The Logos Foundation: The rise and fall of Christian Reconstructionism in Australia

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Abstract

Unlike the United States, where the influence of the "religious right" ebbs and flows, Australian politics has proved remarkably resilient to the influence of religious interest groups since the demise of the Democratic Labor Party, notwithstanding the activities of the Lyons Forum and Fred Nile's Christian Democrats. However, during the nineteen eighties, the Logos Foundation, a group of US style Christian Reconstructionists, did attempt to influence the political agenda in Australia, but following an untimely invention in the 1989 Queensland state election campaign, the group disbanded in disarray.

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One of the enduring influences on politics in the United States has been the phenomenon termed "the religious right", and it has attracted considerable interest from both scholars of religion and political scientists for more than two decades (Hood & Smith 2002; Wilcox 2001; Wilcox 1996; Diamond 1998, 1996, 1995,1989; Berger 1997; Pugh 1996; Shupe 1989; Bromley & Shupe 1984; Liebman &Wuthnow 1983). During the Clinton years, the religious right was seen to be in retreat (Boston 1999; Barron and Shupe 1992); during the Bush years, it has been regarded as resurgent (Leege 1992; Oldfield 1996). Irrespective of whether it is in retreat or resurgent, one of the many strands which make up the religious right in the United States has been Christian Reconstructionism. Admired by perennial Republican presidential candidate Pat Robertson (Boston 1996), and popularised by R J Rushdooney [1917-2001] and his Chalcedon Foundation based at Vallecito, California, Christian Reconstructionism draws on Cornelius van Til [1895-1987], Abraham Kuyper [1837-1920] and Reformer John Calvin in arguing for a Christian theocracy.

The term Christian Reconstructionism is used to distinguish the movement from Reconstructionism in Judaism; the terms "theonomy" and "dominion theology" are also

used to describe the thinking of the movement (Shupe 1989:880). Its core text is Rushdoony's *Institute of Biblical Law*, a ponderous 900 page pastiche of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, published in 1973.

In Australia, despite current media anxiety to the contrary, (Cadzow 2004; Koutsoukis 2004; McNicoll 2004; Brissenden 2004) conservative religion does not have the kind of influence on conservative politics that it does in the United States. However, one attempt to run a US style "religious right" agenda in Australia occurred in the nineteen eighties, when Christian Reconstructionists operated under the banner of an organisation known as the Logos Foundation.

Founded in 1969 in New Zealand by a former Baptist minister, Howard Carter, the Logos Foundation was first based in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, where it conducted seminars and conventions and a publications program (Chant 1984: 232). At the end of 1987 Logos moved its headquarters to Toowoomba in Queensland. Upon moving to Queensland, the Foundation's major political initiatives were to argue strenuously against the amendments to the Federal Constitution in September 1988; to support the concept of Citizens Initiated Referenda (which it termed Voters' Veto); and to mount a campaign during the 1989 Queensland state election arguing that the key issues in the election were "the values of the candidates not their personalities," (*Sunday Mail*, 22 Oct 1989). In the Logos lexicon such values were defined by the attitudes of the candidates on the issues of pornography, homosexuality, abortion and capital punishment. During the Queensland election campaign, the Foundation ran a series of full-page newspaper advertisements, described by one commentator as "lavish" (Wear 1991:146), in support of its position on these issues. The irony of being anti-abortion and pro-capital punishment was not apparent to the Foundation.

The Logos Foundation defined itself as,

> ...a Christian organization committed to the maintenance of the historic Judaeo-Christian values as the basis for individual, family, ecclesial, economic and civil

> spheres. These values are the foundation for an integrated and free society. The message of Logos is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God: the Good News that there is total redemption for mankind and total victory for God's people under the moral government of God. In this, Logos subscribes to the historic position of orthodox biblical Christianity. (Logos Foundation 1987a).

In reality, the Logos Foundation was both a religious and a political organization. It had two arms. These were the Covenant Evangelical Churches, which it sponsored, and the Foundation itself. According to Derek Brown, the national co-ordinator of the Logos Foundation at the peak of its influence, there were only three Covenant Evangelical Churches in Australia: in Toowoomba, Dubbo (NSW) and Perth. The largest congregation, Toowoomba, had some 800 members (Harrison 1989:36). Logos also sent out members - after a month's training at the Foundation's Bible School - into local communities, mostly country towns. They were not, Brown emphasized, sent out to start churches. They participated in the life of local churches where they live. This leaves open the question as to whether such people were political activists.

Carter described the relationship between the Covenant Evangelical Church and the Foundation saying,

> Logos Foundation has been under girded practically, spiritually and logistically by a large body of committed Christians who belong to various churches around Australia functioning...as Covenant Evangelical Churches. The Churches are there to serve Logos and its vision for the nation - not ... the reverse. (Logos Foundation 1987b).

While domiciled in the Blue Mountains, Logos campaigned against the Bill of Rights and the ID card, and somewhat immodestly claimed credit for the failure of these two proposals with a reference in their literature to, "the victories that resulted from the Logos campaigns over the Bill of Rights and the I.D.Card (sic) issues...” (Logos Foundation 1988a). Logos claimed to be apolitical and non-partisan; but Fabian

Socialism was another frequent and long-term target. However, in an interview, Brown was unable to distinguish between Marxian Socialism, Fabianism Socialism and Christian Socialism (Harrison 1989:38).

In the US, one of Rushdoony's primary concerns was the intrusion of the state into education and he was a strong advocate of home schooling. Edgar (2001: 24) credits Rushdooney with being “an early inspiration behind the home school movement” and that influence still holds (Miller 2000). Unsurprisingly, Rushdooney was a guest speaker on the issues of educational freedom at a Logos seminar in Australia in 1986. Foundation leaders tried to play down the association between Logos and Rushdoony. In a radio interview in November 1989, Derek Brown stated that Howard Carter and Rushdoony shared a platform in 1986, implying that was the extent of the contact. When pressed further on the Rushdoony association, Brown acknowledged that Logos has brought Rushdoony to Australia (Harrison 1989:38). If, as Brown asserted, the Logos Foundation did not adhere to Reconstructionism, then why the shyness about the association with Rushdoony? Moreover, why was the organisational nomenclature similar: Logos Foundation in Australia, Chalcedon Foundation in the US? Defending Logos against accusations it was linked to the anti-Semitic Australian League of Rights, and to Reconstructionism in the US, Carter said, without any apparent irony, "we resist strongly the connotation that we are a right-wing fundamentalist sect. We are not sinister as some people think..." (*Courier-Mail*, 9 April 1988).

Christian Reconstructionism in the US was the subject of a substantial critical analysis by Rodney Clapp in the influential, conservative evangelical news-magazine *Christianity Today* in February 1987 under the headline, "Democracy as Heresy". Clapp (1987:20-21) wrote that Reconstructionism appealed to "independent Baptist churches ...and small denominations with fundamentalist and Reformed roots," as well as among "some 20 million charismatics world wide", a description which fits Logos well. Without any sense of contradiction, Carter has described Logos' Covenant Evangelical Churches as, "reformed in theology, baptistic in relation to the nature of the church, evangelical in relation to the gospel, and charismatic in expression", (Logos 1987b). Rushdoony, who

held a post-millennial position on eschatology (Clapp 1987:19), served as a contributing editor for the now defunct American charismatic magazine *New Wine*. In fact, *New Wine* magazine was another link between Rushdoony and Logos. The Logos magazine *Restore*, which like *New Wine* is also defunct, re-published a considerable number of articles from *New Wine* (Buch 1989:1).

The Presbyterian Church of America issued a statement on Reconstructionism in 1978, and while it did not declare it heretical, certainly did not endorse it (Clapp 1987:21). In March 1989, as pentecostals and neo-pentecostals in Queensland were signing up to support Logos' campaigns, the Assemblies of God denomination in the United States, the largest pentecostal grouping in the US, declared as part of its response to Reconstructionism, that post-millenialism was heretical, (Shupe 1989: 881). Other American critics of Reconstructionism have drawn attention to the movement's desire to re-establish the law of the Old Testament, with some concessions to New Testament practices. According to Rodney Clapp (1987:19):

> In the Reconstructed society, there will be no federal government. Nor will there be a democracy, which Reconstructionists regard as a "heresy". Rushdoony is opposed to pluralism since, "in the name of toleration, the believer is asked to associate on a common level of total acceptance with the atheist, the pervert, the criminal and the adherents of other religions"... True to the letter of Old Testament Law, homosexuals, incorrigible children, adulterers, blasphemers, astrologers, and others will be executed.

However, the Reconstructionists are not completely consistent. For example, Clapp (1987: 19) notes that they are not polygamists.

Perhaps the most significant litmus test of Reconstructionist influence is the issue of capital punishment. Like the Reconstructionists they profess not to belong to, the Logos Foundation argued for capital punishment. Apart from the incongruity of also arguing for the sanctity of life in its stand against abortion, Logos said: "Jesus' words on

loving one's enemies, turning the other cheek and walking the second mile were not intended to change the nature of justice in society," (Brown 1989:19). This is highly contentious statement from a group claiming to uphold biblical inerrancy.

Working through Carter's description of the Covenant Evangelical Church as reformed, baptistic, charismatic and evangelical, Derek Brown contended that the Logos Foundation accepted the principles of the Protestant Reformation, which he described as the sovereignty of God, the falleness of man [Brown's term], salvation through Christ, and the inerrancy of the Bible, (Harrison 1989:38). Brown was unaware that biblical inerrancy was not at issue during the Reformation, but rather in the fundamentalist controversy at the end of the 19th century. Indeed, it is the Foundation's position on biblical inerrancy that classifies them as fundamentalist.

Brown said the Foundation also rejected the Calvinist notion of theocracy, which underpins Reconstructionism. In rejecting theocracy, Brown posited that the church and the civil government are separate spheres of life. "As a world-view, it [Christianity] sees creation divided into several spheres, each of which has its own terms of reference and responsibility", (Brown 1989: 18). While this sounds like the classical Lutheran position on church and state, it is in fact drawn from one of the god-fathers of Reconstructionism, Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian and politician who sought to develop a schematic framework for understanding reality based on the ideas of John Calvin.

Finally, like the Chalcedon Foundation, the Logos Foundation was an advocate of "parent-controlled Christian schools", and an opponent of what it saw as the secular humanism of state schools. These then are the ideological foundations upon which Logos built its political campaigns. The Voter's Veto campaign - the name given by Logos to its promotion of Citizen Initiated Referenda - was supported by the League of Rights, the Council for a Free Australia, the Australian Federation for Decency and the Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) schools movement, (*Australian*, 26 July 1987 and *Courier-Mail*, 9 April 1988).

Why did the Logos Foundation choose Queensland for its operations? One reason given was the Foundation's dispute with the NSW state authorities over the curriculum to be taught in the Foundation school according to *The Australian* newspaper in 1990 (7 August). There was also some financial incentive for the group to move. The organization had suffered some financial losses with the failure of an offshore investment. Carter was clearly reluctant to acknowledge this saying,

> One of the problems faced in publishing details of our circumstances and experiences is that reporting information often raises other issues or leaves other questions unanswered. Such is the case with our finances. In 1986...we mentioned the loss of capital through failure of an investment overseas. We did not feel further explanation was necessary. (Logos 1987b).

Apparently further explanation was necessary, and Carter sent out a four page Open Letter to all Logos supporters explaining in further detail the organization's finances and his reasons for the move to Toowoomba.

At the time that Logos decided to move to Queensland, the New Right was in the ascendant, (Coaldrake 1987:110). Senator John Stone and the H R Nicholls Society, John and Andrew Hay, John Leard, John Hyde, the Institute for Public Affairs and other New Right figures and organizations were all in the public eye, and of course Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen was involved in the national crusade that would eventually become the "Joh for PM" campaign. The coalition split that would cost John Howard his chance of becoming Prime Minister in 1987 was yet to come. The *Logos Journal* interview with Bjelke-Petersen in June 1987 was a signal to all Logos supporters to back the Joh for PM campaign, (Carter & Sheldon 1987:12).

The *Logos Journal* preceded this interview with Bjelke-Petersen in 1987 with an editorial endorsement in the following terms:

> In our view Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen epitomizes the traditional values of Christian commitment, family life, strong leadership and personal sacrifice. During an interview with the Queensland Premier recently

> [we]... stressed that the people of Australia are weary of party politics and demand the return of power to the people... We encouraged Sir Joh and promised we would ask our readers to pray for him as a Christian man. (Carter & Sheldon 1987: 12)

However, by the time the article appeared the crusade was all over. Nonetheless, the move to Toowoomba provided the Logos Foundation with a fertile soil in which to plant its mixture of conservative religion and conservative politics. Furthermore, both the Darling Downs to the west of Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley to the east are identified areas of the influence of the League of Rights, (Campbell 1978: 182, 184, and *Courier-Mail*, 12 March 1988, 18 March 1988 and 26 January 1989).

Within the year of its move to Toowoomba, Logos had further battles to fight. The most significant was the constitutional referenda in September 1988 in which the Foundation opposed the fourth question on freedom of religion. At that time Carter wrote in an undated letter to supporters, "The Constitution ...is a document protecting the states! It proclaims decentralization and shared power. Church, this is Christian teaching!" (Carter 1988). It was certainly Rushdooney's view of the US federal constitution. According to Edgar (2001: 24):

> Central to just about every one of Rushdoony's writings is the notion that freedom must be preserved at the local level, so that God's law can be faithfully obeyed by all people, without interference from higher temporal powers. America held a special place in world history for him because it began as a Christian civic structure.

Carter (1988) was also critical of the silence of what he called the "official" churches on the referendum. The irony of the Logos criticism of the churches in its campaign against the referendum proposals is that Logos was selective in the issues it has chosen to campaign on. Corruption, the electoral malapportionment, administrative reform, especially in the areas of police, prisons and the judiciary, all issues which given

their Reconstructionist roots Logos would be expected to progress, did not appear on their agenda.

After the demise of Bjelke-Petersen in December 1987, there were signs that the Logos Foundation and its fellow travellers on the far right were in disfavour with the Queensland National Party. In March 1989 when Logos opposed amendments to the Queensland Education Act, which provided for the registration of all non-government schools, and which were supported by all political parties, they were rebuked by the National Party Education Minister Brian Littleproud (*Courier-Mail* 29 March 1989). Littleproud, a former teacher, represented the Darling Downs seat of Condamine in the Queensland Parliament, to the west of Logos' Toowoomba base.

The Logos Foundation's entry into the 1989 Queensland state election campaign described above, also drew a sharp response from Uniting Church Moderator Don Whebell, Anglican Archbishop Sir John Grindrod, Lutheran Church president Pastor Paul Renner and Baptist Union head, Pastor Fred Stallard; a degree of ecumenical unanimity on public issues not seen for ten years in Queensland. The church leaders were critical of the advertisements, which, they said represented, "a single viewpoint, project a very particular aspect of the political agenda and adopt a questionable approach to political campaigning", (Heads of Churches 1989).

However, Carter was able to muster some 300 Queensland clergy in support of his election campaign, among them Anglican, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Lutheran clergy and Salvation Army officers (*Courier-Mail*, 29 November 1989). Major Bram Hindle, commander of the Salvation Army's central and northern territory, Dr David Cartledge, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God and Pastor Max Taylor, senior pastor of the neo-pentecostal Christian Outreach Centre, essentially those church leaders who has supported the Joh for PM campaign, were among the signatories to the Logos sponsored statement. These signatures are a measure not only of the political naiveté of so many clergy in allowing a recently arrived religio-political lobby group to manipulate them, but

more importantly of the significant hold that pietism has retained on the religious culture of Queensland.

There is no evidence to suggest that Bjelke-Petersen was greatly influenced by the Logos Foundation or Christian Reconstructionism. The Logos Foundation were religious carpetbaggers who sought to capitalize on the political environment Bjelke-Petersen had created, and on the religious culture of Queensland, in which the old evangelical pietism was overlain with the neo-pietist influences of a resurgent pentecostalism. It was no accident that Logos chose a location - Toowoomba - where the amalgam of the old pietism and the new was strong. The influence of this pietism, old and new, in the political culture of Queensland was strengthened by the public persona of Bjelke-Petersen, particularly by the populist and messianic expressions of that persona (Harrison 1987: 40).

There are several reasons for the failure of the Logos Foundation. First, their lack of genuine political sensitivity to the mood of the Queensland electorate after the corruption revelations of the Fitzgerald Inquiry. Like all carpetbaggers they failed to realise that that there was a mood for change and reform. Secondly, the problem of credibility. In the Queensland state election they were rebuffed by an ecclesiastical leadership who understood the politics only too well, who had stood up to Bjelke-Petersen throughout the nineteen eighties, and were not going to allow the chance for change to be held to ransom by a holy huddle of fundamentalists in Toowoomba with a big cheque book. Moreover, when revelations of Carter's affair with a parishioner became public, (*Courier-Mail* 9 August 1990) the organisation lost all credibility, changed its name, realised its assets, and moved away. Carter's subsequent death from cancer soon after marked the end of the Christian Reconstructionist experiment in Australia.

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