Labels—an easy way to discredit but they count

WHEN, recently on a national television program, I was described for the umpteenth irritating time as "right-wing," a silly poem came to mind. It concerned a drunk, who found himself keeping the company of a pig in a gutter, and ended... "You can tell a man who drinks by the company he keeps, and the pig arose and slowly walked away."

I believe the confusion that surrounds the position of free or liberal society in a hierarchy of political ideas is deliberately encouraged by those who, for whatever reason, want more government. Whether fairly or not, people and their causes are judged by the company they keep. An unreasonable but effective means of damning arguments that are difficult to comprehend by giving them labels that imply that they keep the company of discredited arguments—even not quite nice arguments.

Like many another I find I must give a good deal of effort to denying other people's labels, or even saying what liberals are. Philosophical liberals are not conservatives (how do you avoid them?) nor socialists (no right wing, if right wing indicates a preference for the statist/corporalitist methods of Fascist Italy and are not advocates of complete laissez faire. They are not necessarily members of the Liberal Party which in government proved to be quite liberal.

Whatever "right wing" and "left wing" once meant the terms are now no more than vague labels emotively associated with objectionable political regimes. The very vagueness makes them eminently suitable for damnation by association.

Was the German National Socialist Party (a Nazi Party) a right wing or left wing government? Was Stalin right or left? The important distinctions group these two regimes. They are both despotic regimes which allowed their people little freedom.

Both closely controlled their people directing the nation's human and physical resources to do so both found it necessary to curtail free speech and free association and the rule of law. Dominant ownership of capital was irrelevant; in both cases government controlled it and controlled people's serve ever more vague labels emotively by government.

Both were Stalinist and it was their status that made them objectionable and dangerous. Classification from left to right does not advance our understanding of political regimes at best we find political regimes according to the ownership of capital saying nothing about state control of both capital and people.

A more relevant classification is that of economic liberalism, distinguishing governments and philosophies by whether choice is exercised by government for people or by individuals on their behalf.

This classification distinguishes the controlled society on the one hand from the free society on the other. It gives us more helpful labels to guide our hopes and prejudices. On this scale, a conservative, if a conservative be one who is wary of change, is to be found somewhere near to a socialist; the main distinguishing feature being which vested interests are protected from the need to chance to accommodate changing times.

Generally, socialists are most closely allied to labour unions, and conservatives to organised capital and big business companies or industry lobbies, but the distinction is blurred.

"Small L" has come to mean modestness or interest in particular issues including the environment, women's equality and freedom of information legislation while "large L" means conservative.

I and most who want a market economy and smaller government yield to no one in advocacy of the desirability of protecting natural or man made wonders, or in attacking laws and practices which discriminate unfairly against women, and we have been consistent in our defence of the free flow of information. We don't however share the socialists' faith in government power or willingness to put these matters right.

Governments have on the whole made it more difficult to get damages from polluters; governments have so limited property rights that individuals do not have the best possible property interest in preserving the beautiful or remarkable; it is governments who most indiscriminately injure the waterways, air and countryside and governments who still give women inferior property rights and still pamper tax laws that discriminate against one-income families, and governments that are most secretive.

A most damaging but falacious attack on the market economy is that it can't care about the needy. Controls protect vested interests.

There is nothing wrong with vested interests but everything wrong with governments that pander to them.

It is no accident that it is the most controlled nations that have the widest disparity between highest and lowest incomes. The inflation always manipulates government.