

Published
27-9-85

ON THE DRY SIDE 147 ON MAINTAINING DIRECTION IN GOVERNMENT

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Lots of Liberal voters are asking how the Liberal Party can maintain direction when next it wins an election. An answer is not easy, because first the Liberal Party must decide upon its goals. It is one thing to identify individual policy lapses in areas where goals are clear and to prescribe for those. It is another, I think more difficult thing, to design an approach to Government that militates against inconsistent goals and any lapses in policy; but I have two suggestions. The Libs should take steps to increase the level of analytical public debate by party activists and they should set the political agenda for their first twelve months in office.

The absence of a settled view of the world led the Fraser Government into some remarkable inconsistencies: the differences between statements on protection by ministers while overseas and what they said and did at home; the gap between rhetoric and action on unions; the contrast between the 1975 calls for fiscal responsibility and the 1982 budget, to name but three examples.

In a general way the problem is now can any political party maintain direction in government? But it is the Libs who have the luxury of time to prepare for government; it is on the Liberal side of politics that there is intellectual ferment - that the new ideas are being developed. The Liberal Party has a new and philosophically inclined leader, who will, I hope, lead a party that is more motivated to tackle Australia's mounting problems, and commensurately less motivated to maintain power at the cost of aggravating those problems, than any recent government. For the time being it is the Liberals who are interested in the techniques of political navigation.

A Liberal government's navigational problem is likely to be on two levels. One is that of policy that can be implemented by a new government. The other is that of philosophical guidance.

At the level of philosophy it is not just that no one philosophy dominates the hearts and minds of most of its members, but rather that its members - from branch personnel through to the shadow cabinet - are unaccustomed to considering the problems of government within a philosophical framework. The Liberals must develop an understanding of the contending principles of government.

Priding itself on pragmatism and preoccupied with personality cults and 'charisma' the Liberal Party for too long gave ideas and ideals a back seat. That is changing but not quickly enough. Principles like the rule of law and the citizen's right (in the absence of a compelling reason to the contrary) to be left alone by the law are not excess baggage getting in the way of the legislator trying to create a free, just and prosperous society. They are general expressions of conditions which experience has taught us are necessary for the maintenance of freedom, justice and prosperity.

Legislators who hold power over other people and who feel no necessity to learn principles which protect the interests of their subjects are, to say the least, high handed. Either they claim the ability to think

each issue through all its ramifications or else they don't care about the unintended side effects. Principles such as the rule of law have been developed out of long experience.

In a democracy it is not possible for politicians to choose a goal that does not have popular acclaim - a so-called hard option - and then just go to it. They must first justify their choice to many people - and rightly so. They must defend it against interest and prejudice; against not only enemies but often against would-be friends.

Principles should be a government's armour against vested interest. They must not be applied selectively. Liberal principles need to be defended against collectivism and against what I loosely label 'red-necked conservatism'. If reactionary or friendly interests were to prevail over generally applicable principles that fact would discredit the Liberal cause - again rightly so. For instance, it is not reasonable to talk about the virtues of a free labour market but to deny free markets in goods and services. (Nor do I think it is possible to achieve a free labour market without getting rid of government monopolies, occupational licensing and tariffs.) It is not consistent to complain about trade union tyranny while Government tyranny needlessly forces individuals to accept the values of this year's ruling class.

To inspire followers and most of all to guide itself, the Liberal Party of Australia needs to hold to a reasonably consistent body of ideas. There is no easy way to acquire ideas; they demand time and effort and above all debate. Within the party thought must again be made respectable. The roles and rights of heretics must be respected. Even the British Tory Party has the Bow Group, the Monday Club and the Centre for Policy Studies. Outside the party but in the same intellectual debate are periodicals like the Salisbury Review, the Spectator and Economic Affairs; there is even The Daily Telegraph. In Australia there is Quadrant. The Libs should encourage liberal thinkers to their ranks and start a consciously intellectual journal propagating liberal ideas and spurning hackneyed politics.

No matter which party wins in 1987 it will be faced with these pressing problems: mounting public debt and continuing public borrowing, unemployment, inflation, continuing pressure on the Australian dollar and overdue defence expenditure. Australia's productive apparatus is sclerotic. Poor productive performance will deny the new Federal Government a painless treatment for these pressing problems and the sclerosis itself must be treated while the government still has the will and a clear mandate to administer the necessary medicine. At the level of immediate policy the Liberals must work out, or have worked out for them, what they are going to do in the first six to nine months in office and the public must be brought into their confidence. More of this next week.