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# Ideas on Australian Politics

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Lecture

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DO IDEAS MATTER?

There are of course, two views on this subject

- Ideas matter and, indeed are the most important aspect of politics
- Ideas don't matter much, particularly when lined up alongside issues like 'trust' and realities like 'interests'

There is, of course, a distinction to be made between "BIG" ideas and "Singular" or "SMALL" ideas:

**Big ideas:** these are in effect ideologies backed up by particular views about human nature and human society, for example socialism or liberalism

**Smaller or Singular Ideas:** make particular and contestable claims about this or that policy, for example:

"More money given to education will increase productivity"

"Making drugs illegal will reduce their consumption"

We debate both BIG and SMALL ideas by producing evidence or by making assumptions about what might be possible. Both hard facts and lofty hopes are involved.

COMPETING IDEAS IN AUSTRALIAN POLITICS

Now I think you would agree that many ideas can be seen at work in parliament and in public debate, particularly but not only in an election campaign.

Let me try to make a list that would apply at the national level in Australian politics - 1. What's best for Australia - free trade or protection?

1. Should economic activity be free of restriction or highly regulated?
2. Should Australia promote multiculturalism rather than a particular culture or what we might call "Australian values"?
3. What is most important for society - independence and self-reliance or solidarity and social support?
4. Should our nation's primary objective be economic growth or sustainable development?
5. What is most important for people, their material living standards or their overall well-being?
6. What's best for society - a strong state that enforces a strict moral code or a minimalist state that allows for extensive freedom?

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7. How best do we secure our position in the world - traditional alliances and military strength or internationalism and the use of soft power?
  8. Should our constitution be unitary or federal and power centralized or decentralized?
  9. What's best when it come to the use of executive power - strength of purpose or democratic engagement?

In the Australian context there are two other points of contention-should Australia be a republic or should we keep the British monarch as our Head-of-State? How best do we recognize indigenous culture and rights in our system? Is constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples required in order for Australia to be "complete" as a nation? These are important questions but I won't incorporate them into the main body of the discussion today.

There are many variations on a theme when it comes to each of these questions and it's not usually a case of "either-or". You might believe, for example, that markets are good but not in all areas of the economy or you might believe that governments are strengthened not weakened when they involve the people through institutions of democratic engagement.

I also note that "Australian values" may have a leftist or a rightist tinge. Old left nationalism built around unionism and protectionism is different from contemporary nationalism built around self-reliance and "have-a-go" entrepreneurialism.

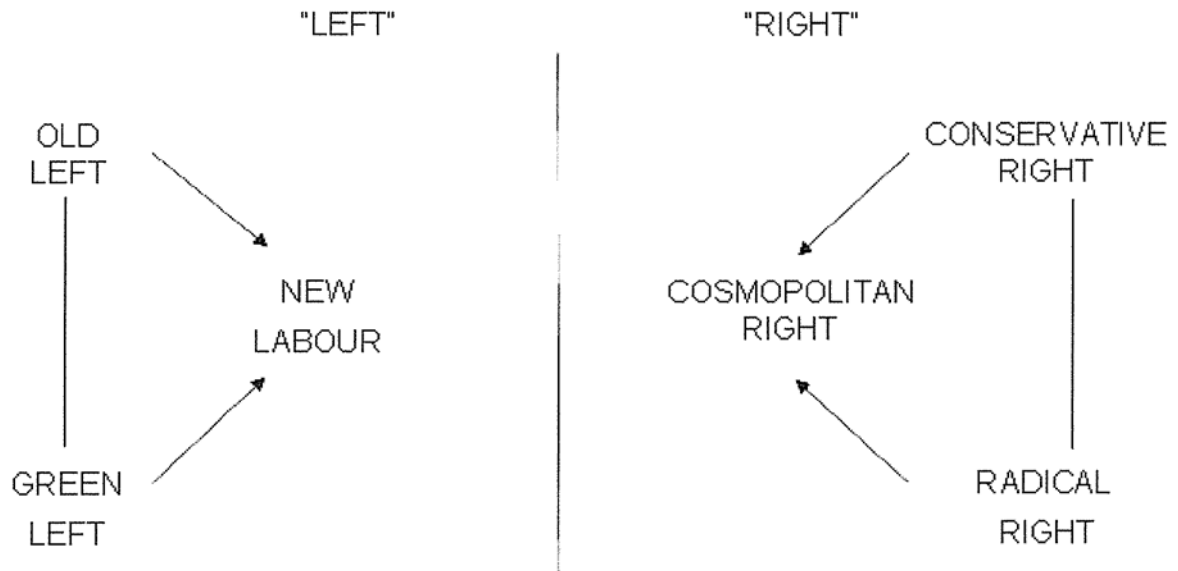
In relation to the range of ideas that any one individual or party may bring together there will usually be key priorities. For example the Greens regard the environment as the major issue around which to develop their politics. Conservatives, on the other hand, see tradition in all its forms as the key.

A distinction can be drawn between fundamentalists who say principles are to be adhered to no matter what and pragmatists who say it is more complicated than that, if only because principles can clash and choices have to be made that almost inevitably mean compromise. For example the old left will see public ownership as the critical link that can't be compromised just as conservatives might say the traditional family cannot be compromised. Pragmatists, on the other hand, are pluralists who see contradiction and complexity rather than natural order and simplicity.

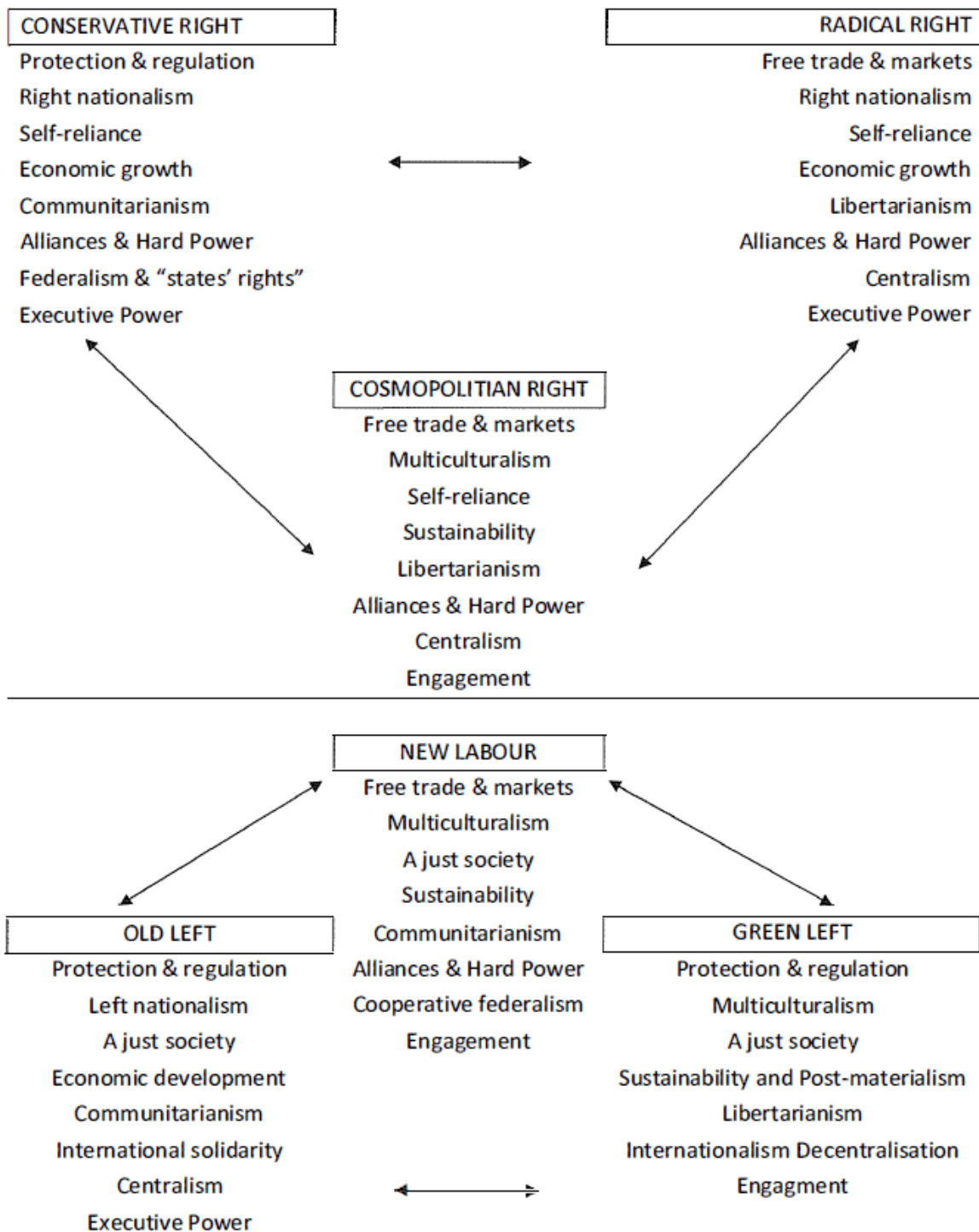
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## SETS OF IDEAS IN AUSTRALIAN POLITICS

Given that I have identified ten areas where different ideas compete for our attention and loyalty it is clear that there can be many permutations and combinations at play. In Australian politics today I can recognize six sets of ideas - three to the left and three to the right.



I reach this conclusion by situating the response to the ten questions in this way:



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## WHERE DO THE PARTIES STAND?

It's important to note that there is not a perfect fit between any of these packages and the political parties. However, we could probably say the ALP is "mostly new labor" and the Coalition "mostly conservative right"

I say "mostly" because clearly there are other influences at play on both the major parties. These influences may manifest themselves as "factions" or "tendencies", for example the cosmopolitans around Malcolm Turnbull in the Coalition and the old left around some of the unions in the ALP. Note too the existence of a strong free market voice in both the Coalition and the ALP despite the conservatism of the former and the unionism of the latter.

Interestingly the way I have presented the picture still leaves us with a left/right division in politics. The left is made up of Green Left, Old Left and New Labor and the Right is made up of the Radical Right, the Conservative Right and the Cosmopolitan Right. The major point of difference isn't on economic or environmental policy. Nor is it on defence and social order.

Rather it is on the question of social support; with the left saying re-distribution is needed for equality of opportunity and the right saying that re-distribution undermines the incentives for progress.

## POLITICAL IDEAS AND THE ELECTORATE

Another way to look at this takes us to the electorate. How do these sets of ideas fit with voter perceptions and priorities?

Voters, of course, occupy different positions in the economy- some employ others, some work for others and some are self-employed. Some work in big business, most in small to medium enterprises. Some work in agriculture, some in mining, some in manufacturing and some in services, government or non-government. Most live in cities but not all. Some rely on wages from work, others on pensions, social support or superannuation. Most were born here, some are migrants. Some are indigenous, but most aren't.

Are there any reasons why particular interests or groups should be attracted to particular ideas?

I would say there are connections here -for example between employees and the left and employers and the right. However, such connections are being made and re-made all the time as circumstances change and agendas change. It may be the case that the division between wage-earners and welfare recipients is seen by "workers" as more important than that between employees and employers. So too might government support for health and education-a left position-be seen as more important by the self-employed than any misgivings they may have about policies to back up the rights of workers.

Note too the factors that come into play when someone goes into the polling place to vote. He or she might vote on the basis of a tradition or party loyalty. In this case they may be "true believers" with an ideology or "loyal followers" no matter what.

They may focus on the leader and his or her team, looking at competence and performance if currently in power and the prospects for the same if they are contenders for power.

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Trustworthiness, strength of character and capacity will all be factors considered - in connection with or independently of party philosophy and policy.

Finally, it may be the case that the party itself is the issue. Voters may be wary of a party because of the influence wielded over it from outside - or indeed from inside due to its constitution and rules. It may even be the case that they support the ideology and policy direction but don't trust the personnel to be able to deliver on that or in a way that is acceptable.

So it is then, that the sets of ideas I have outlined will only be one factor amongst others in determining a vote. However, some degree of ideological coherence is clearly a plus. Indeed its absence will make the going tougher for a party and its leader should their competitors have clarity and purpose. Quite often voters will choose on this basis alone, working on the assumption that consistency of purpose is a necessary even if not sufficient condition for good government.

Voters want to know where the leaders and the parties stand. Having a coherent set of ideas is crucial and without it voters will worry about the trustworthiness of those who seek their support.

#### CONCLUSION

We know, then, that ideas are only one element of what matters in the political process. There isn't a perfect fit between one of the six sets of ideas identified and the political parties. This is not surprising given the wide range of issues that divide opinion. There will be fundamentalists within the parties who want a perfect fit but they will inevitably be in a minority if the party is serious about power. However, leaders and parties who lack some degree of consistency and coherence in their ideological positioning will create doubts in the minds of the electorate.