

A LIBERAL LIBERAL PARTY

John Hyde

I don't think John Howard is going to win on Saturday week but he deserves to. Under his leadership the Liberal Party has been changed from a party which stood for the narrowly held goals of a thousand and one privileged groups into a party for common goals and those without privilege. The Liberal Party has thus become the common man's party. It has shown itself prepared, in spite of political cost, to defend John Doe against big government, big monopolies and big unions. This change is huge, fundamental and largely unremarked.

I am prepared to admit that examples of backsliding are plentiful and obvious: I must. I must also admit that not everyone in the Liberal Party accepts Mr Howard's philosophy. Nevertheless any objective observer can now see a Liberal Party basically opposed privilege in all its forms. It has returned after long absence to this central tenet of classical liberalism. (I am not in the least impressed by attempts by the 'wets' to hijack the term, 'liberal'.)

The Western District and the Melbourne Club no longer control the Liberal Party; neither can protected industry, farmers and other centers of privilege such as the arts and sports any longer write party policy. The Liberals are less paternalistic and much more humble---they no longer believe in an all wise, all knowing, incorruptable cabinet, even of themselves. Industry is expected to stand on its own feet, individual workers are to be trusted to pick their own unions or no union at all, and families are again seen as the prime source of moral values. De facto, the Liberal Party has severed its connections with the elites in business, unions, education, and culture by declining to employ taxation and unequal laws on behalf of them. The elites are not happy.

They say John Howard, can't manage, has no presence, even that his approach to politics is not honest. They lie; they dislike him because they fear that he may succeed in turning Australia into a nation where privilege has no place---where effort is rewarded, merit advances, where what you do and how well you do it matters but who you are (status) is unimportant. Where being boss of BHP, the ACTU, or Heaven forbid! even a Yarts Council gives you no power to extract Dane Geld from a government which rightly represents the little people. Whatever his shortcomings as a salesman and an administrative organiser Howard is better than the Liberal Party or Australia deserves and I fear we are too dopey to see it.

Whatever it once was, Labor is now the party of privilege, of power brokers and utopians. It is also now the party of good taste and bad manners---as exemplified by the treasurer.

Labor leadership is unashamedly elitist. Its senior members are educated, able, wealthy and cultured. They have enjoyed high status positions in unions, the civil service and educational establishments. But not for many years have many of them traded with customers who can't be told what to do and therefore must be satisfied. They have had little experience of being at the bottom of a pecking order or of voluntary market exchange to which status is just not relevant.

Members of the government are talking almost exclusively to the wealthy and powerful representatives of industry, labour, welfare, education, the arts and so on---people with status among their own kind. Representatives of those vested interests which can organise are being given access to the government and thus their interests become the privileged interests. Those who cannot organise---consumers, the unemployed, the really poor and those whose businesses are too small to afford a trip to Canberra---find their separate voices drowned in the clamour of the educated and articulate directors of this and secretaries and presidents of that. Inevitably Labor is governing for the status holders themselves, and for the interests represented by them.

When this government talks about an industrial agreement it does not mean agreement between Bill Smith of Smith & Son and Jo Italiano of the chaps in the foundry. In Labor's scheme of things they have no status, they will not even be directly consulted by the people who claim to act for them. The negotiators will be elites, who are employed by elites, who were elected by elites, who were elected by lesser elites, who at some stage removed were elected by the rank and file. From ACTU officials down they are silvertails with political skills but who do not know the real world they claim to speak for.

They talk of consensus but their consensus will be reached by super-people who have super-intellecets and super-lawyers but who know very little about Bill Smith and Jo Italiano. It would be fortuitous indeed if one of them had ever poured hot metal. Even worse, their agreements will bind not only Smith and Italiano but owners and workers in foundries and non foundries from Perth to Townsville.

John Howard has at least temporarily wrested the Liberal Party from control by people whose approach to the business of government is rather like that of the present Labor Party---which to paraphrase Lincoln is: Government of the people by an elite for the privileged. Like Margaret Thatcher he has turned the face of his party against privilege. Like her he offended the interests who were accustomed to wield influence within it. Also like Mrs Thatcher he has been slandered for his pains; much of the abuse came from people nominally on his side of politics.

Adam Smith wrote that not the most acknowledged probity can protect a member of parliament from the most infamous

abuse of furious and disappointed monopolists he has the power
to thwart. Nothing much has changed.

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