

# Review

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## MASS DENIAL

The climate change debate has to leave the hip pocket and focus on the big picture, says **Mark Latham**

**W**hen a politician shifts ideological positions, marching left-right-left, it is often depicted as a sign of erraticness. The university system, thankfully, has a less rigid approach. In the case of Robert Manne, Australia's leading public intellectual, these free-thinking oscillations are viewed as a virtue. In many respects, he is an Antipodean version of John Maynard Keynes: when the evidence changes, so too does Manne's position — hence his reputation for intellectual honesty.

Manne grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust, having lost his grandparents to the Nazi horror. This linked him instinctively to the politics of the left. After the war, however, when other young left activists were blindly defending Stalin and Mao, Manne looked to the evidence and saw evil — thus commencing his pilgrimage to the anti-communist right. Fifteen years ago he broke from this neoconservative cadre on another matter of historical record, the tragedy of the stolen generations.

Today Manne is still crusading from a left-of-centre position. Rare among Australian academics, he is willing to take a stance in the public arena and wear the opprobrium that comes from controversy. His new blog on *The Monthly's* website is true to these values. I find his work to be



**Giving a value to emissions fed climate scepticism in suburban Australia. Houses in south-west Sydney.** Photo: ANDREW QUILTY

irresistibly rational, especially on the pre-eminent issue of our time, climate change.

Late last year Manne blogged on the question that should be troubling all intellectuals: how has the hard evidence of modern science been so thoroughly undermined that action against global warming is now an unpopular position in Australian politics? Manne calls it "the mysterious rise of climate change denialism".

I share this concern, not from the standpoint of academia, but from talking to people where I live in

anyone who believes in global warming, let alone the legitimacy of collective action against the

**"The challenge for progressive politics is to develop a post-left future, one that addresses the contradictions of left success."**

south-west Sydney, a typically consumer-inclined and aspirational community. It is difficult to find

problem. Denialism is on the rise, creating a sharp paradox in the formation of public opinion.

The longer the climate change debate has gone on, the weaker the community's acceptance of climate change has become. This is more than just part of the political cycle, a consequence of the damage caused by Julia Gillard's broken promise on carbon taxation and the general unpopularity of her government. It goes to the science of the issue and how scientists themselves are perceived in society.

I find that intelligent people, high-achievers in life, are just as likely to dismiss the evidence of global warming as anyone else. That is, those we most readily associate with the ideals of reason and rationality are turning their backs on the world of evidence-based research. As Manne blogged in December:

It would be comforting to believe that the denialist army is composed of fools. This is simply not the case. Many of the denialists are accomplished and educated people. It would also be comforting to think that they represent a small island of unreason in an ocean of rationality, like people opposed to immunisation. This also however is not true.

In the climate change debate, we are witnessing a puzzling shift in **Continued next page**

## The Tory and the radical: opposites attract

**Damien Freeman** reveals a connection through drawings

**H**orsehair wigs, silk gowns and lace jabots have long been the preferred means by which those sitting in judgment over their peers have sought to preserve their anonymity. Looking out from under their identical wigs and gowns, Roddy Meagher and Michael Kirby, though both spent their professional life in the cloistered world of the Sydney bar and bench, could not have seen the view from the NSW Court of Appeal bench more differently. Meagher, who died last year, was the great Catholic Tory, whose powerful intellect and profound aesthetic sensibility was often masked behind the

gratuitously politically incorrect facade he enjoyed cultivating. Kirby, the indefatigable and high-profile radical Protestant, presented himself as the antithesis of the crusty old establishment that Meagher was widely assumed to embody.

What inspired Justice Meagher to pass Justice Kirby a note saying, "I lived in a fibro house for 10 years in the poor white area of Bowral," when the two judges were sitting together in the Court of Appeal, we do not know. We do know, however, that it inspired Michael Kirby to sketch the portly figure of Roddy Meagher sitting on the ground outside his fibro, beggar's bowl in

hand, as the Protestants walked by on their way to church.

Intimacy is rarely a feature of interactions between lawyers. Given their well-known differences of opinion, it would hardly have been surprising to learn that Meagher and Kirby had only the most limited personal interactions during their years together on the Court of Appeal bench. And yet, what is remarkable is the unexpected warmth that blossomed between the two men during this time — as witnessed in the notes they passed one another in court.

The warmth of their relationship, which was genuine and valued by **Continued page 6**



**Meagher: I lived in a fibro house for 10 years in the poor white area of Bowral. Kirby: I can just see you with your beggar's bowl as the Protestants walked by on their way to Church.**

Illustration: MICHAEL KIRBY  
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