A rich man’s world? The impact of market populism on equal citizenship

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Abstract

The rise of market populism in the English-speaking democracies has been accompanied by the labelling of equal opportunity projects as elite agendas. Equality seekers are disparaged as rent-seekers, destined to occupy privileged public sector positions as equality agents. This paper examines the semantic grammar of populism—the way populism frames society in terms of a simplified ‘us and them’ construct which conceals, for example, class, race and gender divisions. While many analysts of populism observe the ‘us and them’ frame they have neglected the way that political emotion is mobilised through the attribution to ‘them’ of contempt for ‘us’. The grammar of market populism, for example, mobilises political emotion against liberal ‘elites’ who are said to despise the values of ordinary people. Ordinary people can include the multimillionaires and bankers, who in older populist discourse formed part of the elite.

In particular, the paper focuses on the strangely feminised character of the ‘elite’ conjured up by market populism. This is an elite that espouses feminist, human rights and environmental causes involving regulation and public expenditure; the feminist component of this elite is characterised by its contempt for ordinary women as well as for men. The paper explores how cross-nationally market populist discourse shares a common structure and common themes. One such theme is that liberal elites are unable to accept the verdict of electoral majorities and characteristically appeal to the courts or international tribunals to overturn the decisions of elected governments. Thus feminised elites are anti-democratic as well as having contempt for the common people. This kind of discursive framing has had immense consequences in terms of public debate and what can be placed on the public policy agenda.

Keywords
Market populism, feminised elites, equal citizenship, English-speaking democracies

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Introduction

Populism and populist name-calling has a long history in the English-speaking democracies; the arrival of representative democracy was accompanied by repeated claims that politicians and political elites were betraying the interests of the people. The message of populism was that despite doctrines of popular sovereignty, politics had actually escaped popular control (Canovan, 2002: 27). Populist politicians called for the reassertion of popular control through devices of direct democracy, such as referenda.

There have been many different kinds of populism, including Right-wing and Left-wing forms, but all are characterised both by anti-elitism and by the exaltation of and appeal to the people (Canovan, 1981: 294). The structure of populist discourse is based on drawing a political dividing line between, on the one side, an untrustworthy and parasitic elite and, on the other, the virtuous and long-suffering people. Or, more briefly, between us and them. Populist leaders offer to defend the interests of the people, constructed as a homogenous group free of gender, race or class divides, from the depredations of the elite and their ancillaries. This is the grammar of populism.

The grammar of populism also involves another element. To mobilise political emotion effectively along the us/them divide, elites should be shown to have contempt for ordinary people and their values. This attribution of contempt is central to current populist strategies in countries like Australia and Canada. It is an aspect of populist discourse that has often been overlooked in the classical analyses of populism, such as that by Margaret Canovan (1981), but can be seen again and again in contemporary political speech.
It may be that the attribution of contempt becomes particularly important in the context of what Thomas Frank (2002) has nicely termed market populism, to distinguish it from the kind of populisms currently found in Europe, which combine xenophobia with economic nationalism. Market populism normalises self-seeking behaviour and aspirations to wealth and displaces older characterisations of elites in terms of 'Mr Fat'. If self-seeking is normal, it is not sufficient to show that elites are self-seeking—they must also be characterised by their contempt for mainstream values. This move is part of the 'culture wars' that distract attention from the distributional consequences of market populist agendas,

While populist leaders historically mobilised hostility against big city financial elites with cosmopolitan loyalties, the market populism of today has quite a different target. This new populist discourse constructs a divide between a welfare state elite and associated special interests on the one side and ordinary people or mainstream taxpayers on the other. The elites are no longer bankers, corrupt politicians and international financiers, but rather ‘the bleeding hearts, the politically correct, who control everything we do’ (Letter to *The Australian*, 9 September 2004). They are still city-based, but are predominantly humanities, arts and social science graduates rather than bankers or financiers. They are teachers and social workers and they are responsible for the growth of welfare state regulation and redistribution, at the expense of business and taxpayers. Current anti-elitist discourse has little in common with the academic study of elites,
where elites are made up of those who exercise political, economic and perhaps symbolic power. It is symbolic power only that is the focus of current anti-elitist discourse.

Elites are held responsible first for imposing political correctness and then for disputing the people’s verdict at elections and continuing to complain about issues such as human rights and social justice or the environment. A current federal minister in Australia has decried the need to pander to 'people who spend time sitting in cafés sipping lattes' when deciding such issues. While talk about public issues may be the defining element of democracy according to the theorists of deliberative democracy, populist discourse is dismissive of those who engage in public debate and who embrace diversity and difference in perspectives.

Feminists turn up on the wrong side of the us and them divide, among the new class elite that does well out of equality and has contempt for the values of the mainstream. In public choice terms they are classical rent seekers, meaning they aim to achieve better returns through the state than they can achieve through the market or through marriage. The attribution of contempt to teachers and social workers may seem odd, but it helps to delegitimise feminist and other equality projects and values.

This paper draws on evidence from both Australia and Anglophone Canada of the reshaping of public discourse under the impact of market populism, The paper begins by

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2 Senator the Hon. Ian Campbell, Interview on ABC radio 14 October 2005.
3 Francophone Canada has been more resistant to the discursive shifts described and analysed here.
providing a genealogy of key components of market populist discourse, the concepts of new class/welfare state elites and special interests. These concepts distinguish market populism from older forms of populism while retaining the basic semantic grammar of the latter.

The paper then examines the effects of market populism in delegitimising social justice and equal opportunity agendas. In particular, it sheds light on how feminists and other equality seekers have been framed as rent seekers, lacking any moral authenticity. It analyses the populist rejection of the accommodation of group difference, and the revival of ideas of equal treatment as same treatment. It notes the similarities in the role of men’s rights groups and anti-feminist women’s groups in the two countries in promoting ideas that equal opportunity programs discriminate against men and against the women who choose to be economically dependent on them. The paper concludes by analysing the impact of market populism in delegitimising the role of intermediary institutions in policy debate, or at least those that provide voice for women and other groups that look to state intervention to achieve equality.

**Introducing the ‘new class’**

The significant populist upsurge in Western democracies is often attributed to the insecurities fostered by globalisation and to the pace of social, economic and cultural change. It was marked by the emergence of parties such as Reform in Canada and Pauline Hanson’s One Nation in Australia. While parties of this kind have drawn on traditional wellsprings of popular discontent, they are also influenced by new international
discourses largely emanating from the United States. In Australia one of these discourses has been the concept of the ‘new class’, as reworked in the 1970s by American neoconservatives, many of whom had been influenced by Marxism in their youth (Dymond 2004). New class discourse had its origins in the Trotskyist critique of state socialist societies: a new class based on ownership of cultural capital had usurped power and was maximizing redistribution from the workers to further its own agendas.

The new class identified by American neo-conservatives consists of university-educated intellectuals radicalised by the social movements of the 1960s. This class has a vested interest in expanding the public sector, in which they will play leading roles thanks to their cultural capital. This new class speaks a language of public interest and equal opportunity, masking their own self-seeking and indifference to ordinary people. Economists Milton and Rose Friedman helped popularise the concept in their best-selling *Free to Choose*, which depicts the new class as acquiring high incomes for itself through preaching equality and promoting and administering the resulting legislation (1980: 142, 301).

The neo-conservatives associated the new class with values such as environmentalism, feminism, multiculturalism and minority rights more generally. These values were not regarded as having any authentic ethical content; rather they were elite ‘fashions’ which received the collective label ‘political correctness’. In the influential essays of Christopher Lasch, the new class elite was characterised not only by cosmopolitanism and political correctness but also by contempt for unfashionable Middle American values.
(1995). The idea that the new class is contemptuous of ordinary people’s values or just of ordinary people becomes very important in mobilising political emotion around this new discursive divide. American new class discourse was soon imported into Australia, through neo-conservative organs such as Quadrant, the journal of the Association for Cultural Freedom.

Both new class and traditional populist themes were presented in Pauline Hanson: The Truth, the book published in 1997 to mark the launch of Pauline Hanson's One Nation. A chapter was devoted to attacking new class or ‘cognitive’ elites and their ‘betrayal’ of Australia (1997: 56–108). However, Hanson was too much in the tradition of the old populism not to also include xenophobic and economic nationalist attacks on ‘Asianisation’ and the internationalisation of the economy. The attacks on free trade and competition policy guaranteed less than sympathetic treatment by the main vehicles of market populism and, after initial electoral success, the party quickly fell apart.

The most elaborate presentation of new class concepts in Australia has been that of sociologist Katharine Betts in her popular book The Great Divide. This book positions the author on the right side of the ‘great divide’ between the world of ordinary people and the cosmopolitan world of the elite or new class (1999). It reproduces the full grammar of populism, with the new class being contemptuous of the materialism and parochialism of the working class and lecturing them to accept asylum seekers (81ff). This view of a new class elite lecturing the electorate to accept asylum seekers and wincing at ‘basic
Australian values’ has been taken up with enthusiasm in free-market journals and in the Murdoch press.

In Canada, as will be discussed further, anti-elite discourse has had many of the features of new class discourse, but without the explicit use of a Marxist framework linking ownership of cultural capital to class and class exploitation. For example, David Frum, a columnist for the *National Post* from 1998, made regular attacks on the social engineers who promote bilingualism, cultural diversity, Indigenous sovereignty and welfare dependency in Canada.

Although rarely made explicit in new class discourse, the core members of this supposedly privileged new class, defined by concern over issues such as the environment and human rights, were the well-educated but underpaid members of feminised professions such as social work, teaching and librarianship. One of the key characteristics of the new class is, in fact, its female character.

**Unmasking ‘special interests’**

The public choice concept of ‘special interests’ has formed another element in recent populist discourse. Public choice theory, as developed by American economists James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, stems from rational actor premises, whereby both individual and collective actors are motivated by the desire to maximise returns. The term ‘special interests’ debunks the idea that groups that purport to be pursuing the public
interest are motivated any differently. It is particularly applied to groups such as environmentalists or equality seekers that invoke state interference with the market.

F A Hayek, who inspired much of this new discourse, said in his philosophical manifesto against the welfare state that the idea of social justice was a mirage. It was a licence for interfering with the mechanisms of the free market and an intrusion on the liberty expressed through market choices. Market outcomes should not be the subject of moral disapprobation or material reparation because they were the result of an impersonal but beneficent process, rather than being ‘willed’. In denying the legitimacy of redistribution, Hayek attacked the rationale of the welfare state at its heart (1976: 99).

Public provision to ensure equal opportunity was alien to Hayek’s view of the world. Those who advocated such provision could not represent the mythical public interest, but must be ‘special interests’ that fed off the state. Such groups promote the moral superiority of the non-profit sector over the for-profit private sector and promote the myth that the public and community sectors are without vested interests. The activity of such groups, whether seeking to protect workers, consumers or the environment or to promote equal opportunity, will invariably be revealed by public choice analyses to benefit the new class. The latter thrives on the growth of state intervention in the private sector.

Public choice theory has been very successfully popularised in the English-speaking democracies, both through think tanks created for this purpose and through means such as
the ‘Yes, Minister’ television series devised by a Friedman disciple, Tony Jay. The think tanks took up Milton Friedman’s challenge to ‘sell ideas like soap’—by dint of constant restatement, re-endorsement and repackaging. The model was the UK Institute of Economic Affairs, founded in 1955. In Canada the Fraser Institute (founded in 1974) and in Australia the Centre for Independent Studies (1976) and the older (1943) Institute of Public Affairs which became Hayekian in the 1980s, were to wield similar influence. Hayek, Friedman and Buchanan served as advisers to these think tanks The ‘special interest’ discourse they disseminated became part of the governing discourse of the Thatcher government in the UK and of other English-speaking democracies.

The think tanks operate at a number of levels. They have had exceptional access to the mainstream media, particularly papers once owned by Conrad Black in Canada and by Rupert Murdoch in Australia. For example, an audit of the Murdoch flagship, the Australian in 2003–04 found that authors from free-market think tanks were 18 times as likely to be represented on its Opinion page as authors from 'progressive' think tanks.4 The publications of the think tanks themselves, for example the Fraser Forum in Canada and Policy and the IPA Review in Australia, specialise in exposing the cosy conspiracy between rent-seeking ‘special interests’ and bureaucrats seeking to maximise their budgets.

One example of a rent-seeking special interest consists of single mothers who have calculated that they can obtain a better ‘rent’ through the state than they can through the

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market or through marriage (Swan and Bernstam, 1987). Women’s units within the state or femocrats, to use an Australian term, are deemed to promote the organisation and interests of sole parents, while at the same time ensuring good jobs for themselves. The activities of feminist policymakers supposedly exemplify the way that special interests construct sections of the population as ‘victims’ in order to justify intervention and public expenditure.

Institutionalising victim status means discouraging personal responsibility for health, safety and financial security, and encouraging dependence on the nanny state. I have explored elsewhere the way in which female metaphors such as ‘nanny state’ or ‘weaning off the breast’ are used to reinforce the neoliberal attack on the welfare state by associating the latter with loss of masculine values such as self-reliance and independence (Sawer, 2003: Ch. 5). Women social reformers of the 'first wave' of the women's movement were deeply implicated in the transformation of the 'nightwatchman state' of classical liberalism into the public caring associated with the welfare state. This 'maternalising' of the state is now denounced as resulting in a loss of masculinity both through overprotection and through usurpation of male provider roles.

Public choice repositioned equality seeking as the rent seeking of special interests rather than an authentic public value (see also Brodie 1995). While social liberalism had emphasised the responsibility of the state to provide all citizens with the opportunity to develop potential, the new emphasis was on ‘choice’, something that only markets could provide. If the term equal opportunity was used at all, it was the ‘thin’ version, meaning
absence of legal restraints on competing for unequal rewards, not opportunity for
development of potential. Any defence of the welfare state could be reframed as
resistance by minority and special interest groups to the economic reform required for
global competitiveness and the tax cuts desired by ordinary people.

**The new populism in Australia**

In 1996 the discursive reframing of welfare state and equality projects in Australia was
given increased impetus by the election of a Coalition government at the federal level,
with John Howard as Prime Minister. In a headland lecture before winning government
Howard claimed that under Labor a bureaucracy of the new class had taken over.
Moreover, ‘mainstream’ Australians felt powerless to compete with the noisy vested
interest groups that had come to dominate decision-making. His goal was to reverse this

Howard also depicted human rights and equal opportunity issues as purely elite concerns,
referring to race, gender and sexual preference as the ‘designer forms of discrimination in
the 1990s’ (1994: 22). As we have seen, it is a common feature of new class discourse to
denigrate such concerns as elite ‘fashions’. Like the US Republicans, Howard was trying
to reach blue-collar workers believed to be hostile to such fashions and resentful of their
own role in funding the welfare state. Following his election victory many interpreted it
in Howard’s terms, as a defeat for the ‘special interests’ such as feminists,
multiculturalists and Aboriginal advocates (Sawer 1997).
While Howard was already taking the newly elected Coalition government in a populist direction, his approach was different from that of the more overtly populist Pauline Hanson's One Nation. The Howard government deplored One Nation's naive views on economic globalisation, but adopted elements of its social policy, including an increasingly punitive regime for asylum seekers and onshore refugees and a men’s rights agenda in relation to custody and child support.

Both One Nation and the new Coalition government (like Reform in Canada) played up populist themes of the need to strengthen border security and defend sovereignty. They suggested that new class elites, the courts and international tribunals were in league to overturn the measures (such as mandatory detention) taken to discourage asylum seekers from arriving on Australian shores. John Howard deplored the way in which the domestic affairs of Australia had been influenced by the fine print of international treaties and the deliberations of ‘foreign’ (that is, United Nations) committees: ‘there is an overwhelming view in this country that Australian law should be governed and determined by Australia alone’ (1994: 25).

As framed by market populism, liberal elites are always prone to selling out the national interest. When they are unable to secure an electoral majority for their agenda, they turn to the international arena and to ‘like-minded self-proclaimed champions of social justice sitting in Geneva, Brussels or New York’ (Albrechtsen, 2000: 30). Or, as the Howard government’s chair of the Australian Broadcasting Authority put it, ‘if the people will not accept your agenda, the elite guardians can have it adopted through the back door by a
consensus among the international elites’ (Flint, 2003: 162). The same kind of censure is not, however, applied to free-trade agreements that will constrain the ability of governments to implement popular mandates or enable corporations to take popularly elected governments before international tribunals.

The public choice view is that human rights advocates who try to work through multilateral bodies are serving the interests of their agencies and staff more than the interests of human rights. The Howard government demonstratively turned its back on such interference from United Nations human rights bodies and was applauded by the free-market think tanks: ‘by refusing to participate in UN shame games, the Howard government—along with its Canadian and US counterparts—is starting to bring an end to the whole advocacy charade’ (Nahan, 2000).

In taking up such themes Prime Minister John Howard appealed to a ‘mainstream’ Australia, in particular the fears, resentments and insecurities of this mainstream. Howard relied heavily on promoting an us/them division around which such resentments could flourish. Elites appealing to international human rights norms or writing ‘black-armband history’ (mourning the treatment of Indigenous peoples) were showing contempt for and sneering at the national pride felt by ordinary Australians. Feminists promoting equal opportunity were showing contempt for the values of ordinary women. He talked of the ‘stridency of the ultra-feminist groups in the community’ who sneer at and look down on women choosing to provide full-time care for their children (1998).
The attribution to feminists of contempt for ordinary women was a necessary part of the functioning of anti-elite discourse. It did not require evidence. In fact in both Australia and Canada it was feminists who campaigned for national time-use surveys to measure the incidence and distribution of unpaid work and calculate its value to the national economy. Nonetheless the idea of contempt was extremely useful in delegitimising the work of feminist bureaucrats, particularly where such work involved redistribution or regulation.

The demonising of equality seekers was reinforced by appeals to resentment of visible minorities. Pauline Hanson appealed on behalf of mainstream Australians against those controlling the ‘taxpayer-funded industries servicing Aboriginals, multiculturalists and a host of other minority groups’ (1996). She also agreed with the public choice analysis of single motherhood, another industry she said One Nation would put a stop to (1998). Increasingly the welfare state was characterised as benefiting ‘do-gooders’ and their constituencies at the expense of the mainstream who paid for it. A collection put out at this time by a Liberal Party think tank suggested mainstream Australia was fed up with an inner city ‘café society’ social justice agenda that got in the way of its mortgage repayments (Goldsmith, 1998).

As we have seen, this new divisive discourse had emerged from a number of directions: traditional populism with its paranoia about cosmopolitan elites, neoconservative theory of the ‘new class’, the public choice notion of ‘special interests’, free-market think tanks seeking to discredit welfare state redistribution, and political exploitation of resentments
within the community for short-term electoral purposes. What was paradoxical was that this discourse, aimed at least in part at weakening the Left, was energetically taken up by some prominent figures within the Australian Labor Party (ALP). They agreed that the villain was the ‘new class elite’ and blamed special interests such as ‘the Greens, gays, feminists, ethnics and disabled’ for alienating the electorate (Johns, 1996). This susceptibility of the ALP to market populism was in marked contrast to the relative immunity of the comparable union-based Canadian party, the New Democratic Party (NDP).

Australian Labor Leader Mark Latham (2003–05) was one of those who adopted a combination of special interest and new class discourse. He identified a ‘symbolic class’ that spoke a language of rights and entitlements and supported redistribution at the expense of working-class taxpayers (Latham, 2001b). The symbolic class included groups such as Women’s Electoral Lobby that promoted abstract rights through constructing women as victims (Latham, 2001a). The equal opportunity project of identifying and addressing sources of institutional bias became labelled, in the new discourse, as ‘special treatment for special interests’.

Once market populist frames are accepted, the central conflict is no longer a class conflict between capital and labour, but one between blue-collar workers and middle-class elites. Big business and the interests of multinational corporations are rendered invisible when the target shifts to special interests (Johnson, 2001: 142–43). The real enemy is the new class, including women whose public sector jobs are allegedly at the expense of working-
class taxpayers. One site of conflict between feminists and Labor was over the latter’s retreat from centralised wage fixing—which had made possible much greater progress on gender equity in wages than was possible under decentralised systems such as that of Canada. In the 1990s some labour leaders began to portray redistribution as the domain of ‘special interests’ who were holding up economic reform. Equality seekers were framed as part of the latté-drinking ‘new class elite’, while blue-collar workers were depicted as ‘aspirational voters’ interested in self-advancement rather than equality.

**The new populism in Canada**

In Canada populism enjoyed an electoral surge in 1993. The populist Reform party had been the only party to oppose what was depicted as the ‘elite-driven’ Charlottetown Accord on constitutional reform. What followed at the federal level was the electoral collapse of the Progressive Conservative Party and the rise in its place of Reform, renamed Canadian Alliance in 2000. In 2003 the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party merged in the new Conservative Party, of which Stephen Harper became Leader. It won (minority) government in 2006 using very similar discourse to John Howard ten years previously, promising to govern for 'mainstream' Canadians and accusing other parties of putting the demands of special interests ahead of the needs of ordinary working families for tax cuts.⁵

Reform, the populist heart of the new Conservative Party, dates from 1987 but drew on a much longer political tradition of populism in Western Canada. Populism had long been a

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⁵ The Federal Director of the Australian Liberal Party, Brian Loughnane, was seconded as an adviser to Harper's campaign. The Australian Liberal Party had found this discourse so effective that for a brief period in 2000 it even issued a magazine called *The Mainstream*. 
vehicle for expressing strong regional sentiment and distrust of the political elites of Central Canada. Reform was able to capitalise on Western resentment of official bilingualism and of proposed Constitutional recognition of Quebec as a distinct society. It countered major party proposals for the accommodation of difference with its own platform of ‘equality of citizens and provinces’ (discussed further below).

In addition to breaking the consensus on official bilingualism, Reform was like its Australian counterparts in rupturing party consensus on multiculturalism and immigration (Kirkham 1998). In relation to asylum seekers it emphasised border security and draconian action against ‘illegal entrants’. In relation to immigration more generally it called for the limiting of family reunion and the closer alignment of immigration with Canada’s economic needs—the prioritising of immigrants with labour market and linguistic skills that minimise the need for settlement services or recognition of cultural diversity. Indeed as in Australia, multiculturalism was framed as state-fostered special interest politics that encouraged ghettoisation or the maintenance of distinct communities outside the ‘mainstream’. The rupturing of party consensus and the consequent shift in public discourse brought in its train policy shifts in both Canada and Australia.

Like its Australian counterparts, Reform also took up the discourse of ‘special interests’—labelling as a ‘special interest group’ any organisation that promoted state intervention to redistribute market-generated incomes (Barney and Laycock, 1999). Thus feminist groups, First Nations organisations, multicultural and minority ethnic groups, official language minorities and unions all became special interest groups. As Reform
complained in a 1992 pamphlet: ‘in Ottawa, every special interest group counts except one, Canadians’ (Laycock, 2002: 61).

Reform became the major political vehicle in Canada for discourse targeted at state-assisted elites who promoted equality agendas and public intervention in the distribution of social and economic goods. Unlike the earlier populism of Social Credit, Reform did not include business or banking elites in its sights and, indeed won considerable corporate and media backing in English-speaking Canada. This and its support for free trade distinguished it from Pauline Hanson’s One Nation and made it more similar to the Howard-led Liberal Party in Australia.

For much of the period after World War 2 social justice and social equity had been regarded as legitimate goals, and groups pursuing such goals had been regarded as being in the political mainstream (Jenson and Phillips, 1996: 119). The discursive shifts encouraged by Reform meant doubt was cast on the authenticity of such goals and on the interests and motives of their proponents. Equality seeking was labelled as an elite agenda inconsistent with mainstream political values. Feminist organisations, such as the umbrella body for the anglophone women’s movement, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), came under increasing attack. They were no longer regarded as having an authentic democratic role in crystallising and representing women’s views but rather were depicted as self-interested and unrepresentative special interests (Dobrowolsky, 1998: 719).
An interesting development in Canada, without a direct parallel in Australia, was the emergence of the self-styled ‘Calgary School’ of political scientists playing a significant role in populist politics as well as in free-market think tanks such as the Fraser Institute. In Australia there have been a number of economists who have played a prominent role in promoting public choice frames of analysis, but this has largely been via think tanks rather than through direct involvement in party politics.

In Canada, the Calgary School includes Tom Flanagan—originally an adviser to Reform founder, Preston Manning, and later the national campaign director for Conservative Party Leader Stephen Harper in 2004 and senior campaign adviser in 2006. Flanagan has been credited with Reform’s original breakthrough into national politics, through his advice to come out against the 'elite-driven' Charlottetown Accord in the early 1990s. Flanagan has been an outspoken critic of political correctness and 'Aboriginal orthodoxy'. His *First Nations? Second Thoughts* (2000), funded by the Donner Canadian Foundation, (also a generous donor to the Fraser Institute) was comparable to the books being produced in Australia as part of the history wars. He preferred to describe First Nations as 'first immigrants' and argued that special treatment related to Indigenous status, including land rights, only served the interests of a small elite of activists, politicians and administrators. The interests of Aboriginal peoples would be better served by policies of assimilation and same treatment. Flanagan continued to provide much of the intellectual underpinning of Stephen Harper’s leadership (McDonald 2004).
Two other members of the Calgary School, Ted Morton and Rainer Knopff have been responsible for a sustained attack on the way the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms has allegedly undermined Canadian democracy. Their book *The Charter Revolution and the Court Party* details how special interest groups have used Charter litigation to pursue policy demands rejected by elected governments. Hostility to the Supreme Court and 'unelected judges' has been common among Reform politicians but was kept in check during the Conservative Party's bid for government. It surfaced again in May 2006 when a Conservative Party MP and long-time critic of judicial activism, Maurice Vellacott, attacked the Supreme Court Chief Justice, Beverley McLachlin for assuming God-like powers. She had stated in a speech to New Zealand university students that the rule of law required judges to uphold unwritten constitutional norms, such as the right not to be punished without a trial, even in the face of clearly enacted laws or hostile public opinion. Following pressure from Opposition parties over the statement, Vellacott resigned his position as chair of the House of Commons Aboriginal Affairs Committee.

Like other members of the Calgary School, Morton and Knopff reproduce the main features of US anti-elite discourse—much of it taken directly from Christopher Lasch—including the distinction between elite fashions and mainstream traditional values and the tyranny of political correctness. They suggest that those who belong to the postmaterialist knowledge class, such as feminists, are ‘fatally removed from the physical side of life’, unlike farmers or homemakers, which accounts for their social engineering ambitions (2000). Apparently feminists, as distinct from ‘homemakers’, do not have caring
responsibilities for children, elderly parents, partners or siblings and apparently the
women's movement did not emerge from the lived experience of such responsibilities.
According to Morton, the coalition of self-styled equality seekers—'feminists, anti-
poverty groups, the gay-rights movement, natives and other ethnic and racial
minorities'—both demand and depend on state funding and state intervention, at the
expense of taxpayers, gun owners and those with traditional family values (1998).
As in Australia, the market populism of Reform and its successors was not just
significant in itself but also in its more general influence on political discourse and public
policy, including the downgrading of state agencies associated with multicultural and
women’s advocacy. Impact on approaches to equal opportunity and processes of policy
consultation are discussed further below.

In terms of the media, the Reform agenda received generous coverage in the newspapers
and magazines owned by Conrad Black and by the Byfield family in Western Canada.
Conrad Black’s National Post, one of Canada’s two national English-language
newspapers, supported the Reform agenda from the time it was established in 1998.
Black was praised by Harper and Flanagan for the conservative voices he brought to
papers that were previously 'monolithically liberal and feminist' (Harper and Flanagan
1997). The role played by Conrad Black and Rupert Murdoch in promoting market
populism has been very similar and they gave similar access to think tanks such as the
Fraser Institute.
A different kind of body, with no equivalent in Australia, is the National Citizens’ Coalition (NCC), founded in 1967. The NCC describes itself as a watchdog on government, animated by its belief in ‘more freedom through less government’. It takes pride in neither lobbying nor taking money from government but instead speaking directly to fellow citizens through ‘well-organized, targeted advertising campaigns, using newspaper ads, radio commercials, TV spots, billboards and direct mail’ (NCC, 2003). Stephen Harper was President of the NCC in 1998–2001, during a period out of parliament before he became leader of the Canadian Alliance and the Conservative Party. The NCC has been one of the players in the shift in public discourse in Canada. The implications of such discursive shifts for equal opportunity agendas are discussed in the following section.

**The implications of special interests discourse for equal opportunity agendas**

Special interest discourses have been vigorously promoted in Australia and Canada by free-market think tanks and subsequently by the mass media and politicians. What are the implications for the equal opportunity agendas developed in the 1970s and 1980s? In those decades feminists and other equality seekers helped achieve an equal opportunity jurisprudence that accommodated group difference. In part this was through incorporating concepts of indirect discrimination. This meant recognising that apparently neutral requirements might discriminate in effect against those with particular group characteristics. For example, requirements of continuity of service as a condition for promotion might discriminate against women because women are characteristically the primary carers of children and more likely to have broken careers. Other seemingly
neutral requirements might compound collective disadvantage experienced in the past or present.

Since the 1990s market populism has effectively pushed back equal opportunity understandings and promoted a return to understandings of equal treatment as ‘same treatment’—regardless of effects on those who differ from the norm. It rejects the ‘sophisticated jurisprudential theories of disparate impact and systemic discrimination that invite judicial revision of legislative decision-making’ (Morton and Knopff, 2000). Reform was committed to an idea of equality that meant government would treat people identically, regardless of their differences. Any accommodation of group difference or policy of affirmative action could only lead to a politics of privilege and special status at the expense of ordinary Canadians. Stephen Harper expressed the reform position on equality as rejecting proactive approaches by government: equality for people, provinces or groups could only be achieved by identical treatment not through ‘different sets of rules or standards’ (Kirkham, 1998: 259).

The Saskatchewan Party, a populist party founded in 1997, similarly proclaimed its commitment to ‘equality for all, special privileges for no-one’ in a way very reminiscent of Pauline Hanson’s First Speech. Like its federal Reform associates, the Saskatchewan Party opposes any deviation from the same treatment principle, whether affirmative action for the socially and economically disadvantaged, recognition of Indigenous land claims, or recognition of the ‘distinct society’ status of Quebec. Both Reform Leader Preston Manning and Pauline Hanson rejected state-supported multicultural and other
policies that promote equality by recognising and accommodating group differences and linguistic diversity. Reform opposed the inclusion of sexual orientation among the prohibited grounds of discrimination in the Canadian Human Rights Act, arguing that protection should be available not on the basis of personal characteristics or group membership but on the basis of the equality before the law. Groups advocating human rights protection on the basis of sexual orientation were described as special interest groups ‘hijacking the status of the disadvantaged’, despite the specific harms that their status in fact attracted.

The public choice assumption of the self-interested nature of all welfare state intervention has also served to delegitimise social justice agendas and to mobilise opposition to equality seekers. Equal opportunity for development of potential has been a core value in the social–liberal traditions of both countries (Sawer, 2003). Its current displacement proceeds at a number of levels. *First*, concern with equal opportunity is portrayed as unauthentic, a mask for the rent seeking of the new class which will do well out of equality. Concern over equal educational opportunity, for example, is regarded as promoting the interests of teachers and academics, at the expense of taxpayers. As an Australian Labor Minister for Finance said, you can be sure that any group ‘which calls itself a “public interest” group is up to its eyeballs in self-interest’ (Walsh, 1990).

*Second*, if concern with equal opportunity is not a form of rent seeking, then it is an elite fashion, which serves the function of social closure and helps to distinguish the new class from ordinary people. The expression of ‘moral’ views is the equivalent of wearing a designer label or some other form of distinguishing dress according to Murdoch-owned
Australian newspaper. It has editorialised (29 December 2003) on how ‘the moral middle class has discovered in asylum-seekers a new mascot through which it can demonstrate its innate superiority over common folk ... ’.

Third, the negative attributes of new class elites (self-interest, insincerity, superiority) are given a more active relational character. As we have seen, welfare state elites sneer at, despise, look down on or wince at the values of ordinary people; feminists sneer at other women.

Women outside the paid workforce become the alleged victims of elite contempt, but are also heroes because they are assumed to make few demands on the state, to be content to be economically dependent on husbands and to provide community services on an unpaid basis rather than demanding equal pay. Groups such as REAL Women [Realistic, Equal, Active for Life] in Canada and Women Who Want to be Women in Australia (now Endeavour Forum) highlighted through their names an implied contrast with equality seekers, who were not real women. While the initial impetus for the formation of such groups was opposition to abortion, they have taken up a much broader range of issues, opposing feminist influence on government and promoting ‘family values’. They have been welcome within free-market circles because their claims are seen as compatible with cheap government in a way that the claims of feminist equality seekers, wanting paid community services, are not.
REAL Women have opposed pay equity on the grounds that comparable worth evaluations would require ‘a huge bureaucracy at taxpayers’ expense’ and they also opposed the concept of ‘universally-available, government-subsidised day care’ (REAL Women of Canada, 2003). Increasingly, any measures to provide equal opportunity to women in the paid workforce, such as paid maternity leave, subsidised childcare or re-entry allowances and training programs are framed as a form of discrimination against women who have chosen to be homemakers, in addition to being wasteful public expenditure. The retention of the individual as the unit of account in the tax system is also seen as discriminating against single-income families: instead family unit taxation is favoured that would impose high rates of tax on second earners. Anti-discrimination legislation is opposed on the ground that private employers, with the incentive of the profit motive will make wiser choices than ‘equal opportunity bureaucrats whose salaries are paid by taxpayers’ (Francis, 1994).

Such groups not only decry the self-seeking and contempt that characterise equality seekers, they also appropriate their language. They claim it is ordinary Australians or Canadians who are being discriminated against by the ‘special treatment’ of minorities or women. All that is needed is for everybody to be treated ‘the same’. In both Australia and Canada this has been by far the most important discursive strategy used against affirmative action programmes, Indigenous land and fishing rights, ethnic-specific services and multicultural programmes. It has also been used by the men’s rights movement, which constitutes another element in the anti-elitist discourse coalition.
In both Australia and Canada men’s rights groups proliferated in the 1990s. In the view of ‘Dads Against Discrimination’ (Australia, Canada and the USA), the Men’s Rights Agency (Australia) or Men’s Equalization Inc. (Canada), feminists have captured state power and are responsible for policies and legislation that victimise men (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998). They claim that policies that recognise the effect of caring work on earning capacity, as in child support formulae, mean women are being treated preferentially. Legislation requiring the identification and removal of barriers to equal opportunity for women and specified groups is seen in a similar light. Programs dealing with domestic violence are discriminating against men by regarding them only as perpetrators. Alternatively, such programs fail to recognise that men’s violence is a consequence of their powerlessness in the face of a feminist-dominated system. Small steps towards greater gender equity in public policy are vastly exaggerated in the eyes of those who believe they are the new victims of feminist elites and gender bias in the state.

In Canada, the judicial interpretation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the ability of the women’s movement to bring Charter challenges, has been depicted as part of an elite conspiracy against the people. Through the lens of market populism equality can only mean formal equality of individuals, not ‘special treatment’ of groups in order to achieve more substantive equality of opportunity.

Delegitimising NGO advocacy

In the 1970s and 1980s, equality seekers and their organisations fitted easily into dominant discourses of equal opportunity and social citizenship. In Canada Prime
Minister Pierre Trudeau had been promoting an agenda of more inclusive citizenship, aimed at encouraging political participation by cultural minorities and disadvantaged groups and funding ‘political voice’ for such groups (Pal, 1993). Non-government organisations (NGOs) were seen as having a central and legitimate role to play in promoting more inclusive and active citizenship. Indeed there was ‘a boom in state support for intermediary organisations which might represent citizens to and in the state’ (Jenson and Phillips, 1996). In Australia such programs were couched less in terms of citizenship and more in terms of equitable access to government, but the outcome was similar. In both countries it became policy to provide public funding for advocacy in order to strengthen ‘weak voices’ that would otherwise not be heard in the policy process.

Impetus for wider forms of consultation came from the new social movements, such as the women’s movement, the environment movement, and the movement for Indigenous and multicultural rights and recognition. The demand for ‘consultation’ in policy development became normal at all levels of government and was particularly strong in Canada following the failure of top-down Constitutional reform efforts. But in order for it to occur, governments needed bona fide and representative organisations with which to consult. In some cases this involved fostering the creation of bodies that could perform the role of community representative at the table. New peak bodies funded by government eventually enabled groups marginalised in public decision making, such as immigrant women, or stigmatised groups, such as sex workers, to be represented in ways not possible through the majoritarian institutions of representative democracy. For the first time women with disabilities, lesbian women or homeless women had their own
advocacy organisations through which they could develop and voice their perspectives on
the national policy process. Such groups of women had previously found their views
overlooked by male-dominated NGOs in, for example, immigrant, visible minority and
disability sectors; they also felt overlooked by women’s peak bodies such as the National

In Australia the official rationale for funding such bodies was that it enabled
disadvantaged groups to be represented in the formulation and implementation of policy
and to balance the input of organised private interests. A parliamentary report strongly
endorsed the view that ‘An integral part of the consultative and lobbying role of these
organisations is to disagree with Government policy where this is necessary in order to
represent the interests of their constituencies’ (House of Representatives, 1991).

The subsequent discursive shifts that cast doubt on equality seeking rendered such an
approach to extra-parliamentary representation increasingly vulnerable. As we have seen,
both Reform and its successors in Canada and the Howard government in Australia were
seeking to reposition equality-seeking groups as special interest groups, inimical to the
interests and values of the mainstream. If public interest groups were really special
interest groups, then governments were entitled to subject them to much greater control.
Peak bodies critical of government were defunded or had their funding sharply reduced,
as happened with NAC in Canada and Women’s Electoral Lobby in Australia. Peak
bodies were increasingly provided with project rather than core funding and with
contracts that restricted their capacity to engage in advocacy critical of government policy.

Free-market think tanks stepped up their attacks on non-government organisations after the successful international mobilisation to defeat the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. The defunding and reduced access to government of community-based peak bodies performing advocacy and representational work particularly affected bodies representing disadvantaged sections of the community, those who were most in need of social programmes being cut by government (Sawer, 2002; Laycock, 2002:37–40; Jenson and Phillips, 1996: 119).

The legitimacy of peak bodies was undermined through suggestions that they did not represent their supposed constituencies and that they distorted grassroots opinion. There was a new privileging of non-deliberative and unmediated opinion reflected, for example, through opinion polling, over representation through intermediary groups. The gap between elite and non-elite opinion was regarded as making the case that self-appointed representatives distorted the views of their constituents. Little credence was given to the deliberative democracy argument that the views emerging from deliberation within non-government organisations and out of engagement with the policy process will differ from the non-deliberative responses of individual citizens to a pollster or market researcher. The public choice view was that the self and its interests were pre-political, rather than developing within a context of active citizenship.
The distrust of intermediary institutions is consistent with the populist preference for forms of direct democracy such as citizen-initiated referenda as a source of public policy. This fairly raw populism at the political level was underpinned by public choice arguments suggesting that to involve relevant groups in policy design led invariably to ‘agency capture’. In order to avoid agency capture, and consequent growth of government expenditure, government had to distance itself from demands for participation in the policy process while talking up citizen engagement and partnerships with civil society.

Conclusion

In the 1970s and 1980s new social movements, including a renewed women’s movement, were able to take advantage of strong equal opportunity or social citizenship discourses in Australia and Canada to make policy gains. Today such discourses have been dislodged, or at least powerfully shaken, by the new market populism. Equality seekers are now located on the wrong side of an ‘us and them’ divide, amongst the liberal elites who are contemptuous of the values of ordinary people but anxious to spend their tax dollars. Feminists are as guilty of rent-seeking as all those who invoke the public sector and like the rest of the new class they create dependence among those they purport to help.

This is a brave new world, where projects promoting the equality of women have become ’special interest’ projects and the only gender equity projects likely to get a hearing are those directed to the under-performance of boys in schools, not the gender gap in wages nor the feminisation of poverty. While affirmative action to recruit male teachers to mentor boys is seen as legitimate, the same is not the case for policies to redesign paid
work to accommodate family responsibilities. Workers with family responsibilities are now expected to receive ‘same treatment’ in workplaces designed for those who are not primary carers, or else to negotiate a better deal for themselves without government interference.

The shift in what can now be heard in terms of public policy is a tribute to the power of discourse in reshaping the world. The same ‘us and them’ frame, which makes feminists part of the elite, renders invisible the real gender, class and race inequalities which continue to be important. Indeed, we might argue that the attack on spurious elites usefully distracts attention from the reality of increased inequalities. It conjures up a world in which corporate capitalism is to be found on the same side as the people, offering them the market choices that the social engineers on the other side of the divide seek to deny them. Every choice, that is, except for the public sector options on which women have disproportionately relied.
References


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