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The (in)visibility of Hobson's Pledge: A struggle for survival in the socio- political environment of Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract

This study explores the emergence of Hobson's Pledge, as an alt-right group that attempts to influence government policy towards a state of 'ethnic unity'. It explores how the group manages ideological contradictions so as to prevent unanticipated (political) consequences, and what the future might hold for the groups as a consequence of those strategies. Three methods are utilised to interpret the situation of Hobson's Pledge: semi-structure face-to-face interviews; content analysis of internet text; and observations gathered from conversations with group members. Three themes emerge from the data. The first of these is: a true face of 'whiteness' - the dislocation of 'coherence'. The second is: maintaining a 'colour-blind' New Zealand for all. With this second theme, four strategies are identified by which Hobson's Pledge manages the contradictions that come to be revealed publically in its ideology. These strategies are: the promotion of an abstract subjectivity - the 'New Zealand' citizen; the issuing of a political demand for national 'unity'; the presentation of Hobson's Pledge as a broker of Māori rights against patronization; and the advocacy of a liberal democratic defence of fragility. The third theme is: moving into the future – a post-racial Aotearoa/New Zealand?. Within this latter theme, three moments are revealed in which the operation of Hobson's Pledge reinforces perceptions of a 'post-racial' New Zealand. These moments are: reducing perceived racism to a small fraction of society; a democratic right to 'free-speech'; and an intensification of covertness – a democratic right to oppose Māori wards. Public conversations are recommended as a mechanism by which the socially-divisive effects of Hobson's Pledge could be engaged with, to progressive effect.

Preface

I was born in the Republic of South Africa. I recall the moment when Nelson Mandela was released from incarceration — I was nine years old at the time. This moment provided a sense of hope for a new South Africa; from here on in, South Africans would refer to the nation as the ‘rainbow nation’. Yet lingering sentiments from fellow white South Africans centred upon a sense of fear as to what the future might hold; for example, my parents felt ‘this is the end of us’.

An accompaniment to a sense of fear — as to what the future might hold — was a widely shared sense of unfairness amongst white South Africans associated with the implementation of affirmative action policies. These policies brought about the commonly referred to idea of ‘reverse racism’. I recall my father, most notably, referring to this term to describe the way in which he had to work to get to where he was, whereas black people appeared to be handed opportunities without putting in the work. Resulting from such sentiments, growing up, I found it hard to articulate the rationale behind the implementation of affirmative action policies.

In 1996, when I was 14 years old, my mother decided to immigrate to Aotearoa/New Zealand with my siblings and I. I recall what I perceived to be similar sentiments held by Pākehā regarding the unfairness associated with affirmative action policies that benefit Māori. For example, my step father, who my mother met and married in Aotearoa/New Zealand, explained to me that Māori are never satisfied with the money and land that they are compensated — ‘all we do is give, and all they do it take’.

I could never articulate the rationale that lay behind affirmative action policies until I undertook tertiary education. Sociology has provided me with the means though which to articulate the historical factors that shape social forces. Within these environments, certain people are thereby able to prevail while others are repressed. That is, within Aotearoa/New Zealand

society, the effects of colonisation still see Māori struggling to break out of repression. Affirmative action policies are subsequently put in place to ameliorate the historical effects of colonisation.

My life experiences have inspired me to articulate the relationship between affirmative action and the perceived unfairness thereof. I take this thesis as the first step in a research trajectory in which I hope to continue.

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