

Politics in the 21st Century:
A Gulf between Two Nations

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The Author

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A lawyer by training, Rick Brown began his career in Papua New Guinea's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

He then spent ten years working for the Victorian branches of the Federated Clerks' Union, which included two years as the waterfront organizer, and then the Federated Ironworkers Association, which subsequently amalgamated with the Australian Workers Union, with which he was the Chemical Workers' Branch president and an advocate. In the late 1980s and 1990s he served as the director of a think tank, the Council for the National Interest, which identified medium and long-term domestic and international challenges facing Australia and was established by a group of eminent Australians including Sir Arvi Parbo, Peter Henderson, Sir Charles Court, Dame Leonie Kramer, Laurie Short and Bob Santamaria. He was the founding editor of a specialist quarterly journal, *Australia and World Affairs*.

In 1999, Rick became the Victorian director of the No Republic campaign. He personally devised the Vote No to the Politicians' Republic slogan; played a significant role in the development of the national strategy; edited the *No Case* papers which underpinned the strategy and secured an unexpected majority No vote in Victoria.

Between 2000 and 2002 he worked as an adviser to Russell Savage, one of the three, lower house Independent MPs who held sway during the first term of the Bracks Government in Victoria. In 2004, Rick joined the staff of Senator Nick Minchin and, after the election, joined Kevin Andrews' staff.

Rick and Stephen established their consultancy in 2009.

Rick was actively involved for many years in the affairs of the Anglican Church in Melbourne, serving on various committees including the committee responsible for identifying and short-listing candidates for the position of Archbishop of Melbourne on two occasions.



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In 1999, Australia conducted its largest taxpayer-funded focus group – the referendum on a republic.

Voting in the referendum was compulsory with 95.1 per cent of Australians eligible to vote doing so. In contrast the 2017 Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey for which voting was optional had a 79.5 per cent participation rate. The result of the republic referendum was a decisive 54.87 per cent 'No' vote.

Every state recorded a majority for 'No'. This decisive result could not be explained in terms of party loyalties or ideological terms such as 'Left' and 'Right'.

None of the major parties adopted an official position and analysis suggested that the results could be explained by where people lived. For example, in Victoria the four electorates with the highest yes votes were Kooyong and Higgins, both safe Liberal, and Melbourne and Melbourne Ports (now McNamara), then both safe Labor. In Queensland only two electorates voted yes — Ryan which was safe Liberal and Brisbane which was safe Labor.

A national analysis generated a similar picture. 42 of the then 148 electorates that voted 'Yes' were predominately in affluent, inner-metropolitan areas. The no voting electorates in outer suburban and regional Coalition seats and Labor seats showed a comparable pattern.

The 1999 referendum result was a harbinger of what was to come globally. Brexit, the rise of Donald Trump and the inability of the French establishment to suppress the 'gilets jaunes' (Yellow Vests) and Marine le Pen should not have come as a surprise.

In Australia, the results revealed the nature of the intellectual and political classes, who overwhelmingly inhabit the inner metropolitan suburbs. Also, they exposed a lack of awareness within the major political parties which could not accept that, in the post-communist world, Australia is two nations.

Consequently, almost a quarter of a century later, the 2022 federal election results form a bookend to that nationwide voter survey. Both Labor and the Coalition are confronted starkly now with an uncomfortable new political reality: a collapsing primary vote and an insurgence of Greens and various Independent MPs.

Two Nations and the 2004 federal elections

The Liberal Party's subsequent drafting of Australian Republican Movement leader, Malcolm Turnbull — who blamed John Howard for '*breaking the nation's heart*' on the referendum — was a manifestation of the élites' obstinacy.

Mr. Turnbull, who has made a substantial contribution to the philosophical quagmire the Liberals have built for themselves, did not want to see it.

One politician who did though, was a prescient Mark Latham. Even before he became the leader of the Federal Labor Party, he made the following observation:

'For the past decade, the Left has been debating globalisation as an economic event when, in fact, its main political impact has been cultural...'

'With the end of the Cold War, the effectiveness of this approach has expired. A starting point is to rethink the political'

spectrum, to move beyond notions of Left and Right...

'...it is possible to identify two distinctive political cultures in Australia. The powerful centre of our society, concentrated in the international heart of the major cities, talks a different language to suburban communities. In lifestyle and political values, they are poles apart.

'At the social centre, people tend to take a tourist's view of the world. They travel extensively, eat-out and buy-in domestic help. The cultural challenges of globalisation are seen as an opportunity, a chance to develop further one's identity and information skills...

'In the suburbs, the value set is more pragmatic. People do not readily accept the need for cultural change or the demands of identity politics. They lack the power and resources to distance themselves from neighbourhood problems. This has given them a resident's view of society. Questions of social responsibility and service delivery are all-important....

'These changes are recasting the electoral map. The key seats are now located well beyond the CBD, on the urban fringe and regional hinterland. In the 1999 Republic referendum... the further one moved away from the centre of the capital cities, the higher the proportion of No votes.

'(T)he conservative establishmentpurports to hold suburban values. Yet its members are unwilling to live or work in the suburbs themselves. It is another abstract ideology in search of substance.'¹

Mr. Howard managed these internal, philosophic contradictions by supporting conservative values on cultural issues, and by reducing the impact of free market policies on middle Australia through extensive financial support to families. These conflicting

values also have been reducing the Nationals to a rump, especially after they went along with economic rationalism and Mr. Howard's gun law changes in 1996.

The 2004 federal election was both a first test of Mr. Latham's theory on culture and of his and John Howard's ability to execute a political strategy in response.

As political commentator Paul Kelly observed at the beginning of 2004:

'Latham knows that repositioning Labor on social issues is a necessary step to office...

'This week Latham confronted Howard and sought to steal his social and family values position... It is about the struggle between Latham and Howard over values, a fight that Labor had previously declined to wage.'²

It was clear that the Coalition's strategy for the 2004 federal election needed to have a major focus on culture.

Labor's Re-invention

Back then, cultural contradictions were more of a problem for Labor. Since the rise of Gough Whitlam in the 1960s, it had morphed into a middle class, inner suburban party. Blue-collar membership³

'made up 46 per cent of the NSW ALP's membership in 1961. By 1981 the figure had fallen to 21 per cent. ... white-collar professionals, managers and administrators... share of membership of the NSW branch doubled in the two decades to 1981, from 14 to 30 per cent. The pattern in the Victorian Party was similar. The result was that by the late 1980s, 'a professional [was] more than three times as likely as a manual worker,

1. Menzies Lecture, King's College, London, 17 September 2002

2. 'Latham's Third Way', *The Australian*, 21st February, 2004

3. Tom Bramble and Rick Kuhn, *The Transformation of the Australian Labor Party* p.4

and five times more likely than a salesperson, personal service employee or clerk, to participate in the ALP's most basic structures.'

This transformation of the membership subsequently was reflected in the parliamentary party. The late John Button, a Hawke Government minister, demonstrated this by his comparison of the difference between the compositions of the 1978 federal parliamentary party and the first Hawke ministry, and the composition of the 1998 parliamentary party.⁴

Senator Graham Richardson's total capitulation to the Greens in 1990⁵; Labor premier Bob Carr's virtually shutting down most of the timber industry in New South Wales in the 1990s⁶; and in 2004, Queensland ALP state director Cameron Milner's call on Mr. Latham to sacrifice Tasmanian timber jobs in the pursuit of mainland, green votes;⁷ reflected this cultural takeover.

2004

On the other hand, Mr. Howard took a different path. A report on the 2004 federal election commissioned by the CFMEU's timber workers' division⁸ noted: *'At the start of the election campaign, Mr. Howard felt obliged to accept advice that he should appease the environment lobby because it was so overwhelming. He had a few concerns including the fact that he personally had signed Tasmania's Regional Forest Agreement and the impact of his decision on timber workers and their communities.'*

4. 'Beyond Belief: What Future for Labor?' *Quarterly Essay 6*, 2002, pp.1-5

5. 'Don't fall for the green fallacies', *The Australian*, 19th March, 2004

6. See, for example, 'Forests lock-up has left us a time bomb', *The Land*, Peter Austin, 21st November, 2019

However, a campaign coordinated by the timber industry persuaded him to ignore the advice coming from his office and from the Liberal Party's pollster, and to honour the regional forest agreements.

As a result, in the last week of the campaign, Mr. Howard addressed a nationally-reported, 1000-strong timber industry meeting in Launceston and won over the votes of people such as timber worker Ken Hall who said:

*'I have come to believe that Howard is the best leader to represent the timber workers of Tasmania. And that's a pretty big mouthful coming from a lifelong Labor supporter who first voted for Arthur Calwell in 1966 and has voted for every Labor leader in every election since then...'*⁹

Despite Mr. Latham's understanding of the electorate, in the critical last days of the 2004 campaign he made a judgment call that went against his best political instincts.

On other issues, he remained better attuned. In February, 2004 Mr. Latham said that marriage was the union of a man and a woman for life to the exclusion of all others. The Coalition responded by introducing legislation to amend the *Family Law Act* to incorporate his definition of marriage.

The need to support the legislation split the Labor caucus. Mr. Albanese and several other front benchers argued that Labor had gone too far in pandering to a group of Christians who were unlikely to vote for Labor, at the

7. 'Labor must take the Green initiative' *The Australian*, 17th March, 2004

8. *The Brompton Report*, 2005, p. 13

9. 'Latham betrays workers', *The Australian*, 8th October, 2004, p.15

expense of the gay and lesbian community which supported Labor.¹⁰

Significantly, subsequent Labor leaders. Kim Beasley, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard maintained Mr. Latham's position of opposing same sex marriage until 2011.

This fracas within Labor reinforced to voters in the outer suburbs and regions that Labor lived in a different world from them, and helped consolidate conservative voters behind the Coalition.

Labor and the Greens were not the only challenges facing the Coalition. There also was the forerunner of the 'teal' candidates, Liberals for Forests.

However, unlike today, the Coalition did not adopt an appeasement approach. Inner metropolitan Liberal voters who were unhappy with the Coalition's environment policies, were made aware that a vote for the Greens was a vote for their economic policies and their radical drug policy. This policy was exposed in the first week of the election campaign.¹¹ It derailed the Greens and contributed to their poor result.

The 2004 federal elections were probably John Howard's greatest electoral victory. The Coalition increased its majority and, in Queensland, it won four of the six Senate positions, giving a government

a Senate majority for the first time in decades.

Labor lost five seats, after losing three in 2001. Political scientist, Associate Professor Paul Williams, pointed out that its primary vote was its lowest since 1931 and arguably the lowest since 1906.¹² Liberals for Forests flopped and, as *Age* columnist Shaun Carney wrote, the results were disastrous for the Greens.¹³

Labor and the political commentariat attempted to put the results down to Mr. Latham's inexperience and an interest rate scare campaign.¹⁴

However, long-time Labor Party pollster Rod Cameron saw it differently:

*'Most experienced observers — from both sides of politics — expected John Howard to be returned, but narrowly, with most tipping a small net gain in seats and votes for Labor. That this did not happen was a big surprise to the campaign professionals on both sides... Howard won because of economic management perceptions and he increased his majority because of Labor's politically suicidal Tasmanian forestry policy.'*¹⁵

It should be recalled that, as recently as 1993, Labor had won as many provincial and rural seats as it did outer-metropolitan seats. However, in 2004 Labor won 14 of the 63 provincial and rural seats and 19 of the 46 outer metropolitan seats.

10. 'Gay marriage splits Labor', *The Australian*, Patricia Karvelas, 10th August, 2002, p.2

11 'Greens back illegal drugs', *Herald Sun*, Gerard McManus, 31st August, 2004, p.1

12. The 2004 federal election: why Labor failed, *Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 5, p.4

13. 'Latham must learn the Greens are no friend of Labor' *The Age*, 20th October, 2004

14. 'We learnt the hard way: failure to kill rates scare campaign cost us poll — ALP chief', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11th November, 2004

15. 'Anatomy of a Labor train crash', *The Age*, 15th October, 2004, p. 15

Political commentator Professor Peter van Onselen and management consultant Dr. Phil Senior concluded: *'Labor can't (win back regional seats) while the party is controlled by the inner-city latte set...(I)t has lost touch with its working-class roots in the bush as well as outer-metropolitan areas. Its grubby preference deal with the Greens was the culmination of this transformation. Selling out forestry workers to win over inner-city greens not only lost Labor seats in Tasmania, but respect across provincial and rural Australia.'*¹⁶

The Political Class

Again, this was not the message the élites and the political class wanted to hear or had expected, as Mr. Cameron pointed out. They remained unrepentant in their determination to impose their values on what they view as the unenlightened masses.

They resent the democratic process and reflect the arrogance of the élites described by an American historian the late Professor Christopher Lasch:

*'The culture wars that have convulsed America since the sixties are best understood as a form of class warfare, in which an enlightened elite (as it thinks of itself) seeks not so much to impose its values on the majority (a majority perceived as incorrigibly racist, sexist, provincial, and xenophobic), much less persuade the majority by means of rational public debate, as to create parallel or "alternative" institutions in which it will no longer be necessary to confront the unenlightened at all.'*¹⁷

Mr. Latham's analysis was right. For the

16. 'Labor's hopes rest on seats in the bush', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13th December, 2004.

See also Dr. Nick Economou, 'Faultlines and Failures', *After the Deluge? Rebuilding Labor and a Progressive Movement* (Blue Book No. 9, 2004), p.BB8

Liberals, suburban values were another abstract ideology in search of substance. Everybody continued on and nobody lost their job. The Liberals' political class continued to put its inner suburban values ahead of both the Party's interests and the people they say they represent.

The Coalition has not hammered home the cultural advantage it had gained. Instead, it has taken the same direction as Labor and today it is paying the price.

Meanwhile, the Greens are well-advanced in their long march to be the party of the inner metropolitan suburbs. This is at the expense of Liberal and Labor, which have not done to the Greens what they did to Pauline Hanson - both put her party last on ballot papers.

The Philosophical Divide

In 2004, political commentator Paul Kelly observed:¹⁸

'The conundrum is obvious: the chasm between party sentiment and public sentiment. The ALP is unrepresentative of the community. The more Latham concedes to the party, the more he weakens his hand in the electorate.'

The origins of the cultural transformation Mr. Latham described require an understanding of the philosophic contest between liberalism and conservatism which has ebbed and flowed since the days of the French Revolution and America's declaration of independence. It took 200 years for

17. 'Introduction, *Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1995), pp. 20-21

18. 'Latham: the power of image', *The Weekend Australian*, 31st January, 2004

liberalism to dominate conservatism culturally in Anglo-Saxon and, to a lesser degree, western European countries. Its ascendancy was heralded by the cultural revolution of the 1960s.

One example of this ascendancy in Australia is the employers' successful assault on the concept of the basic wage beginning in 1964, the outcome of which was foreseeable and foreseen.¹⁹ Its effect was to undermine the family unit.

Another was removing in 1975 the concept of fault from Australia's divorce law and transforming marriage from a permanent relationship into what has been described as serial monogamy. Supporters of this change saw the family unit as an instrument for the suppression of women, and a barrier to personal freedom and self-fulfillment.

'Card-carrying member of the protest generation' and Australia Institute founder Dr. Clive Hamilton,

*'was convinced that the lifting of the suffocating constraints on sexual expression would be a source of liberation... We thought we were creating a new society and we knew our opponents were being defeated. The conservative establishment lost cause after cause...'*²⁰

Coalition's Reprieve

Given the incompatibility of conservatism and liberalism why did it take so long for the ascendancy

of philosophical liberalism to extract a political price?

One response is that, from the end of World War 2 to the 1990s, politics in Australia, and the Western world generally, was viewed through the prism of communism, socialism and the extent to which it is necessary for the State to intervene in the economy. For example, in 1967, twelve months after his retirement Sir Robert Menzies wrote that *'the great issue to which Liberalism must direct itself is Socialism'*.²¹

By the time the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989, Marxism as an economic theory was discredited. For example, the Labor Party had watered down the socialist objective in its Party platform in 1981.

For the Liberals, however, the focus on socialism diverted attention away from the fundamental incompatibility of conservatism with liberalism.

Two things aided the delay of the day of reckoning for the Liberals: Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser's rejection of the liberal agenda of his treasurer John Howard and the Queensland National Party Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's carrying his fight against the Liberals to Canberra.

As for Labor, the Left always had provided the Party's ideological rudder. Its acquiescence to economic liberalism destroyed that rudder. In 2008, Wran Government education minister Rod

human life, marry, bring up a family with some small degree of comfort. The minimum wage, on the other hand, reflects the needs of an individual worker.'

20. *Can Porn Set Us Free?*, speech to Sydney Writers Festival, 2003.

21. *Afternoon Light* (Melbourne, Cassell Australia, 1967), pp. 294-295

19. See, for example, T. J. Kearney, 'Some implications of the 1966 National Wage Decisions', *The Journal of Industrial Relations*, Volume 8, No. 3, pp.221-232. *'The concept of the basic wage had been part of the industrial landscape since 1905 and was embedded in Australian law by Mr. Justice Higgins in the Harvester Case. The basic wage was designed to enable every worker, however humble, to lead a*

Cavalier told a NSW Fabian Society Forum that one could not be a left-winger and not pursue the socialist objective and that being humanitarian did not make one a left-winger.²²

It seems counter-intuitive that economic rationalism would penetrate the walls of Labor. This development demonstrates that the real winner of the 1960s' revolution has been corporate capitalism.

As Dr. Hamilton observed, *'(T)he counter-culture tore down the social structures of conservatism that, for all their stultifying oppressiveness, held the market in check...but it is now evident that demolition of the customary social structures did not create a society of free individuals. Instead, it created an opportunity for the marketers to substitute material consumption and manufactured lifestyles for the influences of social tradition... The women's movement attacked the social and family conventions that kept women in the kitchen. ... but it also conditioned the labour market to operate on the assumption that workers had family responsibilities. ... When workers demanded a 'living wage that could sustain a married man and his wife and children, the moral argument had wide appeal...*

*'Equality is good for the market. It has meant a growing and better qualified workforce; it has destroyed old-fashioned ideas that employers need to pay enough to support a family; it has helped turn nurturing households into nodes of consumption; it has hastened the development of lifestyle thinking.'*²³

Traditional Labor is conservative. Its instincts and values are at odds with Labor's current ruling class. A takeover by economic liberalism has taken a

political toll. In 1998, then Deputy Leader Gareth Evans admitted that: *'I think we are now all acutely aware that the government almost certainly got ahead of the wider community.... Jobs were no longer for life or secure. ...The rise of service industries at the expense of the smokestacks may have created a more fluid and flexible workplace, but one affecting working hours and family responsibilities. Agribusiness pressures and the closure of family farms put many rural communities under stress.*

'...Upper income groups by and large did well in Australia ... enjoying high quality access not only to continuing substantial incomes, but to information technology and communications services; to leisure amenities, entertaining and travel; and indeed to the political system.

*'... For lower income groups it was a different story: wage incomes grew slowly, and even with an array of new government social wage payments which in fact did make lower income earners better off, both absolutely and relatively, they found it difficult to think of themselves as better off. And they could never match the access of the upper income groups to information technology, to leisure services, to the political system – or even to some aspects of consumer society.'*²⁴

Yet, while Labor has known since 1998 that economic liberalism contained the seeds of its political heartache, it still has the Hawke/Keating era on a pedestal.

As with the Liberals, the loyalty of Labor's political class to the cultural values of their social set has outweighed the interests of the people they purported to represent and the political interests of their party. To quote Mr. Cavalier,

22. Guy Beres, *NSW Fabian Forum: What happened to the Left*, 18th September, 2008

23. *Can Porn set Us Free?*

24. Introduction to Chapter 1 of the ALP's Draft National Platform, 19th January, 1998

*'The political class is a coterie.... divisions are not about ideas or ideology. The factions have become executive placement agencies, disputes between them become serious only when they cannot agree on a placement. They are effectively united for themselves against the world.'*²⁵

The Political Price

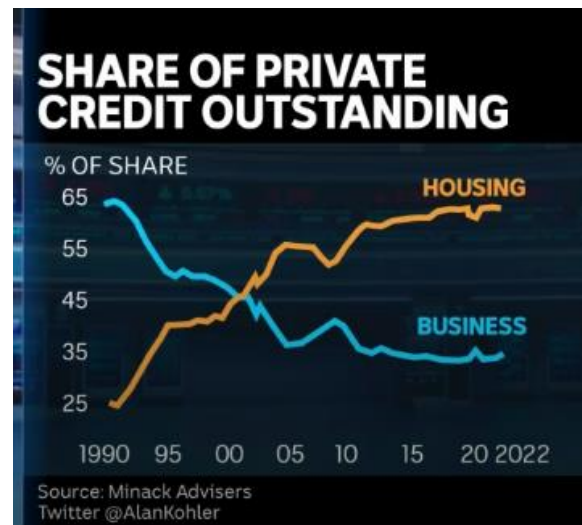
Many would argue that Labor has not recovered from its lost legacy of a commitment to the working class. Certainly it has won elections at the state level and it won the 2022 federal election barely, with a first preference vote in the House of Representatives of 32.6 per cent and in the Senate of 30.1 per cent.

What has Labor's dumping of its traditional supporters by succumbing to liberalism, and the Left's substituting 'gesture politics' – as Mr Cavalier would describe it – done for the Labor Party?

Labor, now an inner metropolitan, middle class party, has alienated itself from its original base which it still needs to get hold of the ministerial limousines. It also has lowered its defences against the Greens, a development of which it should have been aware since 2007.²⁶

As for the consequences for the people Labor claims to represent, the following charts²⁷ produced by financial commentator Alan Kohler provide the conclusion of Mr. Evans' story. They show the housing prices and borrowings and the banks' lending

profile since Paul Keating's deregulation agenda which John Howard supported. While the median buffer for mortgage



payments for home borrowers is 21 months, Mr. Kohler points out that the median is meaningless because 2½ million families are in the 25th percentile and do not have a buffer.

Mr. Kohler thinks that the next housing downturn will be more severe than previous downturns because of the level of debt, an assessment consistent with the analysis of CoreLogic, Australia's largest, independent provider of property data and analytics.²⁸

Banks have transformed themselves from being lenders to business, which Mr. Kohler points out employs people and creates wealth, to lenders to housing which does not, but which is safer and more profitable.

25. 'Could Chifley Win Pre-selection today?', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21st April, 2005

26. See, for example, *Profile of the 2007 Australian Election*, Australian Development Strategies Pty. Ltd., 2008

27. Kohler Report, *ABC TV News*, 5th July, 2022

28. 'the rate of decline in home values is comparable with the onset of the global financial crisis (GFC) in 2008, and the sharp downswing of the early 1980s', Hedonic Home Value Index, 1st August, 2022

Turning to profits, the Commonwealth Bank celebrated its 25th year as a public company in 2016. It said that it had delivered a total shareholder return of 9500 per cent and achieved average annual dividend growth of 10 per cent.



Fast forward five years to the 21st May last year. On that day, 18 CBA shares were worth \$1780 — a gain of more than 1700 per cent since listing in 1991. On the other hand, over the same period the S&P/ASX 200 index increased by 325 per cent and the price of a median Sydney house increased 11-fold.²⁹

Broad Church

29. 'Why Carol is laughing all the way to the bank', Duncan Hughes, *Australian Financial Review*, 21st May, 2021.

30. 1990 Alfred Deakin Lecture

While the Liberals appeared to be unaffected by the changing philosophical challenge in the 1990s, there were tensions following the federal defeats in 1990, and particularly in 1993 when John Hewson's liberal, economic agenda turned victory into defeat.

Party leaders were conscious that the end of communism threatened to expose internal, philosophical differences and render the Liberals irrelevant as a political entity.

A rationale was needed to avoid doing what Sir Robert Menzies did in the 1940s when the United Australia Party had run its race — start again.

In one approach, former NSW premier Nick Greiner argued in 1990 that:

it was a post-ideological age; modern Liberalism (i.e. the Liberal Party) needed to be practical, empirical and anti-ideological; and

ironically, Liberalism must be concerned with the re-design and reconstruction of any of Australia's institutions which are outdated, outmoded or not working in the public interest.³⁰

Another approach sought to: erase any suggestion of a connection between the Liberal Party and conservatism, and rebrand Sir Robert Menzies as a philosophical liberal.

Both propositions failed the pub test.

John Howard provided a solution by promoting the concept of a broad church: liberalism and conservatism could co-exist.³¹

31. 'The Liberal Party is a broad church. You sometimes have to get the builders in to put in the extra pew on both sides of

Professor Gregory Melleuish observed:
*'This formulation was vague enough to encompass a range of political positions, even if they were at odds with one another. 'The "broad church" ideal had a simple goal — ensure that all Liberals were inside the tent and shared a common outlook.'*³²

Mr. Howard achieved his goal. The Liberals federally remained inside the tent until after he retired. However, they demonstrated Professor Lasch's contention that *'the defence of conservative values, it appears, cannot be entrusted to conservatives'*.³³

Since Mr. Howard's retirement nobody has had the authority and the capability to hold this philosophical façade together, and so it has unravelled as the social toll of economic liberalism has eroded the last vestige of conservative values.

What Now?

Antony Green, a psephologist and elections commentator, has noted that the combined first preference vote for the Coalition and Labor in the House of Representatives at the 2022 federal election at 68.3 per cent was the lowest for the major parties since the development of two-party politics in Australia in 1910.

This raises a number of questions: What does the political class do now that it seems to matter that voters are rebelling against the fact that the major

the aisle to make sure that everybody is accommodated.... We are, of course, the custodian of the classical liberal tradition within our society.... We are also the custodians of the conservative tradition in our community... the Liberal Party it is at its best when it balances and blends those two traditions.' Launch of *The Conservative*, 8th September, 2005.

parties think that they can be different things to different people?

Does it matter that voters in the outer suburbs and regions believe that neither of the major parties shares their priorities, or understands their aspirations and the grind of daily life?

If values are not important to people in the outer suburbs and the regions, why do they resent the political class's delivering to the inner suburbs the policies and values they want, and thinking that they only have to bribe the outer suburbs and regions?

In 1989 two American scholars, Bill Galston and Elaine Kamarck conducted an analysis of the Democrats' poor performances in presidential elections over the preceding 20 years. It made a significant contribution to the success of the Democrats during the Clinton era in the 1990s.

This year they repeated the exercise. One 'myth' that they addressed is that economics trumps culture:

'The Democratic party has viewed itself as the party of working-class and middle-class voters who would be bound to the party by economic and material benefits...

'Too many Democrats believe that economic issues are the 'real' issues, and that cultural issues are mostly diversions...For many Americans across the political spectrum, social, cultural and religious issues are real and — in many cases — more important to them than economic considerations ...Economic circumstances do not determine views on

32. 'The fractured Liberals need a new brand — their broad church is no longer working', *The Conversation*, 15th August, 2018

33. 'Conservatism Against Itself', *First Things*, Institute on Religion and Public Life, April, 1990

guns, abortion, or religion, and attitudes toward immigration reflect deep-seated beliefs about ethnicity and national identity...'

*'The myth of economic determinism... leads too many Democrats to believe that showering Americans with public resources is the surest path to victory. This is true in some circumstances but not others.'*³⁴

In Australia it seems the Coalition and the Labor Party believe that too.

Liberalism and Conservatism

The proposition that economics does not override culture is critical for philosophic liberals who claim to be conservatives.

Mr. Howard's proposition that liberalism and conservatism can co-exist depend on their concept of conservatism. He contended that Liberals carried:

*'the Burkean tradition of conservatism within our ranks. We believe that if institutions have demonstrably failed, they ought to be changed or reformed. But we don't believe in getting rid of institutions just for the sake of change.'*³⁵

Edmund Burke, an 18th century statesman, is considered to be the founder of conservatism. However, Mr. Burke's focus extended beyond organisational structures.

For him, the group is the foundation of society — as reflected in these propositions:³⁶

'To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the

series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind';

'We begin our public affections in our families. No cold relation is a zealous citizen. We pass on to our neighbourhoods, and our habitual provincial connexions'; and Society 'becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born'.

On the other hand, the founder of liberalism, Jean Jacques Rousseau, who was the intellectual force behind the French Revolution and a significant intellectual influence on the American Revolution believed that *'Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains'*.³⁷

The chains are imposed by Mr. Burke's little platoons, civilisation itself, property, organised religion and anything that corrupts the individual's natural state:

*'The fundamental principle of all morality, upon which I have reasoned in all my writings and which I developed with all the clarity of which I am capable is that man is a being who is naturally good, loving justice and order; that there is no original perversity in the human heart, and the first movements of nature are always good.'*³⁸

For M. Rousseau feelings were pure. Feelings inform the conscience and conscience determines morality. Truth is subjective. There are no absolutes.

Also, there are no social structures. To quote former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher who is lauded as a

34. *The New Politics of Evasion*, Progressive Policy Institute, February, 2022, p.8

35. Launch of *The Conservative*

36. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790, paragraphs 75, 331 and 165 respectively.

37. *On the Social Contract*, Book 1, 1762, p1

38. *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue* (Cornell University 1986), Carol Blum, p. 103.

conservative, 'There is no such thing as society'.³⁹

Individualism has been modified and transformed through subsequent generations. Today, in the culture of the self-appointed élites, M. Rousseau's legacy is a culture based on feelings to which facts must give way.

Self-identity is a result of this evolution and, with it, the ability to assert that there are seventy-four genders and that children as young as eight years old could experience a gender crisis.⁴⁰

Challenges

The Liberals are compromised in attempting to respond to this latest manifestation of liberalism, because of their either straddling the gulf between liberalism and conservatism or choosing liberalism over conservatism when forced to make a choice.

This is evident around 'gender', religious freedom and freedom of speech issues. For example, in June this year the International Swimming Union effectively banned transgender swimmers from competing in women's events.

The Liberals were compromised on this issue already. Their loud — though somewhat inconsistent — support of such a ban during the election campaign was undermined by the fact that, in 2019, during a Coalition administration, the Australian Sports Commission was in the forefront of

urging the participation of transgender people in competitive sport.⁴¹

Then there is the recent matter of 'birthing mothers'.

Medicare was set to change a consent form to add a baby to a Medicare card to use the term 'birthing parent' instead of 'mother'. After a social media outcry,⁴² a Labor minister, Government Services minister, Bill Shorten put a stop to this frolic, pointing out that he was reversing an initiative of the previous Coalition government.

This led *Herald Sun* columnist Rita Panahi⁴³ to say (presumably to the surprise of Coalition supporters):

'Bravo, Bill. It says something about how hopeless the faux conservatives in the previous government were that it took a Labor minister to tell the woke bureaucracy and trans lobby to take a hike.'

Add religious freedom to the Liberal Party's challenges. American church historian, Professor Carl Trueman, has posited that:

*'the idea that religious freedom is a social good is not simply increasingly implausible, it is also increasingly distasteful, disturbing and undesirable.'*⁴⁴

When the Coalition introduced its religious discrimination legislation in 2021, it deliberately avoided the issue which was the catalyst for the legislation — Australian Rugby Union's sacking of Israel Folau for expressing his religious beliefs.

39. Interview for *Woman's Own*, 23rd September, 1987

40. 'What are the 72 other genders?', Dr. Shaziya Allarakha, *MedicineNet*, 2nd February, 2022

41. National guidelines for the inclusion of transgender and gender diverse people in sport, SportAus, June 2019

42. See Sal Grover@saltweets, 19th July, 2022

43. 'Scrapping birth parenting form is a victory for sanity, biological reality and the silent majority', *Herald Sun*, 22nd July, 2020

44 *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois, 2020), p.400

However, it is an issue that may not go away. In February this year a Muslim player in the AFL women's competition refused to play in a round in which her team was required to wear a Pride guernsey. In July seven rugby league players took a similar action.

Then in October an AFL club forced its CEO to resign 24 hours after appointing him because of his Christian beliefs.

Again, the Coalition is compromised on an issue which has been a cultural cornerstone of Western society for generations and which, not surprisingly resonates in the outer suburbs.

Another challenge for liberals is freedom of speech, which often seems to be conflated with expression of religious beliefs.

Professor Trueman observes:

*'In a world in which the self is constructed psychologically and in which the therapeutic is the ethical standard...the notion of assault becomes psychological... In such a context, freedom of speech becomes not so much part of the solution as part of the problem.'*⁴⁵

Cultural Conservatism

Professor Lasch's concept of cultural conservatism also presents a challenge for the Liberals. In the 1980s, he developed an understanding of cultural conservatism and concluded that:

'the essence of cultural conservatism is a certain respect for limits. The central conservative insight is that human freedom is constrained by the natural conditions of human life, by the weight of history, by the fallibility of human judgment and by the perversity of the human will'; and

*'it is clearly incompatible with modern capitalism or with the liberal ideology of unlimited economic growth.'*⁴⁶

For 19th century liberals, the family was merely a tool. Professor Lasch says:

'The obligation to support a wife and children, in their view, would discipline possessive individualism.... In the long run, of course, this attempt to build up the family as a counterweight to the acquisitive spirit was a lost cause.'

He also observed that:

'Capitalism's relentless erosion of proprietary institutions furnishes the clearest evidence of its incompatibility with anything that deserves the name of cultural conservatism....'

'Twentieth-century capitalism, however, has replaced private property with a corporate form of property...'

*'Even the "family wage", the last attempt to safeguard the independence of the producing classes, has gone the way of the family business and the family farm.'*⁴⁷

After its 2022 federal election result, the Liberal Party seems to be in a state of denial about how bad are both its electoral and cultural prospects. The assault on the values the Liberal Party once held dear, such as freedom of religion, shows no sign of abating and the Liberals seem unable to respond.

The Coalition, as a whole, holds 58 out of 151 lower house seats. Many Liberals have argued that the path back to power is through the 'Teal' seats that were lost, thereby ignoring the outer suburbs where there were swings against them as large or larger than the swings against them in the inner suburbs. Even if the Liberals were to regain every one of the seats that they lost to the Teals, that would get the

45. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, p.326.

46. *Conservatism Against Itself*
47. *Conservatism Against Itself*

Coalition to just 64 seats, still twelve seats short of government.

Whether the Liberals' future is best ensured by continuing to offer policies pitched to the élite, inner metropolitan suburbs and ignoring the contradictions between the values of the liberal inner suburbs and the conservative outer suburbs and regions, is the issue that they have to decide.