Review

Principled Leadership in the Age of Opportunism: An Australian Perspective

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The Conservative Revolution, by Cory Bernardi. *Ballarat, Australia: Connor Court, 2013. $29.95 paper.*

Today, the suggestion that genuine political reform can only be found among those who refuse to play by the accepted rules is almost a truism. However, the pressures of the modern political environment tend to stifle the efforts of would-be reformers; reliance on 'pragmatic' solutions to social controversy has seen *realpolitik* devolve into the politics of simple opportunism. As the electorate becomes increasingly cynical about the sincerity of its political elites, this general failure of civic trust throws the very character of the democratic process into question. A vocation shrouded in such a climate of institutionalized compromise, conformism, or cowardice is not one in which virtue can be expected to be the defining characteristic of its leading representatives. But perhaps these degenerative trends ironically make it easier to identify moral character among prospective future leaders.

Australian Senator Cory Bernardi, who published *The Conservative Revolution* in late 2013, is arguably one of these leaders. While Australian political life is geographically distant from its cousin democracies in the Anglosphere, a shared cultural patrimony makes it an interesting study of social and political trends also witnessed in the United States and the United Kingdom. Like the U.S., but unlike the UK, Australia does not have an *explicitly* conservative political party. However, the 'Coalition' is almost universally recognized as the mainstream center-right force in state

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and federal politics. Because it is a largely heterogeneous amalgamation of various political tendencies, tensions between its more traditionalist and *laissez faire* libertarian wings can often erupt into public conflict. Bernardi, who is a conservative-aligned member of the senior Coalition partner, the Liberal Party, is no stranger to such controversies.

What makes him unique, however, is his willingness to risk harming his chances of political advancement by arguing vociferously when others prefer to keep silent. In September 2012 he warned the Australian Senate that liberalizing sexual mores (specifically, legislating homosexual 'marriage') would lead to the incremental expansion of normalized deviancy.[1] For this he was forced to resign from his position as Parliamentary Secretary by his fellow Catholic and allegedly conservative Leader of the Opposition (now Prime Minister) Tony Abbott. Bernardi was then referring to the comments of Dr. Peter Singer in which he questioned whether "bestiality, homosexuality, fetishism and other non-reproductive acts" were "unnatural."[2] While Singer remains a respected authority for the progressive establishment, the senator faced weeks of chastisement not only from the opposition Labor Party and the commentariat, but many of his colleagues as well.

The publication of *The Conservative Revolution* signalled Bernardi's intention to maintain the political pressure from his party's right. The author claims to represent a popular commonsense approach to public policy.[3] This is arguably true given that leftist ideologues' more adventurous projects tend to be pet-issues of liberal academics and pop-cultural celebrities. However, it is also arguable that the public increasingly habituates to aspects of the left's relentless social engineering: common sense may be less common today than it was some decades ago. Nevertheless, Bernardi's statements in 2012 did not seem to harm Abbott's chances in winning government the following year. To date, his example proves that beneficiaries of 'political correctness' actually wield great power to shape public debate, set its parameters and punish those who transgress against the taboos of modern relativist and permissive norms.

Indeed, as Bernardi suggests, the 'moral' authority of today's cultural Marxists emanates from their supposed status as spokesmen for the politically and socially disenfranchised. Progressivism therefore needs to present itself as a 'daring' phenomenon standing in opposition to the allegedly oppressive powers-that-be. But in today's social and political climate, supporting the idea of 'gay marriage' as well as accepting same-sex child adoption and other related concepts is about as

[1] Australian Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 18 September 2012, 7243 (Sen. Cory Bernardi for South Australia).

[2] Peter Singer, "Heavy Petting" *Nerve* (2001). *N.b.* the term "unnatural" was placed in scare-quotes by Singer.

[3] Cory Bernardi, *The Conservative Revolution* (Ballarat: Connor Court, 2013), 75, 135, 154; hereinafter cited within parentheses in the text.

'cutting-edge' as proclaiming the clichéd platitudes of any other socially accepted dogma. This is because the values of the '60s avant-garde have effectively redefined today's cultural—and therefore political—mainstream. Current liberal posturing is little more than a myth designed to appeal to the electorate's easily manipulated sense of compassion and fairness.

Instead, the true 'radical' today is the one brave enough to risk opprobrium by dismissing arguments masquerading as a kind of modernist *pseudo*-virtue. The dogmatic sentimentalism of contemporary liberal rhetoric reflects a society not only uprooted from the moral teachings of tradition but likewise divorced from reason. Thus Bernardi refers to "the 'global warming' or 'climate change' movement that has developed a *cult-like following* among the political left" (60, emphasis added). Substantial attention is also paid to the existential threat posed by the growth of militant Islam within Western societies. He writes that:

> Most of our political elite now find it impossible to draw what were once obvious qualitative distinctions between religious world-views and philosophies of life. No doubt this is the result of people's desire to avoid bigotry and 'discrimination', but what it has actually achieved is an impoverished political debate. Instead of being 'enlightened', political discourse has in fact become less able to tackle uncomfortable truths (62).

Breaking through the iron curtain of political correctness has defined Bernardi's political, as well as his literary, career. In a recent address to the National Press Club in Canberra, the senator declared that "all too often mediocrity and a lack of conviction are mistaken for moderation." He added that "where I thought it was necessary, I have chosen to rock the boat" because the future of public discourse "will ultimately be determined by representatives who pursue truth rather than what they may see as the safe option."[4] Thus Bernardi is aware of the apparent contradictions of the traditionalist who finds himself gradually moving towards *reaction* as the social and political environment drifts further left with each passing year, where moral outrage among mainstream elites is selective, and where traditionalist views are rarely treated as equally valid in the market place of ideas. Referring to M. E. Bradford's *The Reactionary Imperative*, he writes that "it is difficult not to have sympathy with [his] view" that the mere conservation of the *status quo* today may result in the perpetuation of the outrageous (20).

Furthermore, Bernardi's choice for the book's title becomes clearer given his reference to the work of Brazilian Catholic traditionalist Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, whose call for counter-revolution was a plea for the return to an order which exists within a framework of objective moral hierarchy.[5] On one interpreta-

[4] Cory Bernardi, "Australian Politics is in Need of Serious Reform," address to the National Press Club of Australia, Canberra, ACT, 17 July 2014.

[5] Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (York: The American Soci-

tion, this may reflect the High Tory principle of there being a place for everything, and everything being in its place. But as this principle becomes increasingly alien to popular consciousness, such a call to reconstruction will necessarily appear *reactionary*. In any event, to Bernardi that reconstruction will need to draw on the first principles inherent in the West's cultural and religious legacy. He writes that

> the rich heritage of our Greco-Roman philosophy and Judeo-Christian traditions, connects all members of our community . . . [and] is the source of much of our culture, our ideas about what is right and wrong, our concepts of what it means to be human and the ethics of our civil society (21).

While he makes it clear that much of what defines modern conservative praxis is drawn from this religious and philosophical worldview, he is nevertheless at pains to emphasize that this is not something that ought to be celebrated by the Christian faithful alone. This is largely because the secular 'values' held up as a foundation for an alternative social order by atheists or agnostics ultimately draw their inspiration from the Christian concept of *imago Dei*: the rationale behind all civic virtues can be drawn from the proposition that Man has inherent dignity *qua* Man (28 fn 26). This principle, writes Bernardi, "should be entirely uncontroversial for the religious *and non-religious alike*" (32, emphasis in the original). That secularists should respect Christian tradition in the development of public policy has been acknowledged even by leading Frankfurt School theorist Jürgen Habermas during his 2004 exchange with then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.[6] Bernardi insists that Western civilization requires a transcendent aspect for it to be truly civilized, and in practical terms this necessitates a revival of Christian principles applied to public policy:

> As we see the desolate wasteland of destruction strewn across last century, we cannot but notice that the overwhelming majority of those atrocities were committed in the name of ideologies dedicated to pure science and rationality, from Nazism to Soviet and Chinese Communism. Why did this pure science and rationality lead to such a nightmare century? Because it lacked a conscience that only an appreciation of a higher moral order can provide (32).

Bernardi charges that the loss of this moral order has led to social pathologies that reinforce decay starting at the individual level. Naturally, the debate on sexual morality has been one of the dominant foci of his detractors' criticism. Perhaps this is to be expected given that some of the most heated battles of the 'Culture War' have concerned family policy, bioethics, reproductive 'rights' and sexual identity issues. One often

ety for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property, 3rd ed., 1993), 75 [*Revolução e Contra-Revolução* (serialised in *Catolicismo*: April 1959 and January 1977)]. Cited by Bernardi, *The Conservative Revolution*, 2 fn 1.

[6] Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006) [*Dialektik der Säkularisierung: Über Vernunft und Religion* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Verlag, 2005)].

hears the left mocking conservatives for their 'obsessions' with sex, but that alleged 'obsession' is merely the response to the left's own evidently keen interest in this area of social 'reform.' Homosexual 'marriage' and adoption, polyamory, transsexualism even among minors, the denial of objective binary sex roles: on one interpretation, this is merely a projection of progressives' own Freudian insecurities and complexes. How can any rational person sit back indifferently while the outrageous is perpetuated under the disingenuous pretence of toleration and progress?

In contrast to the utopian and abstract philosophizing of leftist ideologies, conservative thought deals with the particular realities of the human condition as it exists within a specific historical context. Consequently, rightist discourse can at times seem convoluted and even contradictory. Perhaps the greatest obstacle that conservative thinkers face is the risk of alienating the public with detailed exegesis of theory and praxis. Since traditionalism is fundamentally a lived experience, those who may be alienated are likely to be the very demographic group to whom Bernardi's message is most relevant. This risk is exacerbated in a society where the public is incessantly bombarded by liberal bromides within a 'pop' culture of broad leftist bias. Ideas that do not pander to progressive prejudice may therefore be counter-intuitive to the average reader, who would likely reject them by acquired reflex.

Thus *The Conservative Revolution* is written with an overlapping dual structure that allows complicated aspects of policy to be presented in accessible form. The first is the logical compartmentalization of chapters by general subject headings, which is broadly reminiscent of Barry Goldwater's 1960 manifesto *The Conscience of a Conservative*. The second is what could be described as the book's 'philosophical' dimension, which is derived from Russell Kirk's ten principles of conservatism and which underpins Bernardi's overall narrative. It is hoped that the conspicuous omission of an index will be corrected in a future edition as this would make it far easier for the reader to navigate where and how concepts are developed in the author's thesis. Nevertheless, the volume is divided into shorter sections that conceptually address different schema of Australian conservative thought: *Faith*, *Family*, *Flag*, *Free Enterprise* as well as *Freedom*. These can be read independently but frequently are cross-referenced and thus suggest an integrated approach to policy analysis.

Unfortunately, there is a risk that this integration tends to create a repetitive motif which some readers may find tedious. This can create the impression of scattered advocacy or confused argumentation. The attempt to balance various areas of reform may further highlight the risk of inconsistencies in the author's political theorizing. For instance, in practical application, policies that seek liberal economic reform and the fostering of traditionalist family

culture may prove to be mutually hostile. The integrated and repetitive structure of the volume might therefore be a function of the author's attempts to reconcile these various and varied policy concerns. Under the circumstances, some form of eclecticism is only to be expected.

Thus Bernardi does not offer unreserved endorsement for any of the dominant currents of mainstream conservative thought, instead approaching policy with nuance and caution. His strong inclination towards free enterprise economics does not blind him to the atomizing and destructive effect of the moral vacuity inherent in the focus on material progress. "For far too long we have heard the leftist slogan, 'we live in a society, not an economy,'" he writes. "Perhaps this has gained popularity because, with the preeminence of economic concerns in recent decades, we have allowed materialists and economic reductionists to shape what passes for conservative discourse" (134). Likewise, he understands that identity is a complex matrix of different criteria: religious, cultural, as well as historical. This is evident in his approach to national identity, where he balances the contributions of immigrants with the host culture's legacy. He writes that,

> while we are capable of embracing the new that can truly enrich us, we must constantly be mindful of the importance of a unified culture and the imperative to maintain it. No society can exist where its people live according to drastically differing norms and standards. Over time, such societies have been shown to polarise, fracture, and dissolve, sometimes violently. For these reasons, it is certainly not immoral to ensure that policy and law exists within a certain moral and historical framework. (131)

The author's reluctance to fall into reductionist modes of thinking represents a rejection of the sort of simple ideological solutions that perpetuate social dysfunction through doctrinal tunnel-vision. Bernardi holds that any principled oppositional force to cultural Marxism is more *disposition* than ideology, an *attitude* towards reform which respects tradition as the collected wisdom of generations past. Here the influence of Edmund Burke and G. K. Chesterton is evident. Though Bernardi cites authorities as disparate as Sam Francis and Dinesh D'Souza, the author of *The Conservative Revolution* is neither a paleoconservative nor a neoconservative.

For instance, there is a general atmosphere of social inclusivity in Bernardi's brand of conservatism, and this broadly accords with the neoconservative idea of 'subscription identity'. However, the author's emphasis on the importance of the nation's traditional heritage may narrow the scope of what qualities define the Australian citizen. Here Bernardi leans closer to the 'national particularist' tendency of the paleoconservatives. This could also be described as a budding 'identitarian' tendency in Australian political discourse which further distinguishes the author's thought from the dominant universalist currents of modern

center-right politics.[7] Evidently he is trying to find a balance between often diametrically opposed perspectives on the 'national question'. His own multicultural background undoubtedly plays a role in this: at the April 2014 Quadrant Dinner he quipped that, "when my family comes around for dinner, you'd think it was a meeting of the United Nations—only our family works."[8]

The most conspicuous absence in *The Conservative Revolution* is any substantial discussion of foreign policy. Instead, the reader must draw speculative inferences from elsewhere in the book. In fairness, Bernardi's focus is on the domestic sphere, where he evidently believes all genuine reform can most effectively be pursued. What comments he makes concerning foreign relations are therefore generalist, and allow for a broad scope of interpretation:

> I have argued in this short volume that the task ahead is to build on the conservative foundations of our forefathers. This means acknowledging and accepting that our role in world affairs, whether it be in foreign aid, international security or responding appropriately to the calls of our allies and friends abroad, depends entirely on our moral stability and material prosperity at home. It also means that we should never compromise Australia's national interest upon the altar of international pressure. (94)

While there is not much evidence that he enthusiastically embraces foreign adventurism in the name of 'democracy' and 'freedom', he is no isolationist either. Bernardi's conservatism may be patriotic, skeptical, and particularistic, but he does not advocate a passive role for the nation in the global arena.

Indeed, he is open minded enough to reflect on the perspectives of a broad range of political theorists without engaging in the internal disputes of vying factions of rightist thought. This is obvious from the varied authorities he cites, which include: de Tocqueville, Hugh Cecil, and Adam Smith, as well as Winston Churchill, Robert Nash, Peter Viereck, later political theorists John Kekes, Kenneth Minogue, Roger Scruton, John Horvat II, George Cardinal Pell, and a new generation of traditionalist commentators in Australia such as Luke Torrisi and others. Readers of this journal may wish also to note his reliance on the work of Joseph Baldacchino, who urges adoption of Edmund Burke's concept of prudence.

The author's search for a synthesis of conservative thought relevant to the Australian context means that dogmatic criticisms of the *status quo* are avoided. Instead, the book reads as if written for a younger audience. The last section, titled simply "What is to be Done?" is an attitudinal guide for his call to a conservative revolution. Notably, he writes that most of the suggestions listed there

> may not be explicitly political, but that is only because they focus on rediscovering 'the good' in life, and this is a cultural exercise. . . . If we are concerned

[7] This particular theme is analyzed in more depth by the reviewer in "The Future of Australian Conservatism: Mainstream or Sidestream," *Quadrant* 58:10 (October 2014).

[8] Cory Bernardi, Address to the April Quadrant Dinner, Sydney NSW, 2 April 2014.

> with the state of our civilisation, we should, like true local patriots, 'think globally and act locally.' This too is an inherently conservative slogan which has been hijacked by the left. It's time to take it back. (156-57)

Thus the book ends without the stereotypical cantankerous gloom of modern reactionary literature. By emphasizing the latent potential in a generation willing to break the spiral of social apathy and political cynicism, *hope* may be the best descriptor of Bernardi's call for principled social reform. Perhaps his most important message therefore, is that the struggle against leftism will not be won in the halls of Parliament, but in the hearts and minds of the citizenry.