

## **Modern politics are too polarised.**

By Nick Cater, The Australian, 22 September 2015

The Brits are leaning further to the Left, we are told. Austerity and rising inequality have moved the centre of political gravity.

In May, two months after the NatCen Social Research unit delivered its finding, voters showed their disdain for conservatism by sending David Cameron back to No 10 Downing Street with an increased majority.

### **These fractious times**

Locating the political centre in these fractious times is a difficult task, particularly if you're unfortunate enough to be based at the University of Essex, the radical academy NatCen calls home.

It's tricky too if you write for the house of Fairfax Media. *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, not entirely unexpectedly, see Tony Abbott's demise as a sign that the nation is moving decisively to the Left.

Australia was becoming "effortlessly more cosmopolitan and liberal", wrote one liberal, cosmopolitan observer effortlessly last week. The conservatives, or "neo-cons" as they are known in Fairfax house style, were in retreat.

"The centre now is simply not where it was in the John Howard era," the commentator continued. "The easy acceptance of something like same-sex marriage ... was positively, radically unthinkable in Howard's time."

### **The antithesis of everything the cognitive elite held dear**

It is barely two years since the unelectable Abbott rejected the pieties of our Fairfax friends to lead the Coalition back from the wilderness. He represented the antithesis of everything the cognitive elite held dear, from climate change to border protection. The Coalition won 53.5 per cent of the vote.

Straddling the great divide between the intelligentsia and the unwashed is one of Malcolm Turnbull's toughest challenges. He must accommodate the conflicting assumptions underpinning the progressive world view epitomised by Fairfax, and the conservative outlook of middle Australia. The idea that the Prime Minister would shun conservatism or abandon his liberal principles is absurd; as the leader of a party that intends to win the next election he can afford to do neither.

The search for the mythical centre of Australian politics is like the quest for Shangri-La, the moon-washed valley at the core of all loveliness in James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. Shangri-La is an oasis of consensus in an otherwise troubled world. It is unpolluted by dogma since all religions are held to be only "moderately true".

In today's environment, where politics is increasingly a matter of identity, few interlocutors would acknowledge that their opponents are moderate, let alone that their assumptions could

be “moderately true”. It’s all or nothing; black caps versus white caps. Public debate is a collision of binary opposites, with neither side willing to give ground.

### **Finding the common ground in politics is becoming harder**

The Fairfax commentator’s advice to Turnbull — to “drag this government somewhere central” — is easier said than done. Finding the common ground in politics is becoming harder. A large variation in the swing across the electorate of Canning in last weekend’s by-election is evidence of electoral polarisation.

The Liberals lost little ground in the conservative blue-collar heartlands in the electorate. In Mandurah, 70km south of Perth’s central business district, the swing against the government was less than 3 per cent in three booths. In the fourth there was a swing to the government. It was a different picture in Kelmscott, 30km south of the CBD, where there were swings against the government of more than 6 per cent.

The 2011 census reveals the difference between the two suburbs: in Coalition-friendly Mandurah, 45 per cent of workers are employed in mining, manufacturing, energy and construction. In Labor-leaning Kelmscott it is 25 per cent. In Kelmscott, one in four employees works in public administration, education or health. In Mandurah, it is one in 10.

The strongest rejection of the Coalition came in Camillo and Champion Lakes, where unemployment barely dipped below 9 per cent even during the boom and now runs at 14 per cent. In these booths the Liberals lost almost 10 per cent of their 2013 primary vote.

The pattern fits the long-term voting trend across the country: the Coalition appeals to people who work in the private sector while Labor is the choice of those who rely on the public purse for their income through occupation or welfare.

Little media attention is paid to the dynamics in the seat of Canning; it is not an area where journalists like to live. Only 81 media professionals lived within its boundaries on the night of the 2011 census. In Turnbull’s seat of Wentworth there were 2500.

### **The difference in world views leads to extraordinary misunderstandings**

One former Fairfax commentator appeared shocked that Liberal candidate Andrew Hastie “identified himself as a regular churchgoer”. Hastie, it would seem, is not wildly in favour of gay marriage.

Incomprehensible as it might appear in the godless ghettos of inner-city Sydney or Melbourne, Hastie’s declaration of faith would not have cost him votes; in fact it might have earned some. It will be a different story in North Sydney, where the expected resignation of Joe Hockey will present Turnbull with his second electoral test.

The cultural divide between Perth’s southern suburbs and Sydney’s lower north shore is stark. In the North Sydney electorate six out of 10 adults has a university degree; in Canning, fewer than one in five.

### **In North Sydney there are 15 lawyers for every plumber**

One in three of Hockey's constituents speaks a language other than English at home; in Canning, it's one in 20. In North Sydney there are 15 lawyers for every plumber. In Canning, plumbers outnumber lawyers by five to one.

To search for consensus between the cultural outlooks these statistics reflect is futile. The challenge is to find common ground. All Australians have a common interest in a strong economy, in jobs for their children and funds for their retirement.

Turnbull's emphasis on the health of the economy indicates he has no intention of being caught as "Malcolm in the middle", as some headline writers carelessly suggest. He is unlikely to waste time searching for somewhere that, like Shangri-La, is not recorded on any map.

The goal is not consensus but common ground: the shared national interest in prosperity.

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