

Real liberals search in vain for a political party to call their own

Michael Cornish

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I am a liberal. I have always been a liberal. Just not necessarily a Liberal with a big "L". In fact, as a small "l" liberal, I could not bring myself to vote for an illiberal-looking Abbott-led Liberal party. My faith in a liberal Liberal Party has been further dented by the recent - now infamously regressive and inequitable - budget.

The modern social and economic liberal now has no one to vote for.

The Labor Party is schizophrenic on liberalism. Since it gave its trailblazing support for a moderated economic rationalism under Hawke and Keating, the party still backslides on the successful model of regulated, free-market capitalism, occasionally giving off whiffs of protectionism and dabbling in corporate welfare. Parts of the party still represent the vestiges of that conservative working-class mindset that wants to filter the internet, that rejects compassion for refugees out of the fear of job-stealing hordes, and is suspicious of all-too-modern notions of marriage equality. The Labor Party is neither fully socially nor economically progressive.

The Greens set a squarely liberal tone on social and environmental issues, but has a proclivity for a retro, central-planning style economics. The Palmer United Party represents a person rather than an ideology, so is yet to be a serious political choice. So where is the party with both liberal social and economic policies?

Of course, the Liberal Party has always had its conservative wing. John Howard famously declared that he "was the most conservative leader the Liberal Party has ever had." However, even Menzies - who created the party and has been held out ever since as the conservative defender of an Australia that sees itself as an outpost of the British Empire - even he never described himself as a conservative, and was steeped instead in the British liberal tradition of John Stuart Mills and Jeremy Bentham.

But what does it mean to be a liberal? It means erring on the side of caution when considering how far government control should extend over the lives of its citizens. It promotes meritocracy and enterprise.

However, a liberal also understands that the provision of tax-funded public goods - infrastructure, education, health, and a social safety net for those who need it - is an investment not in society as some abstract concept but an investment into a vast collection of individuals. Being a liberal is about empowering the individual, but not at the expense of other individuals. It means desiring a market economy, but not a market society.

So where has this liberal Liberal Party gone, and what has Tony Abbott replaced it with? The Liberals are still full of hard-working parliamentarians who believe in a better Australia, so caustic one-liners like 'in the pocket of business' do not do the party justice. But increasingly it appears that the Liberals now stand for a conservatism that has deserted its long-standing allegiance to liberalism and equality of opportunity for all. It appears to have discarded the recognition that in order to empower those individuals who seek to succeed, you must put up with the unfortunate necessity of a few dole-bludgers.

Let us hope that the party can reclaim its own title. It is not too late. And the name helps. As David Marr once wrote, "it's just too confusing to tell people to despise liberals and vote Liberal." Time for the Liberals to put the liberal back into their own party.

Michael Cornish is a Visiting Lecturer at both the School of Economics and School of Social Sciences at the University of Adelaide.

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