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Shrinking, atomised working class reshapes politics

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM September 22, 2017

Tomorrow “Jacindamania” could propel Jacinda Ardern, the New Zealand Labour Party’s 37-year-old leader, into the prime ministership. No doubt local factors will play a role: having been in government almost a decade, the National Party, despite a solid record, has struggled to convince voters it has much to offer.

But significant as those factors will be, Ardern’s strong run also reflects a broader revitalisation of the left in the advanced democracies. Central to the turnaround is a virulent rejection by the left of the pro-market policies it had adopted in response to the Thatcher-Reagan revolution.

Some leaders, such as Ardern in New Zealand and Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, make that rejection explicit; others, including Bill Shorten in Australia, praise the reforms of the 1980s but only so as to bury them.

In part the move away from those policies could be seen as a delayed reaction to the global financial crisis and the European debt crisis that followed it. Given a financial collapse, a recession and a prolonged period of slow growth, it is unsurprising that the legitimacy of market economies would be eroded, and that of market-oriented reforms with it.

But there are also deeper forces at work. After all, despite the crisis, the left has not done especially well in the advanced democracies. In the 70s the major social democratic parties typically won almost half the popular vote; in this decade, their average vote share has been below 35 per cent, with some once strong centre-left parties, such as the Labour Party in The Netherlands and the Socialists in France, just about wiped out.

At the heart of that decline lie the difficulties the left has had in adapting to longer-term changes in social structure.

The traditional working class accounts for a shrinking share of the population. And while manual workers used to be concentrated in large factories, in today’s economy they are scattered across small workplaces, making them harder to mobilise. As a result, centre-left parties, which once secured more than 60 per cent of their votes from manual workers, have sought new, middle-class, constituencies.

They have, to some extent, succeeded: for example, Britain’s Labour Party, which in the 60s secured 75 per cent of its votes from manual workers, now obtains more votes from the intelligentsia — tertiary-educated voters in the public sector and the professions — than from the working class.

But that has come at a steep cost. To begin with, unlike the centre left’s historic base, with its emotional commitment to the labour movement, the intelligentsia is fickle: retaining its support requires massive public spending. And it is not only filthy lucre that is involved: as might be expected, the intelligentsia, while highly sensitive to the hip pocket nerve, places great weight on symbolic issues that range from renewable energy to ethnic diversity.

As a result, social democratic parties, which tended to focus on bread-and-butter politics, have emphasised policies that primarily reflect the intelligentsia’s interests and values.

However, as Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley show in their brilliant new book, *The New Politics of Class*, there is a gulf between the intelligentsia’s preferences and the views of working-class voters.

British working-class voters, the two Oxford professors demonstrate, remain deeply socially conservative; indeed, the gap between their position and that of the intelligentsia has widened over recent decades, significantly exceeding the differences on economic issues.

It is not that working-class voters are necessarily less tolerant than their more highly educated counterparts: as Evans and Tilley note, the intelligentsia can be exceptionally closed minded.

But the typical white working-class voter continues to believe in the traditional family, views high levels of immigration as harmful and has little patience for multiculturalism.

With “liberal” positions on all those issues having become central to Labour Party policy, just 23 per cent of voters at the 2015 election regarded it as a party of the working class, down from 65 per cent in 1966.

And the fact barely 10 per cent of Labour MPs have had a manual job, as compared with 40 per cent in 1965, accentuates the distance separating Labour from its historic base.

Working-class voters have consequently preferred abstention to voting Labour, with working-class turnout, which used to be similar to that of other social groups, dropping to 30 percentage points below that of the middle class. The Brexit referendum brought working-class voters to the polls, much like the Trump election in the US; but that reversal was not sustained in Britain's June general election, as more Britons with low education and working-class jobs abstained than voted.

In Britain, as in many other advanced democracies, the majority party of the working class is therefore no party at all.

Faced with those trends, and their devastating electoral consequences, Labour's response has been to shift its economic program sharply to the left. That gives new priority to longstanding working-class concerns, including hostility to immigration, privatisation and import competition; it matches the shifting demands of the intelligentsia, whose interests are increasingly aligned with those of the public sector; and it galvanises younger voters who blame markets for everything from university fees to high property prices.

But perhaps most important of all, it distracts attention from the social issues on which the gulf between working-class voters and Labour's new constituencies remains unbridgeable.

Evans and Tilley doubt that manoeuvre will ultimately succeed. But it has at least averted a likely collapse. And in New Zealand, as in Britain and Australia, it has put the centre-right on the defensive while boosting Labour's immediate chances of electoral success. Even if she doesn't get there this time, Ardern has shown that the left remains a formidable contender.

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