



# Good ideas beat ideological divide

*Politics has moved beyond the old divisions of Left and Right, observes Craig Emerson*

COMPETITORS in the battle of ideas seek to occupy the moral high ground by asserting that others belong down the hill, over it or in a ditch. That's why so much energy is devoted to slotting policy thinkers into lines of trenches comprising the hard Left, the Left, progressives, Centre Left, Centre Right and neo-conservatives.

Next we'll be reading about an extreme-centre think tank. Or a new political party called the Moderates who chant: "What do we want? Gradual change! When do we want it? In due course!"

Anyone who acknowledges the potentially beneficial power of markets and competition and who argues for evidence-based policy in the environmental arena is branded by critics as a member of the political Right.

Allegedly only the Right is invited by the Centre for Independent Studies to attend its annual Consilium. Never mind that participants have included Kevin Rudd, Lindsay Tanner, Julia Gillard, Wayne Swan, several other ALP parliamentarians, Warren Mundine, Noel Pearson and Cassandra Wilkinson.

At every Consilium in the past five years, indigenous disadvantage has been high on the agenda and at the most recent meeting, Australia's richest man, Andrew Forrest, entered into a covenant with the Prime Minister, Mundine and Pearson to create 50,000 jobs for Aboriginal people.

At every recent Consilium, new ways of providing a quality education for Australia's most disadvantaged children have been debated, including paying good teachers more and enabling parents to make

informed choices about which school is best for their children. This sort of thinking is right up the alley of the policies announced last week by Prime Minister Rudd and Deputy PM Gillard.

Supporters of the open, competitive economic model can be found at all vantage points in the battle of ideas. Tanner is the author of a book titled *Open Australia*. It would be news to him that he is therefore of the Right. And some business organisations advocate protectionism but would probably resent being labelled lefties.

There was a time when simple Left-Right ideological constructions carried some legitimacy. Until the fall of the Berlin Wall, class warriors of the hard Left condoned mass murder by Stalinist and Maoist regimes in the name of egalitarianism. They were mirrored by the hard Right, which invoked the Bible in propping up military dictatorships hostile to communism.

Then, in the last decade of the 20th century, the conflict shifted to a new economic battleground. The hard Right saw little legitimate role for government beyond creating and protecting property rights. Hard Left adversaries spat accusations of economic rationalist at anyone who argued that competitive markets could be a force for social progress or produced evidence that democratic market economies were more prosperous.

The creed of hard-Left warriors was economic irrationalism: sweetheart deals to protect favoured industries from competition and tax breaks, and cash handouts to spivs in weightless hi-tech sunrise industries to replace the exploitative,

resource-based economy.

Now, as we approach the end of the first decade of a new century, the clash of extremists is being played out in the climate change debate. Fanatics argue that there can be no such thing as clean coal, even if future emissions from coal-fired power generation were reduced to zero. They denounce coalmining as an ugly symbol of materialist society.

At the other extreme, climate change deniers claim as an article of faith that there is no such thing as human-induced climate change, placing full weight on any study that challenges the science of climate change while dismissing the voluminous scientific evidence supporting it. Both extremes embody the lament of Yeats: the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.

The Government's climate change green paper proposals are based on evidence, not dogma, and were developed for public comment. If the evidence changes, the policy is flexible enough to cope with emerging realities. Emissions limits and trajectories will be founded on science and on progress in international negotiations on global emissions reductions.

Ideas for advancing human development and lifting the human spirit on an ecologically sustainable planet can come from thinkers of any political persuasion.

Whatever their voting behaviour, the free thinkers of the world prove Yeats wrong: the best are full of passionate intensity.

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