

Chapter 20 Exercising Power for Cultural Transformation

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"There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning."
Warren Buffet, NYT, 26/11/2006

See also the Richard's Manning Clark Lecture on Big Idea:

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bigideas/manning-clark-lecture/6293172>

On many issues, in a democracy, there are going to be winners and losers. While conversation, dialogue, compromise and negotiating to a win-win solution will work on some issues, on many such as stopping mining coal to mitigate climate change, there is no possible middle ground. In a 'democratic'¹ governance system, not losing means being political. It means recognising we have opponents and we are playing a game with them. It means recognising that on most important issues, if one side wins, the other side loses. For instance, with stopping coal mining to mitigate global warming, some groups are going to lose (coal miners) and some groups are going to win (anti-coal campaigners and the public good). Or, as is the case presently, the other way around.

Richards's key point is that the major, or indeed the only, aim in societal struggle is to not lose. That means recognising that there is, and engaging in, a fight. It means recognising that there are opponents. There will be allies or partners, some natural but others allies on this issue but opponents on other issues, but there are never friends.

We can learn how to do this by analysing how the right side of politics is currently winning. It involves being focussed, playing the political game strategically, with one's eye always on the long term end game. It means being organised, focusing on the matter at hand, unified when needed, and working for common goals at the appropriate level. For example, Coles and Woolworths, daily arch rivals in the market place, attend Grocery Council meetings and work cooperatively with every other competitor to dilute the provisions of the Trade Practices Act. At the Business Council of Australia, they ignore the Trade Practices Act and work with BHP and Rio Tinto to water down the industrial relations regime and counter overtime pay. In this way the right side of politics displays cohesion and cooperation, even a collectivism, that is absent on the left despite the rhetoric.

It means mobilising power to harm, or more usually threaten harm, to parliamentarians. In this context harm may mean loss of popularity, or votes, which translates into loss of office. Since parliamentarians stand for election to shape the world in the image they think it should be, then they need to hold office. Anything therefore that prevents this, generates fear. The purpose of the game is to be in power; it is not primarily ideology or money but being in control. To play the game is

¹ That is a western, liberal, parliamentary system of government; Churchill's worst form of [national] governance apart from all the others that have been tried

to do whatever it takes, and what it takes is usually doing what other powerful people want you to do, which basically come down to sharing a bit of the power and the providing them with resources.

Further, it is always a minority who is wielding power of a majority. This is achieved by the organised dividing their opposition, allowing progressives to fight on multiple fronts on symptomatic issues, and employing delaying tactics: inquiries, dialogue, incremental changes, small non-useful compromises, and even treacherous marketing. The lesson: look at what your opponents do not what they say.

As Lakoff has discussed in *Don't think of an Elephant*, the right is small, organised and expertly uses language to frame issues in their favour. The left on the other hand, is large, focussed on multiple issues, fights over the differences between themselves, and usually buys into or reacts against the framing that the right gives them.

Richard's example is *growth*. In itself *growth* is not bad of itself. Children grow; cancers grow. It is therefore a question of growth of what and how. So economic growth is not the problem. Exponential growth in resource use and waste production might be a problem. Therefore it is essential to define what is being discussed. Similarly GDP is a metric that has it uses; however the point is in who applies it as a metric to what end.

So lesson one in exercising power is: use words and language to frame the message in a way that supports what we want people to hear us say. Another example: we want to spend more on health and education, and indeed we will put a tiny bit of money toward that, but first we need to fix the budget deficit. That is we agree in principle with everything you want, but first we need to do something we want. Of course this works the other way as well: we want to fix the budget deficit, but first we need to make sure we have global warming under control (Cordelia Dalton).

In making strategy, we need to avoid playing chess against ourselves. Our strategy needs to recognise our opponent's strategy, and needs to be flexible to respond to changes in their strategy as they respond to ours.

Spelling out the positive vision is important to get people's attention for your message, but is insufficient to avoid losing. As well there needs to tell people how your program is going to take them there. Again framing is everything. At the same time, contesting your opponent's vision is critical. Not just talking it down, but telling people why it isn't going to take them where they want to be.

But even then, without threatening parliamentarians with pain unless they move on an issue, we are going to lose. For instance, 91% of Australians oppose junk food advertising at times when children watch TV. The evidence supports not advertising to children, regulating to control junk food advertising will cost the government nothing financially, and the small volume of funding to the major parties from the food lobby isn't a major factor. But the pain that the conglomerate of the food industry, the TV stations, and the advertising industry can threaten political parties with if anything changes is immense. Another example is the pain caused to the Rudd government by the mining industry over the Super-Profits Tax.

So a marketing or information campaign is useless when 91% of people are already on side. This doesn't change the power politics. Only by making the issue the top of voters' priority list, and being able to threaten pain is going to improve the chances of winning. That is the power of some progressing groups: Lock the Gate, the EDOs, and the Australia Council. Focused coalitions with wide membership, active in the political space, engendering fear among the political class.

The right side of politics never concedes defeat. The Warkworth mine expansion into the town of Bulga was defeated in the court; the NSW government changed the law and the proponents have submitted a new application under the new law. Sophie Mirabella has been re-endorsed as the Liberal party candidate for Indi. The Senate Inquiry into Wind Farm noise has pushed the government to appoint a Wind Farm Commissioner. The Inquiry into tax deductibility for environmental groups ignores the tax deductibility of right wing think tanks and industry councils.

Questions and Discussion – themes arising

The role of Doom and Gloom or positivity reflects the differences between strategy and tactics. It depends on the market situation. In a market where one is able to grow market share, marketing 101 tells one to keep it positive: good news stories, about how my product is better than all others. In a fixed market, for instance for voters in elections, negative attack advertising works. Your opponent's loss is your gain. Ethically one would attack one's opponent's actions not themselves.

Other tactics for maintaining power:

Accumulate political capital on any issues one can and spend it on what you want. John Howard's use of the gun control following the Port Arthur massacre to introduce a GST; Tony Abbott's use of Axe the Tax and Stop the Boats to try to bring in a massively regressive budget.

Don't criticise the tools but use whatever tools are available to you. While neoclassical economic theory provides the palette (worldview) we use to paint the fabric of our lives, how we apply the paint is of our own choosing. Progressives too can sue the language of neoclassical economics. Similarly the forms of economic rationalism have been deployed by those in power to dismember their opponents. We too can use these tools against our own opponents, holding them to the same account they use themselves. We can reclaim the language. But recognise that of itself economic language is only a tool. Use of this tool needs to be grounded in an explicitly articulated system of values.

Cultural change is a matter of exercising power, But to exercise power for good one needs to consider who is exercising the power to what end. It is a matter of exercising power ethically. Can one exercise power ethically? The exercise of power is ethical if it adheres to the principles of democracy.

So if we are to come at a central theme, a point where all other issues are enclosed in the net, the meta-issue, what would it be?