

ON THE DRY SIDE NEITHER LEFT NOR RIGHT NOR HALF WAY IN BETWEEN
John Hyde

'Left wing' and 'right wing' are poor adjectives. When not used as mere pejoratives they purport to describe an utterly unreal two-polar world. Even when used as pejoratives they suffer confusion - people cannot make up their minds whether a radical free marketer is a dangerous left winger or a dangerous right winger. I have been called both.

None the less the terms are effective swear words. Both 'left' and 'right' imply fault by associating people, organisations and causes with objectionable political regimes which do not respect liberty.

The ideas are now coming from the individualist rather than the collectivist camp. Commentators, in need of a simple label for dry politicians and the free market think tanks which have sprung up in academia - like the Centre of Policy Studies at Monash University, or out in the market world - like The Centre for Independant Studies, use 'Right wing' and 'The New Right'. They are poor tags.

Like the collectivists, the individualists claim to know a better road to prosperity and security. The underlying values which they defend - which make them different - are particular respect for individual liberty and particular dislike for privilege.

It is these values, coupled with that part of economic theory which is not disputed - micro economics, which attracts them to free market capitalism.

They have far greater respect for 'liberty, equality, and fraternity', the catch-cry of the original 'left', than have any of their opponents. Are they to be labelled 'right' because they proclaim the impossibility of imposing liberty, equality or fraternity with a guillotine, Mauser or Koleshnikov? Are they right wing because they understand that equality of outcome and equality of opportunity are inconsistent goals; or because they deny the value of a fraternity that depends on ignorance and fear as it does behind the iron curtain? Historically it would be better to call them 'left wing'. But neither label fits.

People who benefit from subsidies, tariffs and licences want free markets only for everybody else. They know that these privileges are not evenly and fairly distributed and debilitate the whole economy, but most people look after number one most of the time.

Moral claims to favoured treatment are dubious so they resort to name calling. The very vagueness of the 'left' and 'right' wing labels makes use easy and defence difficult.

An essential feature of 'dryness' which has nothing to do with ideology is willingness to face problems. When Mrs. Thatcher felt that a member of her cabinet would not face the tough choices

necessary to govern well she called him 'wet'. With the exquisite loyalty of cabinets the episode was given to the press and a term was born.

In Australia, somebody called that small group of back bench Liberals, which asserted that the Fraser cabinet was irresponsible in its failure to face up to economic tough choices, 'dry'.

Dries are economic rationalists; that is people who accept conventional economic theory, the laws of arithmetic and statistical facts. Within the Labor Party, Mr. Keating, Senator Button, Senator Walsh and Mr. Kerin are dries. Deng Xiaoping, communist ruler of Red China, has been described as an economic rationalist - a dry. All have adopted free market solutions to perceived problems. Have they all been bitten by the right (or is it left) wing bug or did they just face similar evidence?

There is more to liberty than free markets in those goods and services which are commonly assigned pecuniary values, but without economic liberty (voluntary exchange) mankind loses most of its free choices. Of course not even the Soviet Union, Cambodia or Iran have been able to control all transactions. People have a wonderful way of asserting themselves through black markets. The individualists want to legitimise black markets.

Dryness alone is much less than a full blown political philosophy but Liberal and Labor Party dries tend to be in the liberal/radical corners of their respective parties. They want a free society in which there are no privileged classes; they want a society in which those industries, firms and persons who have made it, must continually face competition from those who are about to make it.

They, more than most, place a high value on individual liberty. The society they want is the antithesis of the so called right wing societies, like state dominated Fascist Italy and Saudi Arabia. It is equally unlike the so called left wing societies like reactionary statist USSR and revolutionary statist Argentina under Peron.

Except when used as labels in established contexts, as with the ALP factions, 'right' and 'left' are not much more than vague insults.

Political belief is not a continuum from left to right, or North to South or up to down. The shades of political opinion could not be graphically portrayed within a three dimensional matrix without implying relationships that do not exist. They certainly cannot be portrayed on a straight line. It is not helpful to portray Liberalism or Democracy as half way between Communism and Fascism. It is not helpful to talk of one middle ground or pole, when there are thousands.

The left/right dichotomy makes elements of a complex world appear

to be alternatives when they are not. It has caused more confusion and produced more artificial acrimony than any other over-simplification I can think of.

We have terms like free and unfree, rational and irrational, and individualist and collectivist which have relatively clear meanings. Let us use them.