

**\*NEW\* Article for The  
Australian 4/12/88**

**The Liberals' 'Future  
Directions'**

*John Hyde*

John Howard's (since it seems to be a Howard document) 'Future Directions' statement is the surest sign so far that the Coalition is pulling itself together---that it is recovering from the loss of direction caused by the Joh-for-Canberra push and the loss of confidence caused by the consequent electoral debacle.

'Future Directions' implies overdue recognition that ideas have inspirational authority and that they are an alternative to messianic leadership, which the Liberals do not have and are unlikely to find. It is a serious and much needed attempt to rally the Coalition parties by giving them something to believe in. It also lays down a philosophical position that should guide the Coalition in government and tell voters what they really need to know, namely the general direction that a future coalition government will follow. Its believability is vital; its detail is not.

It makes concessions to political reality, particularly the reality of a coalition. It is thus not a perfectly consistent statement of the liberal/conservative values and the policies that flow from them. For instance it promises to pick winners in the arts, sport, science and rural communities in ways that should warm the hearts of socialists. Nevertheless, there can be no reasonable doubt that Howard intends a more Liberal Australia---an Australia in which Australians will be rewarded more for what they contribute and less for who they are; an Australia in which status counts for less than performance; an Australia in which the ACTU executive, members of the Melbourne club, Croations, Greeks, Aboriginals, miners and textile workers are but Australians with equal opportunities.

Howard promises us an end to the practice of building up false expectations and making U-turns away from them. Public recognition of the danger of promising too much is an important step toward credible campaigning in due course. Governments cannot create utopias and they can only favour

some interests at the expense of others. Oppositions should not, therefore, open their mouths too wide nor try to be too specific about the unknowable future.

The new-found humility is probably a leaf taken from Thatcher's book. Lately, Thatcher has promised little that is specific but has remained true to her most general promise of a more liberal Britain. When she did make specific promises to vested interests, such as her promise to implement the Clegg Commission recommendations for civil service pay, the promises subsequently got her government into trouble. In fact, a criticism that may fairly be made of this Howard document is that, although it does not attempt the impossible detail of the last election campaign, it is too specific. It recognises that if the government, with all of the civil service resources, cannot----indeed should not----lay down a specific tax policy for next year, an opposition cannot responsibly define one for the year after. That line of reasoning should have been extended to other areas as well. One of the important reasons that Mr Whitlam governed as badly as he did was that he came to office with policies which taken together were unworkable. Whereas, one of the reasons that Mr Hawke has governed as well as he has is that Hawke used the excuse of the budget blow-out to break most of his policy promises.

Howard, and the Coalition policy committees have backed the liberal/conservative rhetoric with more than enough specific policy to convince me that at this stage they intend to face up to the hard choices the rhetoric implies. The Coalition is promising to reduce the monopoly power of trade unions, raise educational standards, reduce tariffs and regulation, privatise, and return responsibility to the family. These policies, if implemented, would take Australians away from existing practice in a consistently liberal direction. Of the real world one should expect little more. The specifics offered are practical and cautious. They are mostly too cautious to produce ideal results but the art of political leadership is that of winning public support, not for utopias, but for the next safe step in the chosen direction. I remain cynical about the influence of the Save-Our-Seats Brigade in the party room----Nats who will not privatise the Wheat Board and Liberals who will exempt one industry, gold, from tax, for instance----but, as I say, at this stage the intentions are good.

The extent of the change in political style that Howard is proposing should not be underestimated. Nor should the political risks he is running. A philosophy that treats Australians as equals is necessarily one that withdraws privileges from favoured groups. Disappointed monopolists, for instance those which face privatisation, will squeal like stuck pigs. And they will try to take political action that is more substantial than discordant noise. They may succeed in stirring up dissident elements within the already disunited Liberal party and they may rally to the Labor Party.

As governments go the present government has not done too badly. If it does not panic, as the Fraser Government panicked

in its last year, historians should write well of it, but the current account deficit has knocked the wheels of its cart. If the Liberals can forget their petty squabbling, then they can expect to govern. If they can find some inspiration from the general thrust of 'Future Directions', if not from all of its excessive detail, they may hang together as a political party should. Consistency may then enable them to govern well.

ENDS