered from business when attempting to increase tax revenue. The mining industry mounted a \$22 million public relations campaign against the government’s attempts to introduce a mining super profits tax, which contributed to the (multiple) pressures on Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s leadership (Davis, 2011). When Rudd was subsequently replaced by Julia Gillard in June 2010, key Labor ministers tried to neutralise business opposition quickly by negotiating compromise measures which resulted in a massive drop in revenue (Cleary, 2012: 188).⁷

⁶ Arguably the Rudd government’s strategy was much more Keynesian than that of its British counterpart, see Marliere (2014: 105).

⁷ In May 2010, the Resource Super Profits Tax had been projected to generate a total of \$3 billion in revenue by 2012-13, but projections were reduced to a mere \$200 million by the 2013-14 Budget Papers. See Swoboda, K. (n.d).

The Rudd Labor government had also faced major opposition to its climate change policies when attempting to tackle the market's failure to price carbon, especially given the carbon-intensive nature of Australia's economy. Labor's initial attempt to bring in a carbon price based emissions trading scheme (which would also have raised revenue) had been carefully negotiated with sympathetic sections of business and the then leader of the Opposition Malcolm Turnbull. However, it was defeated in the Senate by a combination of left-wing and right-wing opposition. The right wing opposition included opponents from carbon intensive industries such as coal mining and climate sceptics in the Liberal Party who opposed increased 'taxes' and government intervention in markets (despite the market mechanisms underlying an emissions trading scheme). The internal Liberal Party opponents succeeded in removing Turnbull as leader and replacing him with a more socially conservative, and climate-change sceptic leader, Tony Abbott. The left-wing opposition included politicians from the Greens (elected under the Senate system discussed previously), who argued that Labor had sold out to big business by having overly low carbon reduction targets and providing too much compensation for industries detrimentally impacted by a carbon price (Australian Greens, 2010).

Yet Labor's policy reflected the difficulties in managing a capitalist economy. The temporary compensation packages for business aimed to facilitate workers' transitioning to employment elsewhere. Although Labor's carbon reduction targets were modest to begin with, Climate Change minister Penny Wong was following a social democratic strategy that would enable the government to incrementally increase them, while trying to reduce business opposition and keep up employment levels (Wong, 2009). Nonetheless, Rudd's failure to deliver on climate change policy promises contributed to plummeting opinion poll results (Graetz and

Manning, 2012: 291-2). Meanwhile Opposition Leader Abbott argued that the ETS was a great big green tax that would impact detrimentally on ordinary voters and repeatedly tried to suggest that Labor was selling out its traditional supporters on green issues (Abbott, 2010). Rudd's falling opinion poll results exacerbated internal opposition from Labor politicians who were already concerned by a leadership style that was seen to be erratic, not consultative, indecisive and increasingly lacking in communication skills.

However, Rudd's replacement, Julia Gillard, was unable to win the 2010 election outright (Wanna and Simms, 2012), resulting in a hung parliament. In order to get Greens support to form government, Gillard brought in a (relatively high) carbon price in the lead-up to an emissions trading scheme. Despite having pledged that there would be no carbon tax under any government she led, Gillard was unwise enough to state that the carbon price was effectively a tax. Abbott now argued that Labor was not only betraying its working class voters by bringing in such a tax but that Gillard was a liar as well. Meanwhile the Greens-influenced carbon price proved high compared with international market prices, thereby deepening business opposition (Lane, 2011).

In a revolving door leadership, Gillard was replaced as leader and Prime Minister by Rudd in June 2013, after falling opinion poll results and arguments that she was failing to connect with voters. Rudd went on to lose the subsequent 2013 election with the impact of the carbon 'tax' on ordinary voters (despite generous compensation packages) being a key issue, combined with accusations of poor economic management (Johnson and Wanna with Lee, 2015). Abbott claimed that 'Mr Rudd is prepared to sell the soul of the Labor party to the greens in order to realise his own ambitions' (Daily Telegraph, 2013). This is despite the fact that the Rudd Labor government had repealed legislation brought in by the previous Howard

Liberal government that had attacked unions, pay and working conditions and had reinstated many essential protections — even if it had not gone quite as far as some unions wished (Johnson, 2011: 577-8). Environmental issues have continued to be used as ‘wedge’ issues by the conservative parties with suggestions that Labor has deserted its traditional blue collar base to support inner city ‘trendy’ environmental issues. During the 2016 election campaign, which Labor also lost, the Liberal Party released an election video suggesting that the Labor party had been infiltrated by a secret third force of Greens supporters (Liberal Party of Australia, 2016).

The difficulties of managing capitalist markets, business opposition, and forces on the left and right of Labor had been graphically illustrated by the governments’ experiences described above, which neither Keynesian nor neo-liberal-influenced policies could have resolved. Such problems are only likely to increase in future with the impact of technological disruption on economies and jobs, combined with the challenges that the changing geoeconomics of globalisation, especially in the Asian Century, pose to western economies. The Rudd and Gillard governments’ experiences also highlights Labor’s difficulties in crafting a narrative that appealed to traditional Labor voters while facing the challenges of the twenty-first century that went beyond simple constructions of class issues, to environmental and social justice issues. It is to an analysis of these problems and dilemmas that the discussion will now turn.

Labor and inequality.

The problems social democratic governments have traditionally had in managing capitalist economies have been described above. However, capitalist class relations are not the only inequitable social power relations that social democracy has had to deal with. There are also

relations of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity amongst others. It is sometimes implied that these dilemmas constitute new, late twentieth century ‘cultural’ ones (See e.g. Painter, 2013: 97-128, 225-7; Cramme and Diamond, 2012: 253). In fact, many of these forms of inequality (e.g. gender and race) have economic dimensions. Furthermore, while the rise of twentieth century social movements and the impact of globalisation, may be influencing the forms these issues currently take, they are far from new.

Originally social democratic parties largely attempted to deal with these broader social power relations by privileging the white, male, heterosexual, working class head of household, who was seen as *the* citizen whom social democracy focused on supporting, with benefits and entitlements flowing to their wives and children largely at second hand. In other words, it is important to acknowledge that dominant forms of traditional social democracy played a role in reinforcing crucial forms of inequality, despite longstanding struggles within the social democratic movement to make it more inclusive, for example by feminists (Lake, 1992; Liddington and Norris, 1978: 231-251). Not only is Australia a colonial settler society but Australian Labor supported the White Australia policy, which quite explicitly excluded non-white immigration in the twentieth century, with the last vestiges of the policy being removed by the Whitlam Labor government in the early nineteen seventies (Watson, 1901; Lake, and Reynolds, 2008). In short, social democracy has long been a site of contest over both whether the diverse identities of the working class itself will be recognised (e.g. in terms of gender, race and sexuality) and whether broader forms of inequality that are additional to, and go beyond, class oppression will be addressed.

Conservative forces have frequently exploited such differences and social power relations. In Australia, during the Howard years (1996-2007), Labor faced particularly explicit attempts to

wedge off socially conservative voters. Howard argued that exploitation of ordinary Australians had been happening not at the level of the market but the state. He alleged that politically correct special interest groups (such as gender or racial ones) had been ripping off ordinary taxpayers' funds under Labor governments via state largesse (Johnson, 2007: 180). Up until recently, Labor was so afraid of such Howard-style neo-liberal wedges that, despite support for some indigenous, same-sex or gender equality policies while in government, Labor tended to pursue 'small target' election campaigns when it came to progressive social issues.

Labor is still concerned about being 'wedged' on asylum-seeker issues and remains supportive of policies of boat turn-backs and offshore processing that have been strongly condemned by the United Nations amongst others. However, with the exception of its asylum-seeker policies, Labor rejected small target strategies for the 2016 election. Rather, a major Labor narrative revolved around the argument that the role of social democratic governments is to tackle multiple forms of inequality. Consequently, Labor leader Bill Shorten made strong statements in support of multiculturalism, indigenous, gender and same-sex equality, including same-sex marriage, during the 2016 election campaign (Shorten, 2016b; Shorten, 2016 c; Shorten 2016d; ALP, n.d.). Labor has tried to reconcile its support for addressing diverse forms of inequality by arguing that increased equality is better for economic growth, in large part because it ensures adequate consumption levels (ALP, 2016; Shorten 2016c). In other words, the implication is that increased equality benefits everyone, including blue collar workers, and that economic security will therefore help to prevent social divisiveness, including on issues such as immigration (Shorten, 2016a). Such arguments are a clear attempt to counter the type of neo-liberal arguments that Howard and others have promoted.

Nonetheless, given that some social power relations transcend class or economics, social democrats in Australia, as elsewhere, still have the problem of how to reconcile previously powerful social groups (such as white, heterosexual men) to a potential loss of power and privilege (not least when, in the case of some traditional supporters, they may be facing economic uncertainties as well). As votes for Brexit, Trump and Pauline Hanson in Australia have shown, some sections of the working class seem prepared to embrace the exclusionary practices of the past, in order to shore up their own position in response to job losses resulting from globalisation and fears of major international people movements. Furthermore, Labor's underestimation of the importance of socially conservative positions on issues such as gender, was reflected in the fact that Labor powerbrokers did not adequately anticipate the ways in which her gender would be mobilised against Prime Minister Julia Gillard, particularly after she had overthrown first-term Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in a leadership coup (See Johnson, 2015).

As well, Labor's attempts to use its equality agenda to reconnect with its working class base in the 2016 election, including by arguing that Liberal Prime Minister Turnbull was too close to the big end of town, led to accusations that it was anti-business. Turnbull claimed that Labor was 'setting up an anti-business, high-taxing high-spending, big borrowing program that will put our economy backwards. It will put our economy into reverse. It will put the jobs of every Australian at risk' (Turnbull, 2016). Labor's ability to manage a capitalist economy was once again being called into question in a way that potentially scared voters and drew on neoliberal arguments that Labor itself had once partly embraced. Labor was beaten yet again (albeit narrowly).

Conclusion

George Ross has noted the tendency of voters in Europe ‘to remove incumbents when they cannot provide convincing answers to today’s very real and sometimes intractable problems’ (Ross, 2013: 603). The removal of Prime Minister Rudd in order to replace him with Julia Gillard and then going back to Rudd, was an example of Labor pre-emptively anticipating the voters’ tendency to do this. However, this chapter has suggested that some of the problems both Gillard and Rudd faced were related not just due to individual leadership flaws on their part but also to longer term ideational and structural dilemmas and problems.

In particular, it would be unfortunate to neglect the influence of some deeper and longer term challenges which social democratic governments face, whether that be managing a capitalist economy or difficulties involved in managing the different forms of inequality and social power relations that exist in contemporary societies. Those challenges also intersect with institutional issues regarding the nature of liberal democracy. They have implications for the articulation of ideas, particularly Labor’s ability to develop a simple and coherent narrative. Neo-liberal ideology may claim that the market is the solution to all major problems but social democracy neither can, nor should, offer such simplistic and mono-causal policy prescriptions. Perhaps it is time to have a more serious discussion with the electorate about precisely how difficult Labor’s policy task can be, as part of a process of trying to develop better policy prescriptions.

After all, neither Keynesian nor neo-liberal influenced attempts have succeeded in wishing away the difficulties in managing capitalist economies (even if Keynesian policies have generally resulted in more egalitarian outcomes than neo-liberal ones). Instead they have left a legacy of dashed hopes and unrealistic expectations that have impacted negatively on

electoral outcomes. Nor has social democracy's transition from traditionally reinforcing the inequalities of gender, race and sexuality to challenging them been an unproblematic one. On the contrary, it remains necessary to not just emphasise the intersectional diversity and interests of the working class itself but also to make the case afresh as to why a social democratic commitment to building a better society involves challenging multiple forms of inequality. There are no easy solutions. However, it is important to identify the problems if social democratic governments are to hope to address them.

As a former Labor cabinet minister, who has held both the climate change and finance minister portfolios, as well as being a major advocate for gender, racial and same-sex equality, stated... 'One of the things I have learnt — I think we all have learnt — is just how hard reform... can be.' (Wong, 2011) It is clearly not inevitable that Labor loses, or we would not have had reforming Labor governments. However, it does seem inevitable that the task of social democratic governments will always be a very difficult and complex one.

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