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Howard's Methodism: How convenient?!

Marion Maddox

Analyses of John Howard's social policy often attribute his social conservatism to personal nostalgia, seeking sources in his schooling, family background and church attendance. For example, recent publications have attributed Howard's positions on unemployment, industrial relations, multiculturalism, reconciliation and refugees to his childhood Methodism. There are good reasons for skepticism about such accounts, however. This article draws on archival research on 1950s Methodism, both nationally and in the congregation the Howard family attended, to demonstrate that, in instance after instance, Howard's current social policy positions tend to conflict with the political tenor of 1950s Methodism. Instead of looking back to the lounge rooms and church halls of 1950s Earlwood, we do better to seek sources for the Liberal Party's recent social policy departures in contemporary international neoconservative politics.

John Howard, Methodist

One oft-noted feature of the Howard ascendancy is the rollback of once-cherished liberal achievements. One by one, the post-Whitlam generation watched the erosion or severe circumscribing of the Office of the Status of Women, the Affirmative Action Agency, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975). Seeking explanations for moves so apparently out-of-step with mainstream opinion, it has become axiomatic to link Howard's social conservatism to his Methodist childhood. The Methodism of the 1950s has been credited with Howard's industrial relations policies,¹ Indigenous affairs policies,² reluctance to apologise to the stolen generations,³ reservations about the terms 'reconciliation'⁴ and multiculturalism,⁵ and commitments to mutual obligation,⁶ a strong work ethic,⁷ individual responsibility,⁸ censorship and picket-fence family values.⁹ The implication is that, while Howard's economics are a matter of considered political conviction developed throughout the course of his career, his social policy is a kind of default mechanism, ingrained in childhood and never rethought — as David Marr phrased it in a throw-away line: 'He's a good Methodist boy'.¹⁰

Such attributions make it hard to remember that Howard is no longer a Methodist boy. Neither, in Australia, is anyone else: Methodists joined the Uniting Church in 1977, but Howard was long gone. Marrying into Sydney Anglicanism, he identifies religiously as an Anglican. However, this carries nothing of the iconic weight of his childhood Methodism. As one rough indication, a Google search found a couple of dozen items describing the prime minister as a Methodist, many attributing some current Howard policy position to the denomination's influence. For example, right-wing *eminence gris* Ray Evans on the H R Nicholls Society website encourages Howard, as a Methodist, to take advantage of a biblical mandate for abolishing the minimum wage.¹¹ A drug-reform webpage cites Howard's view on heroin injecting rooms as the 'Methodist view'.¹² Throwaway

references to Howard's Methodism are also relatively common, aside from any policy connection. For example, a recent letter to the editor asked, in connection with Howard's ability to withstand charges of dishonesty, 'Is this Methodist acting?'¹³ One satirical constitutional preamble describes Howard as 'not only short, but a Methodist; a hanging offence in decent countries'.¹⁴ By contrast, only three websites referred to his Anglicanism. Despite the Hollingworth controversy, which caused the words 'John Howard' and 'Anglican' to appear together in numerous news reports, opinion pieces and so on, their authors eschew any temptation to connect the terms. All were straightforward biographical statements, innocent of policy overtones. The image of 'John Howard, Methodist' is evidently working in the public imagination beyond simple biography.

Howard himself has reinforced the impression of Methodism's special place in his political formation. In 1998, for example, he told ABC TV's *Compass*:

Religion did play quite a role in my upbringing. I was brought up in a Methodist home, we went to a Methodist Sunday School and church ... we talked about behaviour, but we didn't talk so much about theology and the more spiritual content ... I still regard myself as having a strong Methodist deposit, I guess it's reflected in my attitude to some things like gambling. Though not drinking, I enjoy a drink ...¹⁵

In contrast to those strands of Methodism associated with the labour politics and the genesis of the trade-union movement,¹⁶ Wesleyan egalitarianism in the Howard household translated into a 'distrust' of 'class division', with implications more cultural than political: 'We were brought up ... not to be hostile to what might be regarded as the upper classes, but there was a strong view in my family that people shouldn't be too pretentious. We were perhaps an understated people'.¹⁷ Insofar as Howard's childhood Methodism had explicitly political dimensions, he identified with the idea of 'standing on your own two feet':

They talk of the Protestant work ethic, and I was certainly brought up in the Protestant work ethic, very much ... it's the idea of working and expecting some reward, but doing it in an ethical fashion ... And I regard that as part of the Protestant work ethic: that work has its own reward in return.¹⁸

From these reminiscences emerges a man forged in a quietly conservative denomination where religion was a matter of private reflection and personal morality, rather than public debate (let alone activism).

Given the explanatory burden that Howard's childhood churchgoing is so regularly asked to bear, it seems worthwhile to look further into 1950s Methodism, and the Earlwood congregation of which the young Howard was a part. When this period of Methodist history in Australia is examined, an unexpected picture emerges.

A good Methodist family

Howard's family reminiscences paint a fairly high level of family religious commitment, if not of regular spiritual practice beyond Sunday churchgoing. Archival sources support the impression of a family heavily involved in its local congregation. The Howards attended Earlwood Methodist Church, conveniently located opposite the family home. There, the boys were able to join a Sunday

School that declared itself to be 'one of the largest in the State'.¹⁹ John appears on the congregation's Junior Roll straight after his brother Robert, both of 25 William St, Earlwood.²⁰ Robert's name stands out clearly; John's has been neatly crossed off, the adjoining column noting his transfer to the Senior Roll.

Sunday School was a serious business. The commemorative publication for Earlwood Methodist's seventieth anniversary shows a 1943 photo of some two hundred suited boys and beribboned girls (the three-year-old future prime minister presumably just missing out). Five years later, eight-year-old John would have found a still-larger student body, cared for by forty-six staff, including thirty-four teachers, three pianists and various officials.²¹ Sunday School staff received regular training,²² attended conferences²³ and followed a centralised curriculum to prepare their pupils for annual external examinations. Results were printed in the church newspaper; in the columns for 1950, John Howard of Earlwood sat Division 7 (for those aged ten on January 1), clocking a solid 70. In 1952 he improved to 85 — not exceptional by Earlwood standards, but creditable on a statewide basis. He did not stop there: in a leaner year for Earlwood generally, its 1953 showing was helped by 'John Howard 88'.

Not all students took Sunday School exams. Although the state's results took up several pages of the tabloid-sized *Methodist* weekly newspaper, Earlwood's 1952 field of thirty-one students was only a fraction of its enrolment. A notice from the state Young People's Department in 1952 lamented: 'this year just on 3,500 scholars were examined, — not altogether a satisfactory' turnout from a potential 18,000.²⁴ In other words, Sunday School exams were for the most committed. John appears to have been the family's Sunday School enthusiast; although Howard has spoken of churchgoing as a family ritual,²⁵ none of the other boys appears in the results lists.

Students remained at Sunday School into their late teens, and their association often continued even longer. Many became teachers. Twenty-one-year-old 'Mr John Howard, LLB' became the Earlwood Sunday School's secretary, serving until 1963.²⁶ At the same time, he took on other congregational responsibilities: church notices in 1961 urge 'anyone among the young fellows interested in playing' in the church's C Grade cricket team to contact John Howard.²⁷ He had good reason to encourage new starters. The previous year, the Quarterly Meeting heard that low enrolment had prevented the church team meeting its £12 ground fees, which John Howard had covered out of his own pocket.²⁸

Those commentators who look for adult Howard political positions in his childhood churchgoing are correct, insofar as the family in which he was born was well integrated into the local church, and there is good evidence that this pattern remained most pronounced in its youngest son. However, the influence of church attendance on any individual's political formation is notoriously difficult to pin down.²⁹ In the case of Howard's childhood Methodism, the connection is far more complicated than conventional wisdom allows.

What would someone in such close contact with the church during his formative years have encountered by way of social and political ideas?³⁰ One obvious source is the Sunday School curriculum. While theological themes predominated ('Jesus the triumphant King', 'How can we know there is a personal God?'), there were also lessons on matters of social concern ('Health for all',

'Food for all').³¹ Regular lessons about the 'aborigines of our own land' reminded students that 'Our "boomerang" children and we are bound together, one family with God our Father, and one in Jesus Christ our Lord'. A feeling of unity was not enough: students (presumed non-Indigenous) had to 'show them ... that we shall do something, and not merely talk about it'.³² While lesson content gives an indication of the topics 1950s Methodist leaders felt to be critical social concerns, it does not take us very far into uncovering a Methodist angle on these issues; however, a fuller picture emerges from other Methodist material circulating at the time.

In search of 1950s Methodist politics

National church events

Local congregations were the most common point of contact for state and national church structures. The Methodist church devoted considerable resources to reflecting on, and disseminating views on, matters of current social concern. As well as formal resolutions, numerous more publicity-oriented events sought the attention of both church members and the wider public. One such event was the Mission to the Nation, a nationwide Methodist undertaking from 1953 until 1955. Its most visible feature was local 'mission weeks' during which 'National Missioner' Reverend Alan Walker and his team descended upon a local congregation for a week-long festival of public meetings, rallies, special church services and 'processions of witness'.

Although it borrowed much of its style from the approach Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham was taking in America, the Australian Mission had a very different social agenda. Walker admired Graham's open-air preaching style, but distanced himself from the American's biblical literalism and social disengagement.³³ Walker was at least as influenced by the British Methodist and socialist Donald (later Lord) Soper, though Walker never became a socialist. Whereas Graham found himself at home with the mood of cold-war era America, Walker's diary records a different motivation: 'What a hellish thing is capitalism. I am going ... to fight it and fight it with the weapons of evangelism ... What can I do? I see more clearly than ever that it must be a striking at the roots of capitalism'.³⁴

Walker's Mission addresses regularly took up the causes of peace, disarmament and his plan for the Commonwealth to break 'the East-West deadlock' by heading 'a third group of powers' to stand between the superpowers.³⁵ Nor was his the only political voice. For example, the Western Australian Mission reported H V Evatt's attendance at one of its meetings, where he recalled Methodist local preachers' founding involvement in the union movement.³⁶ One report assessed the Mission's impact on the eve of 1955:

The Mission has certainly uncovered the 'sore points' of Australian life. It has constantly drawn to public attention the social evils and the sufferings of some of our forgotten people, such as aged pensioners and aborigine and half-caste people. From the beginning of the Mission the evil of war has been attacked and the things which make for peace have been upheld.³⁷

One Mission to the Nation activity that outlasted its parent movement was the annual (later biennial) National Christian Youth Convention (NCYC).³⁸ The first NCYC was held 16–23 January 1955, attracting up to fifteen thousand young people and considerable media attention. The Convention's reports provide further useful evidence of the political tenor of 1950s Methodism.

The Convention built on the premise that 'Australia is at the crossroads of its history', and its program, speeches and reports indicate an overtly political interpretation. It issued a concluding statement calling for 'full status of citizenship' for 'our own aborigines', abandoning the 'white Australia' policy in favour of increased Asian immigration, cuts in defence spending in favour of a boosted aid budget, and 'seeking [God's] will in industrial relations, trade unions and commerce'.³⁹ God's will included stronger church–union links; as the church paper reported:

[A] group of unionists came as full-time delegates, were impressed, asked ministers to address their meetings, and their wages and convention fees were paid by fellow workers ... Surely there is a place in the Church of the Carpenter for carpenters. Continental Socialism came from rationalism: our Socialism in England came from the Church.⁴⁰

The NCYC made a major contribution to the church's self-perception in 1955, and was even incorporated into the Senior division curriculum for the 1955 Sunday School exams. The concluding statement was not only reprinted in the church newspaper but also attracted approving editorial coverage in Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*.⁴¹ Evidence of whether the fifteen-year-old John Howard attended has not been located. However, such was its impact, both in public perceptions of the Methodist church and among churchgoers, that it could hardly have escaped the notice of a teenager so deeply involved with Methodist activities.

Wherever we are to look for the industrial relations policy roots of the adult Howard, who boasts on his government's 'report card' the introduction of individual workplace agreements, an end to compulsory unionism and substantial curtailment of trade unions' rights,⁴² there is little foundation for attributing it to his childhood church. Indeed, given Methodism's historical links to the trade-union movement,⁴³ it would be surprising if there were. The Mission to the Nation and NCYC records show that those traditions burned bright among Australian Methodists in the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, hallmarks of the adult Howard's economic record include the privatisation of previously government-run enterprises, such as Telstra, and the introduction of a tax regime and program of economic restructuring widely said to benefit business and the wealthy, while making things harder for the middle and lower classes.⁴⁴ Such moves sit uncomfortably against Walker's castigation of 'hellish' capitalism. The NCYC call for increased Asian immigration jars with the adult Howard's 1989 calls to limit the family reunion program in the name of increased 'social cohesion', a move that would have reduced immigration from Asia.⁴⁵

Events like the Mission to the Nation and NCYC represent the public face of Methodism, and they were extensively reported beyond Methodist networks. The political picture they paint of 1950s Methodism is maintained when internal denominational sources are examined.

The Methodist

No lightweight throwaway, the *Methodist* newspaper made the most of tabloid-size pages, fitting closely placed newsprint around modestly sized headlines and minimal photographs. News about the Mission to the Nation, reports of church meetings and resolutions, and a large amount of editorial commentary jostled for space. Historian Jennifer Clark has noted, 'Of all the church newspapers, those of the Methodist Church are arguably the most generally and consistently reflective on wider social and political issues ... Methodists were willing to debate at length topical issues of concern'.⁴⁶ The NSW version offers a wealth of information about the views a young Methodist might have encountered.

Those expecting to find a Methodist basis for the adult Howard's policies might think first of his 'white picket fence' image of conservative 'family values'. The *Methodist* offers some support for this perception throughout the early 1950s through articles worrying about the traditional Methodist *bêtes-noires* of gambling and liquor. Those 'terrible twins' were responsible for 'a sharp rise in juvenile delinquency'.⁴⁷ Youth gangs, juvenile delinquents, bodgies and widgees imperilled Australian life, and the *Methodist* at one point even endorsed Billy Graham's warning that juvenile delinquency 'almost equals communism in the problems we face today'.⁴⁸

Graham blamed parents, who neglect their children in favour of 'drinking and carousing',⁴⁹ a position consistent with the adult Howard's stress on personal responsibility and reliance on family as the keys to undoing social problems.⁵⁰ However, though the Methodist agreed with Graham's diagnosis of the problem, it did not accept his prescription. It thought the government should address the 'real delinquents', the media and advertisers who 'commercialise and dramatise evil, who prefer rape to love, criminals to heroes, and gangsters' molls to decent mothers'.⁵¹ These capitalist delinquents were symptoms of 'a delinquent State'⁵² ready to put private corporations' profits ahead of the public good.

Divorce was one cause of juvenile delinquency, but here the *Methodist* again resisted punitive 'personal responsibility' solutions. Rejecting calls for more restrictive divorce laws, the *Methodist* advocated 'divorce by consent'.⁵³ Its position was not only radical at the time, it represents a significant contrast with calls from within the Howard Government to tighten divorce law and end no-fault divorce.⁵⁴

At times the *Methodist* deplored 'the emancipation of women' as opening the floodgates to communism⁵⁵ and fostering juvenile delinquency, but at others endorsed the feminist Women's Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and argued for women's ordination,⁵⁶ in contrast to the Howard Government's reductions of protections for women's rights.⁵⁷ Where the adult Howard champions 'choice' in education and has overseen a 'runaway' transfer of funds from the state school system to private schools,⁵⁸ the *Methodist* determinedly opposed state aid to non-government schools, on the grounds of church-state separation and as undermining free and universal public education.⁵⁹

Although it consistently returned to child- and family-oriented topics, the *Methodist* explored a wide canvas of national and world affairs. In the 1950s Methodism was no ideological monolith. For example, though the *Methodist* remained concerned about the communist menace, its proffered solutions reflect a

view of international relations that can seem quite at odds with the Howard positions now so freely attributed to the Methodist influence. The *Methodist* feared 'organised business' as much as 'organised authoritarianism'.⁶⁰ In February 1955, it carried a piece by Neville Smith on behalf of the Committees in Support of A Call to the People of Australia, arguing that Australia should stop understanding itself in European terms:

Our world has moved from Europe to Asia, and our destiny will lie with Asia rather than with Europe. But they are still teaching French and Latin in schools and the educational authorities report that there is little interest in learning Asian languages. The average person knows of Swiss cantons, or the legend of King Arthur, or wars that were fought about purely European affairs. What does the average person know about Asian races or legends or wars that have affected the fate of more than half the world's population? ... Asia is very near to us, and events are moving fast there. And Europe is a long way away. For us, Europe is a culture and a tradition. For us, Asia represents the future.⁶¹

The Methodist church also explored engagement with Asia in practical ways. For example, in 1963 it proposed entering a 'Concordat with the Church of South India' as a step toward union with other denominations, a move it saw as expressing 'its commitment to its geographical neighbourhood, particularly Asia'.⁶² However, these developments would seem to have had a minimal influence on the adult Howard, whose prime ministership has been marked, according to many observers, by decreasing engagement with Asia.⁶³

Throughout the 1950s, the *Methodist* editorialised against the bomb and in favour of disarmament, urging support for the UN Disarmament Commission. It spent two columns in May 1955 exhorting Methodists to see *Children of Hiroshima*, a film made by the Japanese Teachers' Union and imported by the Australian Peace Convention Bureau and the Peace Council. The film would prove 'a greater answer to the atomic bomb than all the anti-aircraft guns and guided missiles in the world'. Another 'surer way to peace than an exploded hydrogen bomb' was 'a full bread basket'. 'Poverty, sickness, hunger and complete illiteracy' were the lot of 'well over half of humanity', a 'quartet of destroyers' who 'always provide the music when the gods of war call men to march'. So the sincerity of Australia's commitment to peace would be judged by its efforts at more equal distribution of wealth.⁶⁴ By contrast, the Howard Government has seen Australia's aid budget at 'historically low levels',⁶⁵ while defence spending has increased.⁶⁶

Howard's refugee policy, including the long-term mandatory detention of asylum-seekers, the decision to award *bona fide* refugees 'Temporary Protection Visas' rather than permanent residency, and the controversial 'Pacific solution' to limit asylum-seekers' access to Australian courts, has been one of the most hotly debated themes of Howard's prime ministership. His position is at odds with that taken by the *Methodist* in the 1950s, which observed that 'Despite wire fences and observation posts, pitfalls, ramparts, wire-traps and alarm devices, refugees somehow get across borders, leading to freedom'. It applauded government resettlement efforts and urged churches, and individual members, to find additional funding and sponsors for new arrivals.⁶⁷

Howard and his government have proved unusually sensitive to church criticism of their policies, and, indeed, have gone to unprecedented lengths to restrict the comment churches can make. The *Charities Bill* (2004), which proposes to remove tax-exempt status from organisations that have lobbied government or attempted to change the law or policy as more than an 'ancillary' purpose, has prompted church agencies to argue that 'charity' and 'advocacy' cannot be so neatly separated.⁶⁸ Increasingly, the contracts by which government welfare funding is devolved through not-for-profit agencies also include clauses preventing recipient organisations from criticising government policy. In the view of Melbourne City Mission Chief Executive Ray Cleary, such restraint 'eats at the very heart of the mission and the value base of church-based agencies, which are there to demonstrate God's preferential or special interest for the marginalised and those at risk'.⁶⁹

Howard and his ministers have also directly attacked church leaders who criticise policies on native title, the treatment of asylum seekers and mutual obligation. For example, Howard condoned 1997 Liberal Member for Leichhardt Warren Entsch's call for country parishioners to 'boycott' their churches over criticism of the government's native title plans⁷⁰ and, in 2004, labelled church leaders 'partisan' and 'divisive' for speaking on the Iraq war, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and other matters.⁷¹ Federal Treasurer Peter Costello told a church audience that they were losing the public's trust by speaking 'more than ever' on 'what they perceive to be moral issues', such as Iraq and the GST, on which, he claimed, they lacked expertise.⁷² Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer accused Anglican bishops who had criticised the government's Iraq policy of 'hogging the limelight', pursuing 'cheap headlines' and being 'invincibly ignorant'. Church comment on policy matters would have been 'inconceivable' during the Playford era, Downer told a seminar commemorating the 1938–1965 rule of the South Australian Liberal premier.⁷³

However, contrary to Howard, Downer and Costello's nostalgic impression, church leaders in Australia have never been reticent to speak on social questions.⁷⁴ For example, in the middle of the 'Playford era' and while Howard was an Earlwood Methodist regular, the *Methodist* explicitly advocated political involvement. The church had a duty to 'speak fearlessly and frankly ... to give prophetic leadership to the nation' on social questions, the paper maintained. Individual Methodists were to lobby politicians and be more directly involved: 'Churchmen must be active in the political parties of their own choice', where their 'services are sorely needed'.⁷⁵

Indeed, as the Mission to the Nation and NCYC examples demonstrate, reluctance to enter political debate was never a hallmark of 1950s Methodism. In addition to such public events, throughout the 1950s the *Methodist* reveals a general political orientation considerably removed from the attitudes regularly associated with the explanatory icon of 'John Howard, Methodist'. Week by week, NSW Methodists read page upon page advocating an open door to refugees, engagement with Asia, full citizenship and other rights for Indigenous people, a strong trade-union movement, government action against poverty, suspicion of big business and opposition to nuclear weapons. Although the *Methodist* upheld conservative concerns about the 'moral panic' topics of the 1950s — family

breakdown, juvenile delinquency, alcohol and gambling — it was more likely to put the blame on corporate greed, timid government and unduly punitive divorce law than on unrestrained individuals.

Thinking globally and acting locally in Earlwood, c 1955

When criticised by church leaders, Howard and his ministers have argued that senior clergy do not represent the views of all their parishioners. They have a point: studies of churches and politics regularly find that clergy tend to sit politically to the left of their congregations.⁷⁶ So, where did Earlwood Methodist stand in the struggle against 'hellish' capitalism? Can the disjunction between the adult Howard's conservatism and the radicalism of his church be explained by the fact that the Methodist and public mission events represented an official view not necessarily replicated in the pews?

A congregation's choices concerning which of the wider church's many charitable and mission-related efforts it supported can reveal a little about its social and political commitments. Earlwood, for example, made regular donations to the church's Home Missions department, which supported country circuits with Circuit Grants, building funds, the Methodist Nursing Service and emergency hospital visitation. Earlwood Quarterly Meeting minutes also record an active Temperance Society campaigning to keep six o'clock closing and, during the late 1940s, regular food parcels to Methodists in rationing-afflicted England. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Earlwood gave regularly to ecumenical organisations with strong traditions of progressive social service and critique of government policy, including the Australian Council of Churches, World Council of Churches and Australian Student Christian Movement.

Earlwood also donated to Overseas Missions and to Dalmar Children's Homes, which was then just branching out into a new venture. On 10 December 1955, the *Methodist* reported Dalmar Home's first Indigenous child removal. A central plank of the adult Howard's refusal to apologise to the stolen generations is his insistence that the perpetrators of family separations believed they were doing the right thing at the time. His version of assimilationism paints it as uncontested (except, presumably, by the families concerned). His church's embrace of the policy, then, might be one point at which the explanatory icon of 'John Howard, Methodist' can be seriously invoked.

However, it is hard to read the church's own account of its new undertaking as reflecting innocent consensus. Although the words announcing the move are triumphalist, the front-page story betrays a decidedly nervous undercurrent. Most *Methodist* front pages of the era carry three or four staid, pictureless columns of fine print and modest headlines crossing one or two columns. To announce the arrival of former Croker Island resident, 'Rosanna ... rescued from almost unbelievable neglect and committed to our care by the Aboriginal Welfare Board', however, the *Methodist* broke out into inch-high letters across the entire page, amplified with white space above and below. In a tone approaching paranoia, the headline pronounces, 'YOU WILL APPROVE!' Rosanna's photo fills most of two columns. A tear-out donation slip reinforces the impression of a church trying to head controversy off at the pass. 'If you approve of this Service for these and all dependent children, please use the form provided when you send the concrete

evidence of your goodwill', as if the church is really less interested in the funds than the approval.⁷⁷

The innovation was Rosanna's relocation to Sydney: the Methodist church had been removing Croker children from their families to a church-run 'settlement' on the island for some time.⁷⁸ In fact, Indigenous policies in general were, and remained into the next decade, a matter of considerable debate between different state conferences. The more conservative NSW church found itself regularly challenged by the Victorian Methodists' stronger push for Indigenous self-determination.⁷⁹ It would have been difficult for anyone close to Methodist networks to miss the existence of divergent opinions.

Church positions on Indigenous rights became more militant as the 1960s progressed: an article in 1960 described Indigenous peoples as 'the occupiers and owners of this whole continent for unnumbered centuries. They have never ceded to the white invaders their age-old title to the whole land'.⁸⁰ By 1963, the *Methodist* was declaring National Aborigines Sunday to be about 'REPARATION ... They don't need sympathy, they need our action to undo as far as possible what we have done'.⁸¹ Methodist views on Indigenous rights reached local congregations through such events as National Aborigines Sunday, observed in Methodist churches across the country on the Sunday nearest to Australia Day. Ministers received preparatory mailouts from the National Missionary Council to help their congregations 'remember these original owners of our land in a very special way'.⁸² That, however, did not stop one member of the Earlwood congregation later thwarting all attempts by a former Methodist minister, Senator John Woodley, to have the word 'owners' included in the references to Indigenous Australians in the proposed new Preamble to the Australian Constitution.⁸³

John Howard, ideologue

Judith Brett has observed that Howard's rhetorical style includes frequent 'references to his personal experiences ... to his own beliefs and feelings'. She argues that 'the real meaning of his references to his childhood in the 1950s' is 'not that he wants to go back, but that he legitimates his beliefs, both to himself and to others, in terms of his own experience rather than in terms of more abstract systems of cultural and social knowledge'.⁸⁴

However, the situation is more complicated than this explanation suggests. Howard cannot take his listeners or his constituents back to the Methodist values of his childhood, even if he wants to, because the understanding of the 1950s that he evokes is a fiction in many important respects. Even then, the world was more complicated than nostalgia presents it; the very church from which his values are said to emanate was more politically confrontational than conservative portrayals allow. Having transmuted into another (also often politically controversial) institutional form since 1977, the Methodist church of Howard's childhood exists now as an image from the past, available to stand rhetorically for a set of commitments that have little to do with its actual history.

Commentary that finds the roots of Howard's social conservatism in his Methodist past carries layers of comforting subtext. Those who feel at home with his social conservatism can see it as the product of heartfelt commitment. A religious association reassures anyone who might interpret the agenda as mere

opportunism. On the other hand, to the Australian electorate, reared on larrikin anticlericalism, there is a risk in religiosity seeming fanatical or excessive. Association with an extinct denomination is particularly effective: what could be safer than a religion that no longer exists?

For those to whom Howard's social policy seems less benign, the explanatory icon of 'John Howard, Methodist' offers a reassuring subtext. They might regret, even deplore, the consequences of his conservatism, but they should surely pardon what amounts to little more than a personal idiosyncrasy, an almost endearing reversion to childhood values. Moreover, since opposition to gay marriages, suspicion of lesbian couples who want IVF babies, the refusal to apologise to wronged peoples, and so on, are merely childhood throwbacks rather than conscious policy, we can anticipate that, once the man finally vacates the Lodge, the policies will fade with him.

International comparison makes the analysis of Howard's social conservatism as a personal idiosyncrasy look much less convincing, at least as an explanation for his electoral success. It is not enough to say that Howard happens to be a social conservative and happens to have won four terms as prime minister. On the contrary, the success of socially conservative 'family values' politics in numerous electoral settings, from George Bush's America to Helen Clark's New Zealand, aligns Howard's conservatism with international political trends.⁸⁵ As one issue chases another on front pages in all three countries, from faith-based welfare to 'values in schools' and gay marriage, we might note that the succession is a close match for the issues emanating from neo-conservative think-tanks, which have successfully promoted such concerns over a long period.⁸⁶

Capitalism, the 'hellish thing', has successfully co-opted many of Walker's 'weapons of evangelism' into its own ambiguously religious rhetoric. In the process, religiously inflected social conservatism has become firmly enmeshed with right-wing economic thought, even as churches criticise from the left. Those anticipating a Liberal Party ready to step out from behind the white picket fence may have to wait longer than the explanatory icon of 'John Howard, Methodist', would lead them to suppose.

Methodism: How convenient!
Marion Maddox

- 1 Ray Evans, "'For the labourer is worthy of his hire'", in Evans (ed.), *For the labourer is worthy of his hire*, proceedings of the H R Nicholls Society conference, Royal Parade Motor Inn, 3-5 April, 1992.
- 2 For example, David Marr, *The High Price of Heaven*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999.
- 3 Tony Wright, 'Preacher Men', *Bulletin*, 29 August 2001; John Hewson, 'A Moving Picture of Hope', *Australian Financial Review*, 12 April 2002.
- 4 Marcia Langton, 'Cost-Efficient, Triple-Documented Ethnic Cleansing', Address to the International Museums Conference, Melbourne, October 1998.
- 5 For example, Gerard Henderson, *A Howard Government?* Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1995.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 David Marr, Politics Seminar, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU, 6 August 2003.
- 9 Marr, *High Price of Heaven*, op. cit.
- 10 Marr, Politics Seminar, op. cit. Similarly, Labor Member for Grayndler Anthony Albanese: 'John Howard could only be a Methodist!' (interview with the author, Parliament House, 28 June 1999).
- 11 H R Nicholls Society website. Accessed 28 April 2004.
<http://www.hrnicholls.com.au/nicholls/nichvol12/vol1212f.htm>
 See also Wright, op. cit.; 'Howard refuses to weigh into Kernot claim', *Insiders*, ABC TV, 7 July 2002. <http://www.abc.net.au/insiders/content/2002/s600521.htm>; 'Prime Minister tours Athens', ABC Radio AM, 6 July 2002. <http://www.abc.net.au/am/s600203.htm>; George Megalogenis, 'The full-text of the Howard interview', 6 May 2002.
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- 48 G L Griffith, ‘American diary’, *Methodist*, 17 December 1955, p 3.
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- 50 See, for example, John Howard, ‘Fair Australia’, Address to the Australian Council of Social Services (Headland Speech No 3), Sydney, 13 October 1995, p 8.
- 51 ‘Child delinquency and the church’, *Methodist*, 30 April 1955, p 6.
- 52 ‘Design for depravity’, *Methodist*, 17 September 1955, p 3.
- 53 ‘The church and the community: A weekly commentary’, *Methodist*, 28 May 1955, p 3.
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 - 80 Reverend Wesley S Pidgeon, 'NADOC', *Methodist*, 9 July 1960, p 7.
 - 81 Reverend Dr A Capell, 'Would you like to be an Aborigine?', *Methodist*, 13 July 1963, p 4 (capitals in original).
 - 82 'Aborigines' Sunday', *Methodist*, 28 January 1950. In 1957, National Aborigines' Sunday moved to the second Sunday in July to coincide with NAIDOC week. Capell, *op. cit.*
 - 83 John Woodley, personal communication, 11 August 1999.
 - 84 Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp 211–12.
 - 85 Clark's minority Labour Government relies for confidence and supply support on the ambiguously Christian and extremely socially conservative United Future Party, whose stunning success in the 2002 election and determined opposition to what it calls 'political correctness' has made considerably harder the Labour Party's moves to decriminalise prostitution, legislate for same-sex civil unions and support single parent families, for example.
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To Bank or Not to Bank: Edward Smith Hall on Free Trade and the Commodification of Money in Early New South Wales¹

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- 1 I am grateful to the anonymous referees for their constructive comments on earlier versions of this article.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of moral and political economy, see E P Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', *Past and Present*, vol 50, 1971, pp 76–136. Of moral economy, he says, referring to eighteenth-century food riots, that 'grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor' (p 79). Of political economy, Thompson says 'the new economy entailed a demoralizing of the theory of trade and consumption ... questions as to the moral polity of marketing do not enter ... in practical terms, the new model worked in this way. The natural operation of supply and demand in the free market would maximize the satisfaction of all parties and establish the common good. The market was never better regulated than when it was left to