

Rethinking the ‘neoliberal thought collective’ thesis

Damien Cahill

Department of Political Economy, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Elizabeth Humphrys

School of Communication, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Corresponding author: Elizabeth Humphrys

elizabeth.humphrys@uts.edu.au

University of Technology Sydney

PO Box 123, Broadway

NSW 2007 Australia

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0192-0426

Twitter: @liz_beths

Damien Cahill is Associate Professor of Political Economy at the University of Sydney. His research examines the dynamics of neoliberalism as well as theories of capitalism as a socially embedded system of value production. His publications include: *The End of Laissez-Faire? On the Durability of Embedded Neoliberalism* (Edward Elgar 2014) and *Neoliberalism* with Martijn Konings (Polity Press 2017).

Elizabeth Humphrys is a political economist at the University of Technology Sydney. Her research focuses on work and labour, and the relationship between economic change and anti-politics. Her first book, *How Labour Built Neoliberalism* (2018), was recently published in the Brill Studies in Critical Social Sciences Series. Elizabeth is an Associate of the Centre for Future Work, at The Australia Institute.

Abstract

Numerous scholars have identified the ‘neoliberal thought collective’ as the key driver of the neoliberal transformation. These accounts emphasise the building of neoliberal hegemony through the mobilisation of this collective, and the New Right parties who aligned to these ideas. We argue that Australia’s corporatist road to neoliberalism pushes against this thesis, as the movement found little sympathy among policy makers. Rather, the thought collective acted more like a ‘ginger group’, attempting to radicalise public debate and create space for new neoliberal arrangements. In Australia, successive centre-left Labor governments rolled out neoliberalism in a series of formal corporatist arrangements with the trade union movement. This paper sets out a reconsideration of the role of the thought collective, on the basis of the Australian experience, and argues this can move us beyond the ideational determinism that has come to characterise key accounts of how neoliberalism developed.

Keywords

neoliberalism; Australia; think tanks; corporatism; intellectuals; New Right

Introduction

Numerous scholars have identified the ‘neoliberal thought collective’ as a key driver of the neoliberal transformation of states and economies (Davies, 2016; Dean, 2014; Mirowski, 2013; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Wacquant, 2012). The neoliberal thought collective is, in general terms, the name given to a network of radical neoliberal think tanks and intellectuals centred on the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS). Yet, the advance of neoliberal project has not always been connected to the activities of the thought collective. Australia’s development of neoliberalism militates against such an understanding, as the thought collective movement found little sympathy among policy makers in that location.

In Australia, neoliberalism was initially rolled out by successive federal Labor Governments, in a series of formal corporatist agreements (or Accords) with the trade union movement (1983–1996). Neoliberal think tanks and intellectuals acted more like a ‘ginger group’. That is, an organised section of political society attempting to radicalise public debate and undermine the legitimacy of existing forms of capitalist regulation, while creating space for new arrangements. Rather than political economic change being driven by the activities of the neoliberal thought collective, neoliberalism in Australia emerged through a social contract between the Labor party and trade unions (Humphrys, 2018a, 2018b). Within this

process, a series of Labor governments and trade union leaderships leveraged the ideas and image of the thought collective as a way of disorganising their political adversaries and gaining acquiescence from those within their own ranks who would otherwise have been opposed to a neoliberal agenda. Although the neoliberal thought collective did not more directly author neoliberal change in Australia, it played a role in reshaping the public debate during the Hawke-Keating Governments (1983-1996)—a context that was important to how the Australian Labor Party (ALP) sought to maintain government in the long labour decade.

We argue that a critical re-examination of the role of the thought collective, on the basis of the Australian experience, can move us beyond the ideational determinism that has come to characterise key accounts of how neoliberalism developed. We find this literature unsatisfactory because it emphasises the building of neoliberal hegemony through mobilisations by the neoliberal thought collective, and the parties who aligned to these ideas, over a more complex interplay of the ideological, political and economic features of its development.

In what follows, we overview the neoliberal thought collective thesis and then outline the contours of the neoliberal thought collective in Australia. We outline the corporatist road to neoliberalism in Australia between 1983 and 1996, and what forces and process came together in the vanguard neoliberal era. We detail the relationship of the neoliberal thought collective to the Accords, and its role in efforts to subdue organised labour. The paper concludes with a consideration of the role of ideas in neoliberal change.

The contours of the neoliberal thought collective thesis

There are wide ranging definitional debates regarding neoliberalism, though it is usually viewed as involving: an extension of markets and competition into all parts of society (Birch, 2015, p. 571); a macroeconomic approach that views inflation as a greater risk to economic development than unemployment; and one that promotes the benefits of markets over state action (Bieler, 2007, p. 112). A number of scholars also valuably highlight neoliberalism as a rationality that remakes not only the political economy, but transforms democratic structures, social relationships and culture in the image of *homo oeconomicus* (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2004).

Of interest to us is the argument that neoliberalism's advance was driven by the activities of neoliberal intellectuals and think tanks, a network that has come to be referred to as the 'neoliberal thought collective', and where the MPS played the central organising role.

The definitive account of this approach is the edited collection *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (2009), by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe. The volume arose from an examination of the archives of the MPS, who met from 1947, and their interventions in policy and government. The editors argue that neoliberalism ‘must be approached primarily as a historical “thought collective” of increasingly global proportions’ through which a ‘neoliberal identity’ was consciously developed (Plehwe, 2009, p. 4). The neoliberal thought collective thesis argues the debates and initiatives of this international network of neoliberal thinkers and activists were central to re-shaping states and economies after the collapse of the post-WWII ‘Keynesian consensus’ and the long boom.

In developing the term neoliberal thought collective, the authors evoke Ludwig Fleck’s notion of ‘a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction’ (cited in Mirowski, 2009, p. 428). The book develops its thesis regarding the MPS—by which they mean the organisation itself and the people and groups that are ‘within the purview of the neoliberal thought collective’ (Plehwe, 2009, p. 4)—in this way:

At least until the 1980s—when the advance of neoliberal ideas led to a rapid multiplication of pretenders to the title of progenitors of neoliberalism—the MPS network can be safely used as cipher to decode with sufficient precision the neoliberal thought style in the era of its genesis. While arguably diminishing in importance over the last few decades, the MPS has nonetheless sustained an array of important functions that continue to shape the further development of neoliberalism, as well as related think tank networks (Mirowski, 2009, p. 429).

A great strength of this account (and of the volume more generally) is its emphasis on intellectual diversity within the MPS, and the wider networks associated with it. Diverse intellectual strands shaped the thought collective, and included German ordoliberalism, British liberalism, early French lineages, and then the later (but influential) Chicago School and rational-choice-based neo-institutionalism. Where coherence was found was in the need for a critique and practical and intellectual in response to the threat of ‘collectivism and socialism’, and the failures of classical liberalism (Plehwe, 2009, p. 6).

Mirowski (2009) concludes the volume in his ‘Postface’, reflecting on and integrating the findings of the various chapters—which analyse key debates and geographical locations of neoliberalism. He argues that despite internal debate and diversity, neoliberalism can be understood as a coherent project arising from the efforts of the thought collective to forge agreement across a range of criteria including: the need to actively construct their vision for a

good society; the need to redefine the functions and structure the state rather than destroy it; the primary place of freedom over other virtues (albeit a freedom ‘recoded and heavily edited within their framework’); and, the necessity of inequality for the proper functioning of capitalism (2009, pp. 418, 434–440). Mirowski emphasises neoliberalism as both an economic movement and political one.

While the detailed overview of the history and efforts of the neoliberal thought collective in *The Road from Mont Pèlerin* is invaluable, the connections made between this thought collective and broader processes by which states were neoliberalised is unsatisfying. What materialises is an ideas-driven account of the rise of neoliberalism. In this sense, the ‘neoliberal thought collective thesis’ is part of a broader family of conceptual approaches that puts the ideas of neoliberal intellectuals at the centre of their explanation and analysis of the rise and dynamics of neoliberal state and economic transformations (Cahill, 2013, 2014). What is at stake in our analysis, then, is the precise nature of the role played by neoliberal ideas within the neoliberal policy revolution. We contend that the ‘thought collective thesis’ problematically subordinates broader social relations to the intellectual development and practical manoeuvring of the thought collective. Through a broadly historical materialist approach, we argue that neoliberalism was constructed in Australia not primarily through the mobilisation of the neoliberal thought collective, but through a corporatist project implemented by the Labor Party and organised labour. While the neoliberal thought collective played an important role within this, it was not the chief causal agent of neoliberal transformation. Rather, once marginal neoliberal ideas were given new salience by the ongoing crisis within the global economy and the distinct experience of this in Australia. The crisis created an imperative for state elites to search for alternatives to older forms of economic regulation that had become a barrier to economic growth and capital accumulation. In this context, the neoliberal thought collective acted as a convenient threat that served the interests of those within the state and trade union movement who were already moving towards neoliberal forms of governance.

Overview of the neoliberal thought collective in Australia

In Australia, the neoliberal thought collective formed during the period of economic crisis that beset the global capitalist economy in the 1970s. Stagflation, political unrest and the general breakdown of post-war era certainties provided the context in which support grew for the diagnoses and prescriptions of neoliberal intellectuals. Neoliberalism as a political

movement in Australia developed through a small group of businessmen, academics, company economists and journalists, united by a shared commitment to the normative visions of neoliberal intellectuals.

A crucial part of this process was the establishment of a series of neoliberal think tanks. Australia's first neoliberal think tank, The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), was founded in 1976. During the late 1970s The Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), a think tank founded in 1943 and linked to the conservative side of politics, began to embrace a neoliberal worldview. A number of other forums were set up by the mid-1980s, among the more important of which were: the Crossroads Group (1981); the Australian Institute of Public Policy (AIPP) (1983); and the H. R. Nicholls Society (1985), with the Tasman Institute following in 1990. They provided the organisational backbone for the neoliberal thought collective in Australia, facilitating the process whereby 'comparatively isolated intellectuals became linked in a nationwide network challenging traditional conservative centres of power' (Kemp, 1988, p. 340).

Through its think tanks, the neoliberal thought collective mounted a sustained campaign against the welfare state and other perceived forms of 'collectivism'. The antipathy with which the neoliberals regarded the welfare state stemmed from their particular conception of the individual and of markets. Much like their overseas counterparts, the neoliberals in Australia argued that markets, when freed from external 'interferences', most notably in the form of the state, are the most moral and the most efficient means for producing and distributing goods and services. Drawing upon public choice theory, they argued that governments operate according to the individual self-interest of bureaucrats, politicians and lobby groups and that welfare payments of all types simply serve such special interests. Welfare bureaucrats and lobby groups have an interest in maintaining levels of disadvantage in order to justify their own existence. For this reason, welfare payments are not designed to assist those in need:

Lobbying by pressure groups and electoral competition between political parties interact to produce bigger governments by favouring short-run special interests (which benefit from more intervention) at the expense of long-run public interests (which benefit from less intervention) (James, 1986, p. 1).

For the neoliberal thought collective, government agencies in a welfare state operate according to 'non-commercial goals' (Moore & Porter, 1991, p. 10) and are thus not subject to the neutral pricing mechanisms and discipline of market forces. The monopolistic provision of government services tends to 'crowd out' initiatives from the private sector (see

for example Cox, 1992, pp. 49–59). Inefficiencies are created, because government regulation of markets creates ‘distortions’ (see for example Moran, 1987, p. 142). Following from this, political considerations involved in formulating such regulations means that governments are, in effect, ‘picking winners’ by favouring certain industries rather than allowing markets to produce optimal outcomes (see for example Moore & Porter, 1991, p. 8). The thought collective thus advocated a radical re-engineering of the state: the transfer of the provision of goods and services from the public to the private sector. The role of the state then becomes, primarily, to ‘detect and prevent violence, theft and deception’ and to ‘enforce contracts’ (Chipman, 1981, pp. 13–14).

Strong links were forged between the Australian-based neoliberals and the broader cross-Atlantic-based neoliberal thought collective, including the MPS which held its regional meeting in Sydney in 1985. Much like its overseas counterparts, the thought collective in Australia from its inception adopted a particularly strident and uncompromising ideological tone. It was radical in its political orientation and generally followed Hayek’s recommendation that:

What we lack is a liberal Utopia... We need intellectual leaders who are prepared to risk the blandishments of power and influence and who are prepared to work for an ideal, however small may be the prospects of its early realization... The practical compromises they must leave to the politicians’ (Hayek, 1949, p. 432).

The thought collective also had a distinctly local character. This was most evident in its critique of Australia’s institutions of industrial arbitration which, they argued, were inefficient, and privileged an ‘industrial relations club’ comprised of trade union elites and labour lawyers with an interest in maintaining the status quo (Henderson, 1985; McGuinness, 1985, pp. 13–18). According to this view, wage increases and working conditions are based on deals between ‘special interests’, leading to unemployment and inhibiting voluntary employment agreements. The entrenched power of trade unions was argued to infringe both the liberty of trade union members to dissent against the actions of unions and the liberty of employers to be free from trade union coercion. The thought collective’s solution was to abolish the Industrial Relations Commission and deregulate wage bargaining so that common law individual contracts between employer and employee become the norm. The recognition of trade unions as official partners in the bargaining process was to be removed, and the rights of employers to act against unions under the law increased.

The Corporatist Development of Neoliberalism in Australia

The key period in which neoliberalism was advanced in Australia was from 1983 to 1996, during the successive Labor Party Governments under the prime-ministerships of Bob Hawke (1983-1991) and Paul Keating (1991-1996). Throughout this period the Australian Labor Government (ALP) and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) managed the processes of economic transformation, through a formal social contract called the *Statement of Accord by the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Council of Trade Unions Regarding Economic Policy* ('the Accord).

The Accord, and indeed, the election of Labor to government in 1983, emerged out of a period of deep economic crisis in Australia. Historically wages in Australia had been set through a process of centralised arbitration, implemented soon after the federation of the colonies in 1901. The 1970s and early 1980s saw an effective collapse of centralised arbitration as a macroeconomic strategy to manage wages in a context of organised labour's militancy. The government and business representatives labelled this a 'wages explosion', and in 1982 the conservative Liberal Party Government of Malcolm Fraser implemented a 12-month wage freeze—despite an unsuccessful 'voluntary' wage and price freeze in 1977 (Dabscheck & Kitay, 1991). The unions quickly rendered this ineffectual (O'Lincoln, 1993; Stewart, 1985, p. 26). More broadly, political tensions between the government and the unions steadily intensified during this period. Fraser outlawed secondary boycotts, introduced anti-union legislation, and set up an Industrial Relations Bureau to intervene in labour organisation. This provoked an increasingly combative approach on the part of organised workers in key sectors (Bramble & Kuhn, 2011, pp. 101–102; Jones, 1979; Singleton, 1990, pp. 50–69). In seeking to suppress real wages, Fraser fed the industrial conflict and contributed to mounting disenchantment with his government (Langmore, 2000, p. 21). These factors were key in shaping the eventual emergence of both the social contract and neoliberalism.

Although the Fraser Government was conservative and sought to limit trade union power, it would be incorrect to view it as neoliberal. Despite Fraser's admiration for Thatcher, he stood against the drive within the Liberal Party to implement a generalised neoliberal policy framework. While 'advocating lowered protection, his enthusiasm was tempered by the electoral consequences of unemployment and industrial strife, and by the interests of rural manufacturers his coalition partner [the National Country Party] articulated' (Hampson, 1997, p. 545). Additionally, although Fraser established the Campbell Committee of Inquiry into Australia's Financial System, which recommended extensive financial deregulation, he did not implement the findings despite personally supporting them. Fraser

threw the report in a bin in his office because he believed it could not be carried politically (Clark, 2015). The proposals of the Campbell Committee were realised during the Hawke-Keating ALP cabinets.

While the business community and neoliberal thought collective in Australia were increasingly concerned about the militant industrial situation, and internally the Liberal party debated a more neoliberal direction over issues like tariffs, a new corporatist political project was proposed to resolve the economic crisis and the Accord operated as the principal statement of domestic economic policy (Ahlquist, 2011, p. 133). Trade unions agreed to restrain wage demands to the level of inflation, and in return the government agreed to moderate prices and non-wage incomes, expand the social wage, and implement progressive tax reform. The Accord reintroduced central wage fixation (which had broken down in the Fraser era) and sought to promote growth through economic management and central planning. The Accord stated that reducing inflation by moderating wage claims was fundamental to achieving expansion, and effectively argued that unemployment would have to be relegated or delayed as a priority.

The Accord was reconstituted through national wage cases over 13 years and eight ‘editions’ (Mark I–VIII). Although the original statement (ALP & ACTU, 1986) set out a wide-ranging and largely progressive reforms, the process quickly narrowed to focus primarily on wage suppression. Real wage levels, to be pegged to inflation under the Accord, in practice declined markedly. Promised new expenditure evaporated when the ALP publicly committed not to increase taxation, government expenditure or the size of the budget deficit as a percentage of gross domestic product—which significantly curtailed the planned social wage spending.

Some advances were made in the re-introduction of a generally universal healthcare system (Medicare) and the expansion of superannuation (a privatised pension system) across the workforce. However, core elements of the original Accord statement were not implemented and, on frequent occasions, policy contrary to the agreement was adopted: no serious action was taken on prices; Australia’s tariff system was dismantled; free tertiary education was abolished; taxation (which was to be restructured to ensure business paid a ‘fair share’) moved in the opposite direction; widespread industry deregulation took place; the currency was floated; state-owned assets were corporatised and privatised; and the beginning of what would later become a far-reaching process of neoliberal labour market restructuring commenced. In Australia, the implementation of vanguard neoliberalism

occurred through a 'positive' corporatist project centred on working class sacrifice in the national interest (Panitch, 1976, p. 247).

The Accord became the vehicle for a radical neoliberalisation of the Australian state and economy (Humphrys, 2018a; Humphrys & Cahill, 2017). Crucial to this neoliberal transformation was an ongoing process of labour disorganisation. Divergent to Britain and the USA under the neoliberalism pursued by Thatcher and Reagan, where labour disorganisation was achieved through direct confrontation with trade unions, in Australia it occurred through corporatism and the incorporation of the trade unions into the national economic restructuring program. Two key ways this was achieved was the policing and undermining of union industrial action, and through the later introduction of enterprising bargaining—which deregulated wage setting and eroded centralised arbitration.

In the first years of the Accord, the ALP achieved through corporatism what Fraser's Liberals could not: the suppression of real wages and trade union militancy, primarily through policing union activities and undermining claims for higher wages. Soon after the election of Hawke in 1983 several unions sought a catch-up pay rise of just under 10 per cent, which was a consequence of the Fraser wage freeze. This was refused, and the ACTU and the government policed unions that continued to pursue wage rises directly with employers (McPhillips, 1985).

There were also two key moments where the ALP and ACTU undermined unions that broke with the Accord framework. Firstly, in 1986 the government mounted a successful deregistration of the militant Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF). The ALP and ACTU aligned in efforts to deregister the BLF as part of an investigation into union corruption begun in the Fraser era. Many argue that although the allegations of union corruption were the catalyst for the deregistration, and had some foundation, the action was also taken to ensure the stability of the Accord process and limit labour militancy (Bramble, 2008; Ericson, 2004; Kaptein, 1993; Ross, 2004). Secondly, in 1989-1990 a dispute involving airline pilots was suppressed by the ALP and stifled by the ACTU. Both the government and trade union federation actively disciplined the Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) in order to maintain union compliance with the Accord and its practices of wage suppression. The action took place in the context of enormous changes in the airline industry, which experienced significant growth throughout the 1980s, and the announcement in 1987 that the government intended to deregulate and privatise the sector (Sheehan & Jennings, 2010, pp. 145–146). Even when the government used the military to break the strike, leading to increased criticism from within the labour movement (Sheehan & Jennings, 2010, p. 174), the ACTU

shifted its position only slightly and argued there was fault on all sides rather than swinging its support behind the pilots' union. As a delegate in the Victorian Communication Workers Union said, 'the New Right was now glowing with expectation at precedents set and could not believe its luck—all without a whimper from the ACTU' (Singleton, 1990, p. 189).

Moreover, enterprise bargaining—originally placed on the political agenda by the Business Council of Australia in the mid 1980s—was subsequently actively campaigned for by the ACTU and key left unions (Bramble, 2008, p. 161; Briggs, 2001, p. 31). Enterprise bargaining was a central element in the neoliberalisation of industrial relations and was, at the same time, both a response to the constraints of the Accord and a greater curtailment of workers' organised power. By the late 1980s, intense pressures had built up inside unions because of the heavy cost of wage restraint. In 1989 the ACTU began to campaign for enterprise bargaining as, in theory, this would allow stronger unions to fight for and gain the additional wage increases denied to them under strict centralisation. This found support not just from the government, but also from most employer organisations (Bramble, 2008, p. 161). In 1991 the central arbitration body sanctioned a version of enterprise bargaining but disassociated it from the award system. This meant that wage agreements won on an enterprise-by-enterprise basis could not be fed back into the next national award determination, as they had been in the pre-Accord era. This made it significantly more difficult to use the bargaining power of stronger workplaces to deliver gains indirectly for weakly organised workers. In a historical shift, strong groups of workers were now fighting only for sectional gains—the solidarity implicit in past militancy and central arbitration was broken. As union leader Laurie Carmichael later reflected, despite being centrally involved in constructing and implementing the Accord, this was 'very much part of economic rationalist policy' (cited in Briggs, 2001, p. 36).

In turn, the use of corporatism within vanguard neoliberalism led to a particular method of labour disorganisation—one marked by the labour movement implementing successful wage suppression and self-policing of industrial activity. The Accord was thus the key process by which vanguard neoliberalism was constructed.

The Neoliberal Thought Collective and the Accord

If the Accord was central to the advance of neoliberalism, then what role did the neoliberal thought collective play in the transformation of the Australian state and economy in this period? If the ideas-centric interpretation offered by advocates of the neoliberal thought

collective thesis is correct, then we would expect the neoliberal think tanks to have in some way authored these changes.

To assess this, we examine the relationships between the neoliberal thought collective and the ALP, the Hawke-Keating federal Labor governments, and the labour movement. Potential sources of influence of neoliberal think tanks upon the Accord partners' neoliberal project include the supportive ties between, and overlapping membership of, neoliberal think tanks and both the Labor Party and the labour movement. Some of the most prominent activists from the neoliberal thought collective, such as Paul Houlihan (associated with the H. R. Nicholls Society), Paddy McGuinness (CIS and H. R. Nicholls) and Michael Porter (Tasman Institute), began their political lives in the labour movement or Labor Party. Other prominent Labor figures also gave public support to the certain radical neoliberal publications or think tanks, including NSW Labor Council officer (later to become NSW Treasurer) Michael Costa, Finance Minister Peter Walsh, and Governor General (and former Labor leader) Bill Hayden. Clearly, there was some sympathy for neoliberal think tanks, their philosophies and policy agendas within the ALP between 1983 and 1996. Labor caucus members also took notice of think tank publications (Martin, 2003). No doubt this led to a certain amount of policy influence by the think tanks during this period. Labor MP Stephen Martin concedes that 'it can be said that we did probably take and steal some of the general agenda items of new right philosophy, like some privatisations' (ibid 2003).

Furthermore, in very general terms, there is a correspondence between the policy agendas advocated by neoliberal think tanks, and the broad neoliberal policy direction taken by Labor during the 1980s and 1990s. However, a conclusion that the neoliberal think tanks therefore drove the neoliberal policy agenda of the federal Labor Government would be premature if it did not consider other aspects of the relationships between these institutions, especially the hostility of the think tanks towards trade unions and the system of industrial arbitration. The thought collective advocated dismantling Australia's system of industrial arbitration, the introduction of individual contracts, and stripping away social protections that mediated the employment relationship between labour and capital. The integration of much of the trade union movement with the Labor Party, including the provision by unions of a significant proportion of Labor Party funds, made it unlikely the Party would embrace groups who were openly hostile to unions.

The public reaction of the Labor government to the neoliberal thought collective was to attack them stridently. Prime Minister Hawke labelled the H. R. Nicholls Society 'troglodytes and lunatics' (Taylor & Hewett, 1986, p. 1). John Dawkins described the 'new

right' as 'treasonous' (Hywood & Taylor, 1986, p. 4). Former Labor MP Stephen Martin (2003) recalls that:

at different times ministers in the parliament would refer to comments made by people associated with those different [neoliberal] organisations and use it to make political points about where they were wrong. And in debates you would often here MPs refer to individuals associated with those organisations and declare where they thought the organisations and their philosophies were wrong. I mean H. R. Nicholls Society was always a great one for kicking around.

Such tactics conjured the image of a brutish and ideologically motivated minority, antithetical to the values of mainstream Australia. The thought collective was portrayed as inimical to the inclusive 'consensus' image Labor painted of itself, with the Labor leadership then able to position itself in opposition to this threat. According to Martin (2003), this was a deliberate tactic by Labor who attempted to portray the neoliberal thought collective as a 'bogey'. Labor was able to use the existence of the neoliberal think tanks to exploit divisions within the Liberal Party opposition. Senior progressive Liberals were torn between suppressing their philosophical convictions in the interests of party unity and expressing their antipathy towards the neoliberal think tanks, thereby supporting the stance taken by the Labor government. Electorally, this worked to Labor's advantage because the Coalition appeared divided, incoherent and captured by ideological interests. Continuing into the 1990s, the Labor leadership was able to use the image of the neoliberal thought collective to delegitimise the Liberal Opposition. For example, in 1990, ACTU Secretary Bill Kelty attacked their industrial relations policy, stating that they had embraced the ideas of their 'new right friends' (Moffet, 1990).

By promoting the neoliberal thought collective as a threat, the right-wing and centrists who dominated the Labor leadership had extra leverage to persuade the Left-Labor factions to acquiesce to a less radical, but nonetheless neoliberal, policy agenda. ALP National President and Special Minister for State, Mick Young, employed such a tactic in 1986 when he implored the party to put aside its differences and unite against the common enemy in the form of the 'New Right' (Taylor, 1986). Young claimed the 'new right' stood for 'busting the unions and busting the welfare net' (Steketee, 1986); hence if the agenda of the neoliberal thought collective was implemented, it would destroy those egalitarian institutions at the core of Labor's commitments. Moreover, the trade union leadership took seriously the threat from the neoliberal thought collective. As Jennie George (2003), Assistant Secretary of the ACTU 1991-96, argued:

...it was well known within the union movement that there was this conservative world view about industrial relations that we had to contend with, and of course it came at a time of declining union membership, so it made the future more problematic.

So, while there was some direct influence of think tanks upon the ALP in office, it does not seem enough to justify the argument that the thought collective was the author of Australia's neoliberal transformation.

Due to Labor's integral relationship with the trade union movement, a sympathetic and close relationship between the neoliberal think tanks and senior Labor figures was limited to a few individuals. The think tanks were, however, a catalyst for Labor's embrace of neoliberalism federally and, it would seem, that neoliberal think tanks were used strategically internally and externally. Internally they were used by the Labor leadership not as a source of policy advice, but as a point of focus to illustrate the New Right 'threat' as a known alternative to the ALP's neoliberalisation. On the one hand, the Party's dominant Right faction mobilised the threat posed by the neoliberal think tanks in order to neutralise opposition to its program of neoliberal restructuring. On the other, the think tanks' alliance with key sections of business represented a perceived threat to Labor, which could only be headed off through the adoption of policies which incorporated some of the values being espoused by them. Externally, attacking think tanks and the New Right was virtue signalling to the ALP base in the trade unions and the electorate.

As with the Labor Government, there is evidence to suggest possible lines of influence between neoliberal think tanks and the senior ranks of the federal bureaucracy. During the neoliberal era, the bureaucracy underwent a profound shift in its policy frameworks. In an influential argument, Michael Pusey (1991) characterised this as the rise to dominance of 'economic rationalism' (a term often used as synonymous with neoliberalism in Australia) within the strategically important 'central agencies' of Treasury, Finance, Prime Minister and Cabinet, during the 1970s and into the 1980s (see also Whitwell, 1986). Several prominent thought collective activists held senior public service positions prior to their work with think tanks. Among these were John Stone, who after serving as Secretary of the Department of Treasury, 1979-1984, resigned and later took up a post with the IPA; Des Moore who went to the IPA, and later founded the Institute for Private Enterprise, after serving as Deputy Secretary, Department of Treasury, 1981-87; William Cole who became the Canberra director of the Australian Institute of Public Policy in 1989 and had previously served as Chairman, Public Service Board (1978-83) and Secretary, Department of Defence (1984-7); Brian Tucker of the IPA who resigned as Chief of Division of Atmospheric

Research, CSIRO in 1992, and Alan Moran of the Tasman Institute and IPA who was formerly Head, Business Regulation Review Unit and First Assistant Commissioner at the Industry Commission.

If it is assumed that the ideological views of these individuals did not alter significantly between their service as bureaucrats and their involvement in the neoliberal think tanks, then it seems reasonable to argue that the neoliberal think tanks had numerous sympathisers within the senior public service. This lends credence to the argument that neoliberal think tanks had some direct influence over the neoliberal policy shift within the senior federal public service.

As with the case of the Labor Party and labour movement, however, this influence must be viewed in a broader political and institutional context. First, there is the assessment (by some key senior bureaucrats and advisers of the time) that the neoliberal think tanks played a marginal role in the policy development of the public service under Labor. Senior bureaucrat under successive Labor Governments, Michael Keating (2002), for example, argued that the neoliberal think tanks ‘had little influence. I doubt that most politicians in the Labor Government had ever read them and I doubt many senior bureaucrats ever read them’. Ross Garnaut (2002), former economic adviser to Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke, said of the neoliberal think tanks: ‘They weren’t very central to the story’.

Second, it is worth considering the fit between the policy prescriptions of the neoliberal thought collective and the institutional logics and pressures operating upon public servants. In general, Australian neoliberal think tanks advocated a particularly radical brand of neoliberalism, but rarely did this constitute detailed policy blueprints. When detailed policy was articulated, it often entailed a rapid dismantling of key institutions, laws and practices that regulated market conduct—and mediated relationships between labour and capital—which quarantined certain elements of society from market dependence. Typically, such proposals were made with little concern for: the maintenance of electoral constituencies; their consistency with Australia’s institutional structures of governance; or, indeed, with many of the pragmatic compromises that often characterise the reality of the policy making process. This underpins the assessment of Garnaut and Michael Keating as to the lack of influence of neoliberal think tanks. So, while they may have been influential upon some public servants who were disposed to a radical neoliberal ideology, and while they may have contributed to the general context for speculation about policy alternatives to the status quo, the radical ideological character of their policy prescriptions likely meant that they did not enjoy widespread direct influence within the public service. For example, Alan Moran left his

senior public service position in 1990 to join the Tasman Institute ‘after a series of controversial statements on the environment’ (Power, 1990, p. 7). Upon his departure, Labor’s Environment Minister, Graham Richardson, said Moran displayed a ‘complete lack of understanding’ of sustainability issues (ibid). It would seem that, in this case, Moran’s radical neoliberal ideological convictions might have clashed with the priorities of his Minister. John Stone and Des Moore also had strong disagreements with the Government. Moore reportedly resigned as Deputy Secretary in 1987 ‘because of his concern that the macro-economic policies being pursued by the Federal Labor Government would likely lead to recession’ (Institute for Private Enterprise, 2014). This potentially speaks of a frustration at his inability to exert significant influence upon national economic policy at the time. For his part, John Stone, made a strong public attack upon the Labor government shortly before resigning as Secretary in 1984. In his Shann Memorial Lecture, Stone (1984) said:

...our system of wage determination today constitutes a crime against society. It is, starkly, a system of wage determination under which trade union leaders and ‘Justices’ of various Arbitration benches combine to put young people in particular, but many others also, out of work.

Ideological disagreement with the government is clearly evident here, and Stone’s resignation may also indicate a frustration at his inability to steer policy in a direction consistent with such ideological convictions. This is not to suggest that Stone and Moore were uninfluential within Treasury. As Whitwell notes, from the mid-1970s onwards Treasury embraced the broad principles of neoliberalism. The ‘Treasury line’ came more and more to lay blame on government spending as the cause of the stagflation that wracked the Australian economy at the time (Whitwell, 1986, pp. 205–235). However, this ideological shift cannot be attributed primarily to Stone’s influence:

Without denying that Stone was a powerful intellectual force in the department and without denying the importance of his deep sympathies for the neo-classical model, Stone’s position in the department is best seen not as a shepherd leading a flock of sheeplike Treasury officers, but, to offer a more satisfactory metaphor, the zealot among the devout (ibid 1986, p. 272).

Confirmation that Stone was likely a ‘zealot among the devout’ comes from former senior bureaucrat Michael Keating (2002), who says Stone was unlikely to offer ‘second best’ policy solutions to his Ministers. The neoliberal think tanks, in contrast, offered Stone and Moore a sympathetic audience and the freedom to pursue their ideological convictions without the restraints required by bureaucratic office.

If these examples are representative, then a note of caution is in order regarding the influence of the neoliberal thought collective within the Commonwealth bureaucracy. While there were several senior public servants who were sympathetic to the ideology of the neoliberal think tanks, a combination of the institutional constraints of the bureaucracy and the need to tailor policies so as to be realistic given the increasingly neoliberal, but less radical, policy agenda of the Labor government, limited the influence think tanks could have. Furthermore, the radical and uncompromising nature of many of the policy proposals advocated by the think tanks ensured such proposals clashed with policy-making constraints, thus inhibiting the appeal and relevance of the think tanks to other senior bureaucrats.

In 1977, the Fraser Government introduced changes to the *Trade Practices Act* based on anti-union legal precedents from the US. These changes prevented ‘secondary boycotts’, and effectively stopped unionists from taking solidarity action with striking workers—including the act of refusing to cross a picket line or being on a picket line at a company where one did not work (Ericson, 2004). In the early years of the Accord elements of the neoliberal thought collective and associated business organisations and think tanks mobilised to take legal action against various unions. While companies impacted by industrial action officially took the legal remedies, employer organisations underwrote the legal costs and helped coordinate these efforts. In doing this, business ‘organisations such as the National Farmers Federation (NFF) and the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce were not merely protecting the interests of their own members, [but] actively trying to reshape the Australian political landscape’ (Cahill, 2010, p. 14). The Accord created openings for these offensives, ‘because the officials were determined to avoid a generalised union response [to the New Right attacks] which would in turn undermine the enforced passivity’ of the social contract (Griffiths, 1989).

Civil action cases were used both to intimidate the labour movement and to financially crush unions who acted. During a 1985 dispute at the Mudginberri Abattoir, the small Amalgamated Meat Industry Employees’ Union had total fines and damages ordered against them in the range of \$2.7 million (Ericson, 2004). The legal action at Mudginberri was ‘a test case for [the New Right’s] strategy of using the courts to break unions’ (Bramble, 2008, p. 141). The 1985 Dollar Sweets dispute involved the Federated Confectioners’ Association, which was campaigning for a 36-hour week, and again the activists from the neoliberal thought collective spearheaded the action (Hendy, 2006). The neoliberal thought collective ultimately viewed the Dollar Sweets as the dispute that ‘rewrote the manual on what are the acceptable limits of industrial action by unions’ (Costello, 1988). Prominent

cases of civil action (or the threat of it) also included the 1985 South-East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB) dispute over the privatisation of work previously done by government employees (Casey, 1987), and the 1986 Robe River dispute over the sacking of workers who refused changes to over 200 work practices (Bramble, 2008, p. 144). Here again, the thought collective was more a ginger group, an organised section of political society working to influence overall direction of economic transformation and creating space for processes of neoliberalisation, than they were the authors of the radical changes for which they professed support. These legal actions were not, however, the central initiative to disorganise a once militant labour movement, although they were an important development. Rather, they were made possible in the context of the Accord's stifling suppression of industrial action.

Putting Ideas in Their Place

The story of Labor's making of neoliberalism in Australia challenges dominant explanations of the development of neoliberalism on two fronts. First, it demonstrates that the construction of neoliberalism during its vanguard phase was not the preserve of right-wing governments. Nor was neoliberalism inevitably opposed by, or imposed upon, trade unions. In Australia, successive social democratic governments, with the active support of the peak trade union body the ACTU, implemented the radical neoliberalisation of the Australian state and economy through their Accord relationship. This should prompt a reconsideration of the role of centre-left parties and the labour movement within processes of neoliberalisation more generally. Indeed, the historical record suggests that such institutions were active in constructing neoliberalism contemporaneously with, or even prior to, the Thatcher and Reagan governments which are most often seen as being in the vanguard of this process (Humphrys & Cahill, 2017). In this sense, the progressive origins of neoliberalism in Australia might not be an outlier, but indicative of a more general, although uneven, embrace of neoliberal forms of regulations by centre-right *and* centre-left parties across the capitalist world during the 1970s and 1980s.

Second, the Australian experience demonstrates that the neoliberal thought collective was not the main author of neoliberal change. Because of the close relationship between the Labor government and the trade unions, the neoliberal thought collective faced hostility from policy makers. While some high-profile civil servants sympathised with the thought collective, the fundamentalist character of the discourse and policy critiques emanating from

the neoliberal think tanks meant that, for the most part, their direct policy influence was minimal.

Clearly this poses a challenge to the influential ideas-centric account of the rise of neoliberalism found in what we have termed the thought collective thesis. Whereas such accounts place the thought collective centre-stage, the analysis presented here suggests a different set of conclusions. Rather than driving the process of neoliberalisation in Australia, the thought collective (nationally and globally) contributed to the context for speculation about alternatives to the regulatory status quo. At a general level, the thought collective radicalised public debate (shifting the locus of discussion more closely to their own views), even if they never converted the broader public, the Labor Government or the trade union leadership to their fundamentalist normative vision. In this sense, Burgin's (2012, p. 223) description of the long-term impact enjoyed by Milton Friedman applies equally to the Australian neoliberal think tanks: 'Although Milton Friedman failed to convert the public to his specific views, over time his rhetorical audacity succeeded in restructuring the terms of popular debate'. At the more particular level of industrial relations, the thought collective's advocacy of the radical dismantling of the existing institutional architecture that privileged trade unions and the involvement of key thought collective activists in legal cases which struck at the heart of such institutions, helped engender support among the left of the Labor Party and labour movement for a less radical, but nonetheless neoliberal, restructuring of the terms of bargaining over employment conditions throughout the economy. This has significant implications for how we should properly understand the role of fundamentalist neoliberal ideas in processes of neoliberal state transformation. It suggests that we require an account of neoliberalism in which such radical neoliberal ideas, intellectuals and think tanks are not *presumed* to be the authors or the main drivers of neoliberalisation.

There is a useful parallel to be drawn here with debates about the 'performativity' of economic ideas. 'Performativity' describes a discourse that creates the world it describes (MacKenzie, Muniesa, & Siu, 2007). The conceptual frame of performativity has been used to examine the way that economic models have shaped the construction of markets. Advocates of the performativity thesis distinguish their views from what they claim are traditional understandings of economics as a discipline which seeks simply to know the world (ibid 2007, p. 2). They argue in contrast, that economics is active in 'producing', shaping, enabling and bringing into being the economy.

Within this literature are a variety of emphasis regarding the extent to which economic knowledge is performative. Callon (1998, p. 2), for example, takes a strong view of

performativity, arguing that economics is performative, *not* representative: ‘economics, in the broad sense of the term, performs, shapes and formats the economy, rather than observing how it functions’. He claims the economy is constituted by economic discourse: ‘the economy is embedded not in society but in economics’ (ibid 1998, p. 30). Such a strongly idealist form of analysis denies the utility of materialist or structuralist analyses to apprehend the processes by which economic phenomena are constructed, because the economy is understood as a function of economic ideas. One can readily see here the parallel with the ‘thought collective thesis’ for understanding neoliberalism, which views material economic practices and transformations as the product of the ideas proselytised by the neoliberal thought collective. In each case, ideas are accorded primacy in the construction of the social world.

Yet, not all within the performativity tradition adhere to such a strongly idealist position. MacKenzie (2006, pp. 18–19), for example, identifies three levels of performativity: ‘generic’ where economic knowledge ‘is used, not just by academic economists, but in the “real world”; by market participants, policy makers, regulators, and so on’; ‘effective’ where economic knowledge ‘make[s] a difference’ to the conduct and nature of economic processes; and a third level whereby economic knowledge shapes economic processes in ways which ‘bear on their conformity to the aspect of economics in question’. This third level consists of two types ‘Barnesian performativity’ (whereby economic processes become more like the economy described by an economic model) and ‘counter performativity’ (whereby economic knowledge makes economic processes less like those described by the model). MacKenzie posits that economic ideas can have a range of effects upon the economy, from simply being used by economic agents to the reshaping of markets according to the values embedded in the economic model. Moreover, MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu (2007, p. 6) also argue that ‘plainly, markets can function perfectly well (and historically have done so) without drawing on economics in the academic sense’.

Reading the neoliberal thought collective through this weaker version of performativity then offers a potentially more satisfying understanding of their impact. Jettisoning the assumption that the neoliberal thought collective was the chief author of processes of neoliberal reform opens the way for analysis of the more varied ways by which the thought collective influenced the roll-out of neoliberalism. Nor, as Christophers (2014, p. 18) has recognised, is the use of this ‘weaker version of performativity’ incompatible with a structuralist political economy approach—an approach which we argue provides the crucial context for understanding the turn to neoliberalism in Australia, and elsewhere.

Australia's turn to neoliberal policies occurred within the context of developments within the world market and the Australian economy's integration within it. Throughout much of the twentieth century Australian-based manufacturing had developed with the assistance of high tariff protections. By the 1970s, their competitive position, and that of the Australian-based exporters who faced inflated capital costs, was under threat from the rise of new manufacturing facilities and processes in Europe and, increasingly, Asia. Alongside this, the end of the Bretton Woods regime and moves to financial deregulation put enormous pressure on Australia to follow suit, which in turn generated new dynamics and market disciplines (Bryan & Rafferty, 1999). Moreover, in the 1970s and early 1980s in Australia, political elites were confronted with a crisis of the capitalist economy that rendered traditional tools and institutions of economic regulation dysfunctional with the imperative to secure conditions for capital accumulation. A process of institutional searching was set in motion in which neoliberal forms of regulation increasingly came to be seen as the solution.

Indicative of the Labor government's orientation on these matters was both the content of, and its reaction to, the 1989 report it commissioned by Ross Garnaut: *Australia and the Northeast Asian Ascendancy*. The report outlined the economic growth of Northeast Asian economies such as Korea, Japan and Taiwan, arguing that Australia's prosperity depended upon greater integration with these emerging markets, a precondition for which was further domestic neoliberalisation (Garnaut, 1989). In a speech delivered at the launch of the report, Prime Minister Hawke (1989) said: 'we have to internationalise. The only real debate is about how we go about the process of reform and how fast we do it', and then proceeded to endorse Garnaut's recommendations to abolish tariffs, deregulate labour markets, and engage private capital in the provision of electricity and aviation services. Among Labor elites, there was a strong sense that 'there is no alternative' to some form of neoliberalisation as this was seen as the route to making Australian industry more competitive (which was understood to be the prerequisite for generating employment and wages growth). It was informed by a *realpolitik*—mobilised in the discourse of neoliberalism—and centred on the ALP maintaining power, above implementing the progressive and expansionary components of the original Accord statement, whilst tackling inflation and restoring an environment for business profitability. Certainly, the neoliberalisation of the Australian economy was a result of deliberate policy choice by political elites (Bell, 1997), but these choices occurred within an economic environment that had rendered older arrangements for facilitating capital accumulation somewhat redundant.

Within this context, at least for the most part, the neoliberal thought collective did not produce technical knowledge useful to policy makers. The thought collective in Australia did not recognise the necessary role for the state in underpinning markets, and nor did it cater to the inevitable compromises that characterise the policy process. Nonetheless, the think tanks *did* play an important role in the construction of neoliberalism in Australia. The thought collective *was* variously performative in a generic, effective and ‘Barnesian’ sense. Yet this performativity can only be appreciated when understood in the context of broader political economic shifts, alliances and dynamics. Moreover, to the extent that the thought collective shaped the contours of political debate in Australia, it was due to the circulation of their ideas in forms over which they sometimes had little control, and to the mobilisation of their ideas in ways they may not have liked. The neoliberal thought collective therefore did not make neoliberalism in Australia but did contribute to the circumstances of its construction.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine critically what we have labelled the ‘neoliberal thought collective thesis’—one of the more influential explanations of the neoliberal policy revolution to emerge in recent years. The thought collective thesis is an ideas-centric understanding of neoliberal change which posits that neoliberal think tanks and their associated ideas were the principal authors of the wave of privatisations, deregulations and marketisations that swept capitalist states from the late 1970s onwards. The article tested this thesis through an analysis of Australia in 1983-1996, during which period the state and economy underwent a process of radical neoliberalisation. While this process was broadly contemporaneous with other vanguard neoliberal regimes, it occurred under a period of social democratic governance and with the active support of the trade union leadership. It was found that although the neoliberal thought collective occupied a prominent place within Australian political debate it was not the primary author or driver of neoliberal change. Rather, the Accord between the Labor Government and the trade union leadership was the vehicle for the neoliberalisation of the Australian state. The neoliberal thought collective *was* influential in so far as it was viewed as a warning of a potentially more radical neoliberal attack upon the institutions of welfare and industrial arbitration, but the hostility with which it attacked trade unions limited the direct influence it was ever likely to exert over the Accord partners. Rather than the thought collective driving neoliberal changes, the article argued that the Labor government moved towards neoliberalism as a consequence of the ongoing weakness in the global capitalist economy and the barriers that inherited economic institutions now posed to

the viability of ongoing capital accumulation. Together these formed a strongly constraining material context that prompted policy makers to search for new, and as it turned out, predominantly neoliberal, institutional resolutions. The Australian case, therefore, should prompt a reconsideration of the usefulness of ideas-centric explanations of neoliberalism. Yet it should also prompt recognition of the need for a research agenda that seeks to tease out and identify in more detail the concrete and complex relations between neoliberal ideas, the institutional architecture of economic regulation inherited from the pre-neoliberal era, and the dynamics of capital accumulation in processes of neoliberal state transformation.

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