

## Debt crises, guns and other sacred cows - down the Tea Party path to righteousness

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The 1773 Boston Tea Party was a protest against a tax imposed by a distant metropolitan authority in Britain. This article discusses the ideology of the more recent American political movement that has named itself the Tea Party. The contemporary Tea Party is a strong advocate for reducing the US national debt and federal budget deficit by reducing government spending and taxes.

Conservative parties around the world are not alone in borrowing ideas from each other (an earlier contribution on this website described the privatization debacle in Britain) but they are the worst offenders in that they choose ideas based on unexamined prejudices. All parties look for evidence generated by experience elsewhere and New Zealand and Scandinavian countries have often influenced the policy choices of social-democratic and reform parties.

But some important elements in the conservative parties of Australia seem to accept that the United States is the source of all political wisdom, often imagining that ideas framed on the assumptions and structures of the US Constitution should apply equally to the Westminster tradition embodied in Australian political practice. This not a new phenomenon, particularly in Queensland. Australian conservative interest groups such as the League of Rights have drawn many of their ideas from similarly-inclined bodies, particularly Christian evangelical groups in the southern and western US. In the Bjelke-Petersen era, curriculum disputes about evolution and religious education in secular schools often turned on assertions derived from American political behaviour in an area identified as 'the Bible belt'. American activists from these conservative campaigns visited Australia to carry the same message.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, supporters of these sort of ideological positions were grouped into a wider social movement known as 'The Tea Party', formed in 2004. Within the US Republican Party, the Tea Party devotees gained the reward for an intensity of commitment which overshadowed their relatively small numbers - adherence to their positions by a range of state governors and assemblies and the endorsement of a Tea Party sympathiser as a Vice-Presidential candidate. Sarah Palin's patent inadequacies ultimately proved an embarrassment for mainstream conservatives and the Republican Party is now struggling to purge this influence to make itself electable again.

But the Tea Party ideology continues to be embraced in Australia and to have a significant impact on the policy choices made by those in power. Both locally in Queensland and nationally the Christian fundamentalist position has had an impact on school curriculum and management issues, for example with huge budgetary rewards for a chaplaincy scheme shorn of the liberal secular amendments which made the idea acceptable to ALP leaders with widely different attitudes towards organised religion. It will be interesting to see whether the review of schooling by Donnelly and Wiltshire pursues similar goals across the social science curriculum.

It is not just in education that the issues and the loaded language of the Tea Party is readily identifiable. The clearest illustration was the way in which the Tea Party created a political storm over the essentially formalistic process of raising the US debt ceiling, dramatising it to deadlock Congress and shut down the federal government. The Australian Tea Party sympathisers entrenched within the conservative parties created a similar sense of crisis in an effort to damage the credibility of the then ALP government - even though no such formal debt ceiling even existed or was relevant to the conduct of the economic managers and the Reserve Bank.

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<sup>1</sup> See Scott A and Scott R, *Reform and Reaction in the Deep North: Education and Policy-Making in Queensland*, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 1980; and Scott, A, 'The Ahern Committee and the education policy-making process in Queensland', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1984 (<http://www.textqueensland.com.au/item/thesis/b2ced0a6c5916a43ae586b79a2b98b8f>)

Once in power at state and national level, the LNP claimed more Tea Party nonsense, with assertions about the 'budget emergency' (several papers here and in other media point to the underlying strength of the Australian economy and its relatively low per capita debt problem relative to almost every other country measured by the OECD). There is certainly a structural problem associated with an ageing population and declining terms of trade but Australia is in a fundamentally sound position to cope with this in a measured rather than cataclysmic approach. But this does not accord with the ideology and language of the Tea Party, which is derived from different circumstances and is rapidly being discredited in its country of origin.

From the opening days of the Newman parliament, Ministerial statements repeatedly assured Queensland voters that the LNP would get their portfolio areas 'back on track', and Queenslanders were assured that the new government would also 'get the Queensland economy back on track'. Throughout the Abbott campaign, there was a similar refrain offered for example by Joe Hockey that 'it is only the Coalition that is going to make the decisions that get the economy back on track'.

This metaphor is writ large in the Tea Party literature, as in Republican presidential aspirant Paul Rand's comment in 2011 that 'now is the time to get America back on track - this is the moment of the new revolution that will take us back to our grass roots, to the country of our founding fathers'. (Hacette audiobook, "The Tea Party Goes to Washington".) The same values underpin enthusiasm at both levels of government for privatisation of public assets. This will reduce the total size of the business of government by selling to private businesses, businesses which will then have an opportunity to extract shareholder profits and simultaneously reduce the need for taxation.

It is relevant therefore to reflect on where the Tea Party in its transplanted form might be leading us (or has already led us?).

The Tea Party's website offers 15 "Non-negotiable Core Beliefs":

- 'Illegal aliens are here illegally'
- 'Pro-domestic employment is indispensable'
- 'A strong military is essential'
- Special interests must be eliminated
- Gun ownership is sacred
- Government must be downsized
- The national budget must be balanced
- Deficit spending must end
- Bailout and stimulus plans are illegal
- Reducing personal income taxes is a must
- Reducing business income taxes is mandatory
- Political offices must be available to average citizens
- Intrusive government must be stopped
- English as our core language is required

Progressive thinkers and political leaders may find it useful to consider this agenda with its far-reaching local implications. They need to develop counter-proposals which accord more closely with the Australian scene, and in particular with its different social democratic tradition. This tradition emphasises fairness and the need for focussed action by governments to promote greater social and economic equality. They need to recognise that there are influential proponents out there selling an alien ideology which would create a different, harsher world for the majority of Australians.