

Progressivism's clash with reality

By Merv Bendle, Quadrant Online, 8 February 2016

Philosophically, historically, and economically, progressivism is bankrupt, sustained only by the very capitalist system and productive middle-class it reviles. As the gargantuan costs become utterly unsustainable, it is this chimera in which Turnbull and his supporters invest their hope and rhetoric.

An ideological conflict

The civil war **within the NSW Liberal Party** between the conservatives and the progressivists (the so-called 'moderates') is a further episode in an ideological conflict that has been underway in Anglosphere countries for two centuries. Malcolm Turnbull and his progressivist supporters seem to think they are 'on the side of history' when, in fact, they have aligned themselves with a bankrupt ideology.

In a **recent Quadrant Online article** I observed that "the terminal weakness of progressivism is presently being revealed — it is little more than state-empowered libertinism, iconoclasm, and antinomianism, financed by mortgaging the future and culminating in civilizational suicide". I took as my starting point the claim by the political commentators, Peter van Onselen and Paul Kelly, that "the conservative movement within the Liberal Party is at a crossroads", that there is a "new paradigm", and that "Australia is a frontline test case" in a powerful global trend against traditional conservative values. Leading this is Turnbull, who is "a social progressive who champions same-sex marriage, serious action on climate change, a multicultural society, a repudiation of the monarchical trappings, and an economy, entrepreneurial and innovative, geared to aspiration". As a progressive, Turnbull allegedly offers an unprecedented political synthesis of "economic adaptability with social progressivity [sic]" that leaves behind "the social conservatism of Howard and Abbott", in favour of an "appeal to feminists, gays, environmentalists, ethnics and youths".

This is all hot air

To begin with, it is highly unlikely that feminists, gays, etc., are going to flock to the Liberals, Turnbull or not. Even more obviously, it is absurd to claim that there is a powerful global trend against traditional conservative values when the most powerful form of militant political activism on the planet is Islamism, an arch-reactionary creed being systematically imposed on 1.5 billion Muslims (and the rest of the world where possible!). Similarly, both China and India, accounting for nearly 3 billion people, are drawing upon traditional belief systems to sustain their national identities as they undergo accelerated modernization. In Europe, there is an increasing move to the right and far-right as the technocratic progressivism of the central EU powers, such as Germany, France, Italy and the Scandinavian countries, proves to be utterly impotent in the face of the mass Muslim insurgency presently overwhelming their meagre border defences. In America conservatism continues to be an extremely powerful force, as the present presidential campaign is demonstrating. Of the other continents, Africa and Latin

America are home to innumerable dictatorships, kleptocracies, and failed or semi-failed states where jihadists and crime syndicates run amok and talk of a conflict between progressivism and conservatism would be not only beside the point but bizarre.

What van Onselen and Kelly are referring to concerns mainly the Anglosphere nations (which account for only about 15% of the global population). Progressivists there do have an extraordinary grip on the key academic, media, legal, political, cultural, and corporate elites, and these will tend always to project their own obsessions, desires, and self-image onto the rest of the world. They are the vehicle of the adversary culture, discussed below, which targets the values of the middle class and serves as a corrosive and parasitical force living off the largesse of liberal democratic societies, while being their most vocal and influential enemies. However, like Turnbull, they are held hostage to the baleful history of progressivism and its fatal flaws.

Seizure and mobilization of state power

First amongst these is the central characteristic of progressivist policies – these require the seizure and mobilization of state power to impose and police new systems of values and behaviour upon society that would not otherwise have evolved in the desired direction of their own accord. **As I have argued**, these values and behaviours (e.g., in the area of sexuality and the constitution of the family) would not have arisen spontaneously from within society and, therefore, their imposition requires draconian laws and the bureaucratic regulation of everyday life. This in turn involves the core progressivist presumption — that the almost infinite intricacies of social, economic, and cultural life can be grasped, modelled, manipulated, and directed by the apparatus of the state. Historically this has always been the progressivist agenda: systematically to erode the power and autonomy of the individual, the family, the community and civil society, and to replace those with the power of the Leviathan State, with its great tangled mass of bureaucratic tentacles reaching down to surveil, regulate and ultimately strangle the most intimate of personal and social relationships in every area of life.

It has become common to dismiss this Leviathan fatalistically as the ‘Nanny State’, as if government is no worse than an over-solicitous grandparent who needs to be indulged. However, this label obscures the deadening effect this omnipresent monstrosity has on everyday life. It suggests that the state plays a nurturing role in peoples’ lives, when in fact it more often has a stultifying and exploitative impact, destroying initiative, disempowering people, and draining money and resources from the productive sectors of society to fund its progressivist obsessions.

An excellent example of such state-empowered progressivism is the drive for same-sex marriage or so-called ‘marriage equality’, of which Turnbull is also a vocal proponent. Despite its bogus egalitarian trappings (**well analysed by Peter Kurti**) this is actually a legislative Trojan Horse that will allow LGBTI activists to mobilize the power of the state through bespoke laws and star-chamber tribunals like Australia’s many Human Rights agencies and Victoria’s

Commissioner for Gender and Sexuality. For a further example, consult the complaint against Catholic bishops **now before Tasmania's anti-discrimination commissars**. These actions can be deployed against any persons or institutions (especially churches and schools) that LGBTI folk claim are discriminating against them in terms of employment, education, training, 'hate speech', or religious ceremony, etc. Their explicit agenda is to use state power to impose their views of human sexuality on society at large, especially children via the education system. It will be (and is intended to be) **a lawyers' picnic** that will expose those in the cross-hairs to crippling legal costs (as demonstrated already in the area of race) and thereby further corrode the traditional family as the foundation of society.

This brings us to the second main characteristic of progressivism – its adversarial ideology. In the medium term this dates back to the birth of progressivism during the Enlightenment and particularly to the incredibly influential assertion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau that society is a prison – “man is born free but is everywhere in chains”. In the longer term it draws also on the iconoclasm and antinomianism that have long been important tendencies within the Western tradition. These have previously erupted on a massive scale on a number of occasions, with devastating results. These include the 8th and 9th centuries in the Byzantine Empire and the Protestant Reformation, as well as in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which saw the destruction of an immense amount of priceless art and cultural artefacts. In its contemporary form the progressivist adversary culture defines itself in terms of its opposition to 'bourgeois' or middle-class society and its traditional values, especially religion and the family, which it always claims to be 'challenging' in an iconoclastic fashion, usually with efforts of unrelieved banality.

The role of the adversary culture was highlighted by the first generation of neo-conservatives, including Lionel Trilling in *Beyond Culture* (1965), Irving Kristol in “**The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals**” (*Encounter*, October 1979), and Daniel Bell in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1975). Some of its leading ideological proponents are discussed by Paul Johnson in *Intellectuals* (1988) and Roger Scruton in *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* (2015). It is extremely influential in Australia, where the ABC, the universities, the arts, and the media are its principal vehicles, exemplified by *Q&A*. A typical iconoclastic artwork is the notorious 'Piss Christ', which was exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1997 and remains on display in America and Europe. (Revealingly, attempts to have it removed from display at the NGV were rejected on the basis of the artist's right of freedom of expression – a right that progressivists never, ever extend to their opponents.)

Adversarial ideology

Contemporary progressivism developed its adversarial ideology in the Sixties, when its proponents began their 'long march through the institutions', as advocated by the German New Left activist Rudi Dutschke (a founder of the Green Party) and the neo-Marxist philosopher, Herbert Marcuse, in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972). This strategy involves promoting

radical political change and subverting established institutions and professions (especially education and law) *while working within them* – in effect, reaping the lucrative benefits of liberal democracy and capitalism while seeking to destroy it. In this fashion, the state becomes both the vehicle and target for the adversary culture and radical political change. In Australia, the best example of this strategy (apart from the universities) is the agit-prop activism of the Green-Left cadre within the ABC, as described by Nick Cater in *The Lucky Culture and the Rise of an Australian Ruling Class* (2013). The ABC has proved, of course, to be a protected species under Turnbull's stewardship.

The focus of this adversarial ideology began in Sixties with class but quickly shifted to race, and sexuality and gender, driven by the feminist and gay liberation movements. These concerns became obsessional and have dominated progressivism for the past 40 years, during which time the original agenda for change and reform was achieved. This victory has not been enough, however, especially in the realm of sexuality, where the antinomian determination to reject limits or boundaries has imposed itself. This is illustrated by the evolution of the LGBTI designation to refer to an alleged community of folk which identify with various non-mainstream forms of sexuality and gender. In the Seventies, the term "gay community" was used, but then GLBT was adopted to accommodate those who felt restricted by the label 'gay'. This became LGBT in deference to women, and was then expanded to LGBTI to include yet another form of 'intersexual' gender identity. More recently, it has become LGBTIQ, to accommodate those who 'question' their sexuality. There is no reason to expect that the acronym will not expand further as new forms of sexual expression seize the progressivist imagination.

Sexual antinomianism reached a crescendo in the Sixties, led by Marcuse with his advocacy of an extreme form of progressivist 'polymorphous perversity' in *Eros and Civilization* (1966). **As Roger Kimball observes:**

Eagerly embraced by countercultural enthusiasts who wanted to believe that heating up their sex lives would hasten the demise of capitalism and bring forth the millennium, it outlines a portentous struggle between "the logic of domination" and the "will to gratification," attacks "the established reality in the name of the pleasure principle," and fulminates against "the repressive order of procreative sexuality."

The roots of this go back to what have been called the 'black writers' of the Enlightenment, and above all to libertines like the Marquise de Sade, who came very much back into vogue in the Sixties and inspired Michel Foucault, the shaven-headed grey eminence of postmodernism and champion of 'transgressive' behaviour who died of AIDS in 1984. **As Kimball recalls,** Foucault had a "penchant for sadomasochistic sex" and pursued "certain specific erotic practices [within] a mutually consensual theatre of cruelty." And in this

he followed the lead of the Marquis de Sade, who had long been one of his prime intellectual and moral heroes. (...) Foucault came to enjoy imagining “suicide festivals” or “orgies” in which sex and death would mingle in the ultimate anonymous encounter. Those planning suicide, he mused, could look “for partners without names, for occasions to die liberated from every identity.”

Foucault was “wracked by unfulfillable fantasies of absolute ecstasy” and consumed by a “demand for liberation from every fixed form,” of civilized behaviour, a core progressivist tendency. As James Miller discusses in *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (1993), it is rumoured that before his death Foucault set out to infect as many other men as he could via his innumerable bathhouse encounters.

Sociologically, the role played by the adversary culture promoted by progressivists can be understood in terms of the model provided by Daniel Bell in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. Bell proposes that post-industrial, knowledge-based societies can be analysed in terms of three distinct but articulated realms: the economic, cultural, and political spheres. As he argues, the developments of contemporary capitalism have led to a contradiction between the economic sphere, which sustains society but requires stable, reliable, hard-working, and productive individuals capable of deferred gratification, and the cultural sphere (historically always controlled by progressivists), which is largely adversarial, narcissistic, hedonistic, consumerist, and devoted to immediate self-gratification.

The massive growth of the welfare state

Crucially, the massive growth of the welfare state has produced a further – political – imbalance in the shape of a vast population of unemployed making no economic contribution except as consumers. Ominously, they are dependent upon government for their income and many other forms of support, and they have come to form a political constituency in their own right. Over the past 50 years an implicit pact has emerged: the progressivists act as champions of this constituency in its endless pursuit of government largesse; in return they can rely upon its electoral support as they pursue their political and cultural agenda.

Unfortunately for progressives and the welfare-dependent underclass with whom they share a co-dependent relationship the historical and economic forces that have sustained progressivism are presently moving ever more deeply into an intractable crisis, as I will now outline.

Historically, progressivism has been revealed to be bankrupt, giving birth to social monstrosities. Although they appear only dimly aware of it, Turnbull and other contemporary progressives are heirs to a political ideology that has mutated several times since it emerged during the Enlightenment, sometimes quite grotesquely. Based on a belief in the perfectibility of man and the conviction that reason and science can solve all humanity’s problems, progressivism emerged some 250 years ago as an historically unprecedented faith in the

possibility of human progress. Indeed, as John Passmore points out in *The Perfectibility of Man* (1970), “The idea of progress ... is a peculiarly modern one. It is scarcely to be met with ... before the first decades of the 18th century”. Whereas ancient systems of thought saw history in terms of decline from a Golden Age, or as moments in an endless cycle of events, Enlightenment thinkers envisaged an ascending path towards a secular paradise. As the French philosophe Turgot exclaimed in 1750, as humanity becomes enlightened it “marches always ... towards greater perfection”.

Progressivism melded with apocalypticism

In the 19th century, progressivism melded with apocalypticism (which involves the irruption of the Divine to redeem a fallen world) and spawned communism. In the pivotal work of Karl Marx, this took the form of a messianic ideology that purported scientifically to establish the historical inevitability of a secular paradise. This utopianism seized the imagination of the intelligentsia and has been the dominant ideology on the left ever since, enjoying a resurgence after the Global Financial Crisis.

It is usually overlooked that progressivism preceded conservatism. Indeed, the latter arose in the frightening aftermath of the French Revolution and the Terror that engulfed the most powerful nation in the world. Inspired by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), conservatism emerged as a modern political ideology in reaction to progressivism’s excessive claims for the power of science and reason, and its ignorance of the irrational and violent side of human nature exemplified by the Terror and the Napoleonic Wars that convulsed Europe and consumed millions of lives.

This order of appearance is often misunderstood because progressivism, by definition, must see itself as the highest point in the evolution of human thought. It literally can’t handle the notion that a subsequent ideology can emerge that rejects progressivism as inadequate and looks behind it to the modes of thought and society that existed prior to its appearance. Its own logic compels it to depict conservatism as a regressive form of thought instead of an indictment of its own failures.

It is this desperate need to conceal the inadequacies of progressivist thinking that drives its militant proponents to deny their opponents any right to free speech or criticism. Simply put, progressivists refuse to allow debate because they know they can’t win. This is the principle, for example, behind Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, which is designed to prevent any questioning of the favoured victims groups that live off the largesse of the state. It also allows allegedly aggrieved parties **to claim massive amounts in damages** in civil cases for alleged hurt feelings. Turnbull, having initially expressed misgivings has now revealed himself as a strong supporter of this section.

Despite the ongoing conservative challenge to its underlying premises, progressivism reigned supreme during the 19th century, finding profoundly influential expression in communism and technocratic state socialism, exemplified by Auguste Comte's positivistic science of society, (ably critiqued by F.A. Hayek in *The Counter-Revolution of Science* (1952)). Towards the end of that era it gave birth to major statist and collectivist political movements, including Fabianism in Britain (and subsequently Australia), communism and fascism in Europe, and the Progressive movement in the United States. President Woodrow Wilson (an Ivy League academic) was a leading progressivist within the Democratic Party and his faith in the power of the League of Nations to resolve international disputes typified the movement's tragically misplaced optimism about the role and power of nation states.

Progressivism's extreme collectivist form

In its extreme collectivist form, progressivism in this era viewed human perfectibility in terms of class, nationalism, and/or race. Consequently, Stalin set out to "liquidate the kulaks as a class" in 1930, initiating a systematic campaign of repression, deportation, and executions that left tens of millions of the better-off peasants dead, imprisoned, or poverty-stricken. Elsewhere, eugenics programs flourished amongst the advanced nations and found ghastly expression in the Nazi obsession with the purity of the 'Aryan' race and the need to expunge 'inferior' races from the human species, culminating in the Holocaust and the death of many more millions.

Indeed, the cataclysm of the Great War was followed by 30 years that saw the rise of totalitarian communism, fascism and Nazism, the Great Depression, World War II and the Holocaust. This period of unparalleled devastation should have extinguished progressivism's excessive faith in the inherent goodness and perfectibility of man and the benign nature of the state, but instead it saw an unprecedented concentration of state power. This was accompanied by an increasingly blind faith in the power of government to protect, regulate, supervise, and direct human affairs. Psychologically, this was diagnosed as the 'fear of freedom' exhibited by people **desperate for the security promised by an all-embracing state**. Indeed, it constituted a 'cult of the state', as Jonah Goldberg describes it in *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (2008). This is characterized by 'the Totalitarian Temptation' to succumb to total governmental control and involvement in everyday life.

This brings us to the second force that is undermining the progressivist project. Economically, progressivism has driven liberal democratic societies into a cul-de-sac. Throughout its history it was sustained by the enormous productive capacity of the very capitalism it desperately desired to shackle and ultimately destroy. After World War II its multitude of programs were funded by the apparent success of Keynesian economics during the 30-year post-war boom, until the mirage was extinguished by the 'Oil Shock' and 'stagflation' of the 1970s. This economic crisis produced an anti-Keynesian reaction in the subsequent Thatcher-Reagan era in the 1980s. This period saw significant neo-liberal economic reform and a fleeting attempt

by Anglosphere nations to wind back the excessive presence of the state in economic and social affairs. In Australia, this was led by the Hawke and Keating governments and later built upon by the Howard administration. (Unfortunately, Australia was also invaded in the 1980s by leftist academics from Britain desperate to escape Thatcherism, and this cadre had an intellectually regressive impact, further entrenching neo-Marxism and postmodernism in the universities, helping to make them progressivist strongholds and no-go zones for civilized intellectual debate.)

This conservative revolt

This conservative revolt was inspired by works like Hayek's study of *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) and *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), which showed how it is the constitutionally guaranteed liberty that promotes economic and social wealth and happiness, while increased government interference leads to torpor, impoverishment, and servitude. Hayek's work was a re-statement of the form of classical liberalism that has long been a central component of conservatism in the Anglosphere countries. It directly challenges progressivism because it refutes the notion that centralized state planning can efficiently guide economic and social affairs. Instead, Hayek insisted that no government apparatus can ever adequately understand the complexities of advanced societies, that there is a spontaneous order at the basis of all social life, and that the most viable, productive and resilient societies are those that enjoy the maximum possible amount of individual liberty under a minimally-intrusive state.

Despite this neo-liberal reform process, the power and reach of the state continued to increase, especially in the area of social and cultural programs, as did the proportion of national populations partly or entirely dependent upon government largesse. This continued dependency upon the state accelerated after the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-08, and promoted a resurgence of faith in Keynesian-esque economic policies and a shift away from neo-liberalism. This reinforced the determination by governments throughout the world to finance massive and ever-increasing public expenditures through government borrowing on a scale never previously approached in history.

As a result, the economic foundations of the progressivist project are now in tatters. For example, the utterly untenable situation of the EU is infamous. Similarly, America's total government spending has more than doubled since 2000 and national debt is now about US\$19 trillion –or over 100% of GDP. This amounts to some US\$58,000 (A\$80,000) per head of population, or US\$158,000 per taxpayer, and growing. This is a level of government indebtedness not previously seen in American history (apart from when America mobilized to fight World War II), and it largely funds costs in health, education, pension, and social security, rather than investment in infrastructure.

In Australia the national debt has grown in a similar fashion over the past decade, from A\$58 billion to over A\$440 billion, or over 27% of GDP, on which about A\$14.5 billion in interest

is presently paid annually. National debt is now equivalent to some A\$19,000 per head of population; quite apart from the massive individual debt Australians shoulder (total household debt is about A\$1.7 trillion). Obviously, this method of funding present-day programs through borrowings consumes massive and increasing amounts of money in interest payments and also involves a 'generational shift' of the huge financial burden of progressivism into the future. However, that future is rapidly becoming the present and the system is heading for imminent collapse.

Progressivism is bankrupt

Philosophically, morally, historically, and economically, progressivism is bankrupt. It has been sustained for over two centuries by the very capitalist system and productive middle-class society that it reviles and seeks to undermine and destroy. However, progressivism is about to enter its death throes as the gargantuan economic costs of its policies become utterly unsustainable. Incredibly, it is to this bleak scenario that Turnbull and his supporters want to attach the credibility and future of the Liberal Party. They must be resisted.