

John Hyde

During my nine years in Federal Parliament I learned enough to know that I was adrift in a sea of conflicting information, ideals and pressures. Like others I tried to maintain direction by reference to one of three philosophies found in the Australian political mainstream - liberalism, socialism and conservatism. Liberalism claimed my nominal allegiance but my understanding of it was inadequate.

When it came to policy, like everybody, I borrowed from all three philosophies. I wanted a publicly funded welfare safety net, at least until it was demonstrated that private rather than public charity would (again) care adequately for those who would otherwise be in need; I believed in the family and the parliament, revered by conservatives; and I felt deeply a liberal's abhorrence of the unnecessary and arbitrary power of governments and trade unions. Those positions can be consistently held, but I lacked an adequate intellectual framework to be wholly consistent in their defence. When the Fraser government so obviously needed a light to steer by, we dries hung out a sort of liberal lantern, but our light must have been too dim or by then the captain and his officers were too giddy to see it.

Following the dries decimation at the 1983 poll, Max Walsh, on the TV programme 'Sunday', said of us that we were the only Liberals who held a consistent ideological position. I think the remark was an intended compliment, but it was overstated. The dries, or economic rationalists, never did spell out a comprehensive political philosophy. I at least was not equipped to do so. Intellectual debate is uncommon within the Liberal Party and philosophy had been but a small part of my politics.

The parliamentary dries are not philosophers but men of political affairs using the disciplines of economics and arithmetic, to evaluate policies in terms of the accepted goals of prosperity, security and freedom. Liberal Party dries give their wider, if inadequately tutored, allegiance to liberalism and conservatism. I imagine that the dries in the Labor Party give allegiance to socialism in the corporatist mode of modern Austria. If they are better equipped philosophical than the Liberals, they keep pretty quiet about it. The hallmarks of dryness include willingness to accept the political cost of facing economic and other social truths and the use of argument rather than power to achieve political ends. Within this framework Howard and Keating are both dries.

While, but few years ago, the dries were labelled ideologues, in some generally conservative Australian circles, it is now fashionable to criticise the Australian dries in particular, and economic rationalists in general, for want of ideology. In fact Australian liberal/conservative politics lacks philosophical debate of any sort. It has been slow to become involved in the vigorous debate in North America and the United Kingdom during the past ten years. Today the ideas are to be found upon the 'right'.

The Mont Pelerin Society, (MPS) is 'a sort of international academy of political philosophy'. It was formed in 1947 by Nobel Laureate, Friedrich von Hayek, and a small group of eminent liberal thinkers to preserve liberal ideas in the face of the ascendancy of collectivist ideals. During the dark years for liberalism - the fifties, sixties and seventies - the Mont Pelerin Society kept liberal debate alive and provided an intellectual haven for such greats as Hayek himself, von Mises, Friedman and Stiggler. I expect last month's MPS meeting in Sydney, organised by Mr Greg Lindsay and the Centre for Independent Studies, to be one of the turning points from which Australia will join modern liberal debate. I expect the debate to permeate Australian politics changing the political agenda. Agendas are not determined by power but by ideas.

Esoteric arguments about the relative virtues liberal-conservatism and conservative-liberalism are not everybody's cup of tea but it is from arguments like these that political positions are established. It is by the insights they generate that political direction is maintained. The dearth of philosophy in Australian non-socialist politics, and the lag between Australian thinking and that of Europe and North America makes the Sydney MPS meeting important.

Before any substantial sustainable political change can occur it is absolutely necessary to generate a mandate for the change. The public, or essential elements of it, must be won by argument. It is true that political systems do not respect simple consensus among majorities &

it is also true that the balance of influence can be changed by winning opinion for courses of action and ground rules which serve the aggregate, rather than the more concentrated, community interests. In setting the political agenda an Opposition is as powerful as a Government - perhaps more so. Remember now, though Menzies and Co held the reins of power in the sixties, Calwell and Whitlam set the agenda.

An Opposition which plans to get into office by default, by falling over the line, by saying nothing about the tough decisions it will have to take, by not offending any vested interests, by doing nothing now, will earn itself some excellent pension entitlements but nothing more. In office it will not have the power to govern well. It might intend to say, as Hawke did, that all bets made during the campaign are off and to set about resurrecting the economy but at the first whiff of grape-shot it will duck for cover. It will not even have a mandate from its own back bench for policies which strike at various vested interests. Episodes like the Funeral Benefits episode in 1976, when back bench Senators denied Fraser an obviously desirable budget cut, are inevitable.

If the Opposition wants to govern, as opposed to merely occupying the treasury benches, it has two years in which to woo and win a mandate from the party room and the electorate for the dry policies which it knows are necessary. In the meantime the Government will, the ACTU permitting, adopt Liberal policy as Menzies, Holt, Gorton and McMahon once adopted Labor policy. There are some Labor dries who would love to do it. That may be galling for those in the Liberal Party who want nothing more than office, but bigger men will welcome the change in national fortune.

During the war and the fifties and sixties collectivism prevailed because collectivism commanded the ideas - we were all, or nearly all, socialists then. By the seventies it was apparent that collectivism had failed to deliver the Millennium and had delivered much that was unpleasant, but an alternative was not apparent to politicians or public. The want of an articulated alternative was the most fundamental cause of the failure of the Fraser years.

Which ideas eventually prevail will be determined by the Mont Pelerin Societies, the Centres for Independent Studies and other institutions; the sort of government we have immediately after the next election will depend upon the ideas the Opposition sells now. The ideas will be more important than which party wins.