FAULTLINES IN POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

Gary L. Sturgess

In the past national governments were expected to meet citizen's material needs by providing physical and economic security, and the significant faultlines in society followed the divisions between rich and poor. Today people focus on past-material needs and we face a multitude of faultlines marked out by special interest groups and minority parties. But two major questions lie behind this multitude of faultlines. The first concerns community. Should we identify with the national community or with a number of different types of communities? The second concerns individualism and the growing politics of rights. Should we define democracy as a system of representation within a nation state or as a set of individual rights? If we are to maintain social cohesion we need to find ways of answering these questions.

WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

We already know something about the characteristics of those who will prosper in the post-industrial society. Unsurprisingly, they are more affluent, better educated, more technologically literate, better connected, more mobile, more self-reliant, more optimistic about the future and more inclined to believe that change is good.[1]

In short they are rich in financial capital, human capital and social capital. By definition, those who are having difficulty coping in the post-industrial environment are deficient in these forms of capital.

In an information society, educational differences will be more important than ever, and in a world that is increasingly about horizontal relationships and less about one's place in a hierarchy, those with membership in networks of trust will prosper ahead of those with a narrow circle of friends.

But how much does this tell us about the new faultlines in society? How different are they from the old faultlines between rich and poor, employed and unemployed, educated and uneducated, socially integrated and socially excluded? What conclusions can we learn from these insights, other than the traditional ones about the need for income redistribution, social safety nets and affordable high quality education?

There are other faultlines — such as the ones based on family status — that we are reluctant to speak about. In spite of there being profound social impacts, particularly for the young, we still have difficulty in talking about family breakdown honestly. In any case it is a faultline that government can do little about.

But are there other significant dividing lines in this post-industrial environment that we must understand if we are to maintain an acceptable level of social cohesion and inclusiveness?

FAULTLINES OR CRAZES?

One of the great difficulties in trying to understand the changes taking place lies in thinking that we are going to find significant or obvious faultlines.

Social change can no longer be interpreted as movements in the tectonic plates of 'labour' and 'capital'. The faultlines of the industrial era simply don't make sense in the dynamic environment of the late twentieth century.

For the first half of this century, we were largely agreed about the big

problems facing us. With two world wars and an economic depression, there was widespread agreement about the big issues – the physical and economic security of the nation.

For this reason, there was also widespread agreement about the role of government in society and a general willingness to make individual sacrifices for the common good.

Of course, there was disagreement about the redistribution of wealth. That one issue — equality — was the great political faultline of the industrial age, and yet even there, in liberal democracies, the forces of labour and capital were able to reach a broad settlement about its resolution.

Over the past two or three decades that situation has fundamentally changed. With some exceptions in some parts of the world, national defence and the security of the economy are no longer at stake. The generations that lived through two world wars and a Great Depression are dying out.

While some of us still grapple with issues of physical and economic security at a personal level, the nation as a whole has moved beyond purely material concerns.

Longitudinal, cross-cultural research has established a distinct trend, right around the world, towards post-material values — a greater concern about environmental and cultural issues, a heightened interest in human rights and in having a greater say in government decision-making.

One of the consequences of this shift away from material concerns is a fragmentation in social values. Once we get past our shared concerns about defence and economic stability, there are so many different values which government might be called upon to fulfil.

Unlike our parents and grandparents, we no longer agree on our differences. We are no longer agreed about what it is we want government to achieve. Politics has fractionised.

Instead of the *tidy* faultline between labour and capital, we see the *proliferation* of minor parties and special interest groups. Government itself has become balkanised, as it restructures to respond to these different interests.

Moreover, we are no longer prepared to make sacrifices for the 'greater good' to the extent that our parents were. Partly that is because we are no longer agreed about the public good, but it is also because of a marked decline in our trust for and our willingness to belong to *hierarchical* institutions such as governments, political parties, trade unions and mainstream churches.[2]

Instead of distinct faultlines, we find that the differences in society have taken on a crazed pattern, and it has become much more difficult to discern where significant social and political divisions lie.

SMORGASBORD POLITICS

Nor are the faultlines of the industrial era of much assistance in predicting the value sets into which we will combine these different interests.

It would seem that we are more eclectic than their parents. We bring together seemingly conflicting preferences in new and surprising combinations. We don't feel that there needs to be a consistent theme or ideology running through our social and political choices. We're happy to pick and choose, resulting in what some commentators have referred to as 'smorgasbord politics'.

The result is that politicians in the liberal democracies are producing a baffling mix of liberal and conservative

policies. Tony Blair is a classic example. In a speech to the British Labour Party in 1995, he described the political outlook of what he referred to as 'his generation':

> We grew up after the Second World War. We read about fascism, we saw the Soviet Union, and we learned to fear extremes of left and right. We were born into the welfare state and the NHS, and into the market economy of bank accounts, supermarkets, jeans and cars. We had money in our pockets never dreamed about by our parents.[3]

There is a flexibility and a pragmatism to post-industrial politics, not because it is cynical and lacking in values, but rather because of this eclecticism. And on one interpretation, politicians like Tony Blair and Australia's Mark Latham, who are trying to develop a 'Third Way' in politics, are trying to put together a new governing coalition out of this myriad of post-industrial values and interests.

So, the dividing lines are less obvious and the value sets more complex. Are there nevertheless, significant faultlines associated with this post-industrial society?

I want to suggest that there are two. One occurs in the relationship of the individual to his or her community. The other is between the different communities which compete for our loyalty.

These are differences over fundamental issues — questions of identity and political loyalty — and they are potentially more challenging for nation states than the issues which divided us in the industrial era.

GLOBALISATION AND POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Nationalism was successful in large part because it gave us convenient answers to the lawyer's question, 'Who is my neighbour?' How far do my social obligations extend? What are the boundaries of my life's responsibilities?

The nation state says that I have an obligation to go to war on behalf of my fellow citizens and that it is morally offensive (and, indeed, criminal) for me to fight for any other cause.

The nation says that I have an *ethical* responsibility to share my wealth with fellow citizens through the taxation system, and that I have only weak obligations to people in foreign lands, no matter how much they might suffer.

And as Jonathan Sacks – Chief Rabbi of the Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth – recently reminded us, nationalism demanded that we renounce other social and political loyalties and become first and foremost, citizens of the state. Even in the most liberal of European states, in order to *win the rights of citizenship, the Jews had to surrender their nationality.*

> It was less the fact that Jews were different than that they were *collectively* different that made them so ready a target. They had allegiances to one another as well as to the state, and this opened them up time and again, in one country after another, to charges of dual loyalties, despite their endlessly repeated acts of patriotism and despite the tragic fact that they had nowhere else to go.[4]

It wasn't only the Jews. In the process of nation-building, we also demanded this price of the Aborigines, Chinese and Japanese immigrants and religious minorities such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

One of the reasons why globalisation is such a threat to the nation state is that it deprives it of its moral superiority over alternative cultural and political loyalties.

We have extended social rights to permanent residents and dual citizens,

some of whom feel a moral obligation to return and fight on behalf of their homelands. I am sure that, like me, some readers heard adverse comments about Kosovar Albanians returning to fight on behalf of their people, leaving their families behind to benefit from the social security system in Australia.

Individuals who spend a significant part of the year abroad, and pay part of their taxes in foreign countries, come to develop a much more complex set of interests than Australians who stay at home. And the situation is even more complicated for Australian corporations selling their services in the international marketplace with a significant part of their shareholding overseas.

And as we have seen in Europe and North America, we are today witnessing a resurgence of the old ethnic nationalities within the boundaries of the nation states. In May, the people of Scotland went to the polls to elect their first parliament in nearly three hundred years.

In this country, the Aboriginal peoples are increasingly asserting their cultural and political identity, straining traditional concepts of citizenship. Concerned at the implications of this for the integrity of the nation state, some Australians have chosen to campaign under the banner of 'One Nation'.

It is not just that some of us have become 'citizens of the world'. In weakening the boundaries of the nation state, globalisation has unleashed a plethora of ethnic, religious and community-based loyalties.

Moreover, many of us seem capable of loyalty to several different communities at once. I was fascinated by an opinion poll published in *The Times* earlier this year when I was in London.

In spite of the fact that the Scots voted overwhelmingly for devolution, recent research has found that two-thirds of them identify very or quite closely with being British.

Eighty-one per cent of them take the view that 'it is important for England, Scotland and Wales to work together to be a strong force in the new global economy'. On the other hand, 43 per cent of Scots agree with the proposition that 'Britain has had its day – the future lies with Europe'.[5]

Confusing? Apparently not to the people who hold those views. The difficulty lies with politicians and public policy-makers who must try to interpret what these manifold and conflicting loyalties mean *and still seek to defend the integrity of the nation-state*.

THE INDIVIDUAL IN SOCIETY

The other dilemma is concerned with the relationship between the individual and society. There is a large body of literature dealing with the 'privatisation' of society – the rising importance of individualism.

Without a doubt, individualism is popular among modern men and women. But few doubt that it poses a major challenge to social cohesion. And no one seems to know quite what to do about it.

The causes of this 'atomisation' of society are reasonably well understood. They aren't new, but their cumulative effect poses particular problems for post-industrial society.

This is not the place to repeat the analysis of the impact which technology, urbanisation and the triumph of the market have had on our sense of community.

While there is some evidence of a renewed interest in the *geographic* community, there are also powerful forces working against it.

Globalisation has further weakened our links to the local or national community. As Kenichi Ohmae has pointed out,

'At the cash register, you don't care about country of origin or country of residence. You don't think about employment figures or trade deficits'.[6] And as Robert Reich has demonstrated so powerfully, it is almost impossible to know whether you are buying local, even if you want to.[7]

But globalisation is more complex than the integration of markets. The growth of global governance is also weakening our sense of local connectedness. When Nick Toonan succeeded against the Tasmanian Government in the International Commission on Human Rights on the question of gay rights, it was a win for democracy-as-rights over democracy-as-representation.

Whatever we may think of the outcome, the triumph of a concept of democracy as individual rights raises important questions about social cohesion. Under such a definition, the sources of *authority* are to be found less often in the parliaments and more often in the courts.

There is a spirited debated about whether our generation is weaker in social capital than its predecessors. While we have learned to adjust our social institutions to take into account the larger scale and the more complex organisation of modern society, it is not clear to me that this can compensate for the increased isolation from the local community.

THE SOCIAL IMPERATIVES OF NATIONHOOD

These new faultlines — between the individual and community, and between our different concepts of community — pose a number of serious challenges. It becomes increasingly important for us to understand the sources of social cohesion in a post-industrial environment, and these may be found in unexpected quarters.

Recent research has shown that 91 per cent of people across Britain put the National Health Service (NHS) on top of a list of national institutions that show Britain in a favourable light. The army came second, followed well behind by the House of Commons and the BBC.

While Medicare has not yet attained the stature which the NHS has in Britain, there is local research which shows that Medicare taps into these same strong feelings of identification with our fellow Australians.

It is possible that, in future, our social institutions may have a more powerful influence on our sense of national identity than the political, cultural or military ones, to which we would have traditionally turned.

If this is so, then the design and presentation of our key social institutions is particularly important.

• In many countries of the world, the first rights to be extended to guest workers and other resident non-citizens are social entitlements such as collective bargaining rights, education in public schools, health benefits and social insurance. We are much less willing to extend the civil and political rights traditionally associated with membership in the nation state.[8]

It is understandable that we should want to extend these social entitlements to our workmates regardless of their citizenship status, but it does have the effect of diluting the linkages between membership of the national community and these key social institutions.

• To a greater extent than it is today, social welfare used to be delivered through physical institutions such as public hospitals and public schools. These social institutions were physically manifest as bricks and mortar.

The trend in recent years has been away from the direct delivery of services

towards the provision of private benefits such as transfer payments. There are no veterans' hospitals anymore. These services are purchased on veterans' behalf from State governments or from the private sector.

While these new forms of service delivery are more convenient for the beneficiaries and more cost effective for government, they also change the nature of the relationship between the citizen and the state.

Can my membership in a social insurance scheme (or a risk pool) act as the basis for sustaining a national community?

• Many of the problems faced by disadvantaged groups in society today cannot easily be addressed through the traditional institutions of the welfare state.

Some of the worst economic and social disadvantage in our society today is associated with single parenthood, an impact that is particularly strong among children.

Income redistribution can only do so much to compensate for this kind of disadvantage and it is unclear what else the state can do to reinvigorate the family as a key social welfare institution.

• On the other hand, the state may not always be necessary to build national social institutions of this kind. In nineteenth century America, local communities were able to build a public education system deeply imbued with the ideology of nation-building, without any significant role by state or federal governments.[9]

Again, while there are some fascinating possibilities in the relationship between these social institutions and our sense of national community, they are complex and becoming ever more so.

In this post-industrial world, the threats to community cohesion and social inclusiveness will come from entirely new quarters. Likewise, the solutions will lie in baffling, complex and innovative institutions that are unlikely to resemble those of the industrial nation state.

Note
An earlier version of this paper was presented to the conference 'Australia Unlimited: Nation-Building: The Social Imperative', sponsored by *The Australian*, Melbourne, 4 May 1999.

References
1   Among other names, the new elite have been referred to as: 'digital citizens' (Jon Katz, 'The Digital Citizen', *Wired*, December 1997, pp. 68-82); 'wired workers' (William A. Galston and Elaine C. Kamarck, 'Realities that will Shape 21st Century Politics', *Blueprint*, vol. 1 (Fall 1998) pp. 6-22); and 'free agents' (Daniel H. Pink, 'The Politics of Free Agents', *Blueprint*, vol. 1 (Fall 1998), pp. 54-60).
2   For a comprehensive discussion of the emergence of post-materialism around the world, see Paul R. Abrahmson and Ronald Inglehart, *Value Change in Global Perspective*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995; Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1997; Joseph S. Nye, Jr, Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King (Eds), *Why People Don't Trust Government*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997.
3   Tony Blair, 'Speech to the 1995 Labour Party Conference', p. 1
4   Jonathan Sacks, *The Politics of Hope*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1997, p. 101
5   Peter Riddell, 'Why we still want to be British', *The Times*, 15 April 1999, p. 7
6   Kenichi Ohmae, *The Borderless World*, Fontana, London, 1991, p. 3
7   Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations*, London, Simon & Schuster, 1991
8   Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, pp. 122-130
9   John W. Meyer, David Tyack, Joane Nagel and Audri Gordon, 'Public education as nation-building in America: enrollments and bureaucratization in the American States, 1870-1930', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 85, no. 3, 1979, pp. 591-613