

By JOHN HYDE

WHEN, recently on a national television program, I was described for the umpteenth irritating time as "right-wing," a silly poem came to mind. It concerned a drunk who found himself keeping the company of a pig in a gutter, and ended... "You can tell a man who drinks by the company he keeps, and the pig arose and slowly walked away."

I believe the confusion that surrounds the position of free or liberal society in a hierarchy of political ideals is deliberately encouraged by those who, for whatever reason, want more government controls.

Whether, fairly or not, people and their causes are judged by the company they are seen to keep.

An unreasonable but effective means of damning arguments that are difficult to confront is to give them labels that imply that they keep the company of discredited arguments — even not quite nice arguments.

Like many another I find I must give a good deal of effort to denying other people's testimony — to saying what liberals are not.

Philosophical liberals are not conservative, are not socialist, are not right wing, if right wing indicates a preference for the statist/corporatist methods of Fascist Italy and

Both resort to government to slow down or stop change.

Generally socialists are said to be left wing and favour strong, central, more purely statist government while conservatives are said to be right wing favouring clubby corporatist deals between government itself and the other elite and powerful.

Again the distinction is blurred: the Fraser Government was fairly statist in its approach to trade, public ownership and regulation, while the Hawke Government's summit conference of the best and greatest was similar in approach to the corporatism of Mussolini.

Conservatives and socialists together are much more clearly distinguishable from liberals than they are from each other.

A few members of Parliament make the distinction clearly but I had one ex-colleague who did. He once stated to me categorically: "I am a conservative. I do not believe in free enterprise. I do believe in private enterprise."

He saw a big role for government manipulating markets to protect producers from competition.

He also saw a big role for government protecting people from their own bad judgment.

Implicitly he assumed that wise and public spirited people could and would make better choices on your and my

# Labels—an easy way to discredit but they count

are not advocates of complete laissez faire.

They are not necessarily members of the Liberal Party which in government proved to be quite illiberal.

Whatever "right wing" and "left wing" once meant the terms are now no more than vague labels emotively associated with objectionable political regimes.

Their very vagueness makes them eminently suitable for damnation by association.

Was the German National Socialist Party (a Nazi Party) a right wing or left wing government? Was Stalin right or left?

The important distinctions group these two regimes. They were both despotic governments which allowed their people little freedom.

Both closely controlled their citizens directing the nation's human and physical resources; to do so both found it necessary to curtail free speech free association and the rule of law.

Putative ownership of capital was irrelevant; in both cases government controlled it and controlled people to serve ends chosen by government.

Both were statist and it was their statism that made them objectionable and dangerous.

Classification from left to right does not advance our understanding much, it at best classifies regimes according to the ownership of capital saying nothing about state control of both capital and people.

A more relevant classification is from statism to liberalism, distinguishing governments and philosophies by whether choice is exercised by government for people or by individuals on their own behalf.

This classification distinguishes the controlled society on the one hand from the free society on the other. It gives us more helpful labels to guide our hopes and prejudices.

On this scale, a conservative, if a conservative be one who is wary of change, is to be found somewhere near to a socialist; the main distinguishing feature being which vested interests are protected from the need to chance to accommodate changing times.

Generally socialists are most closely allied to labour unions, and conservatives to organised capital in big companies or industry lobbies, but the distinction is blurred.

behalf than we could make for ourselves.

Like children we were not to be trusted; our loss of freedom was justified by better results.

He was an elitist.

Conservatives and socialists are both elitists.

Liberals do not for an instant deny that some people are smarter than others, or that public spirited people are numerous, but noting the corrupting influence of power, the hugeness of the task of managing society centrally, the inadequacy of the crucial data and the appalling record of all statist governments, prefer, all other things being even approximately equal, to trust markets rather than authority.

That is not a laissez faire position; those government interventions which are designed to make markets work better — to make them yield more accurate and timely price information — are consistent with liberalism.

Trade practices legislation (but not every clause of the present act), enforceable contracts and laws requiring frank disclosure are all designed to make markets work better.

In most cases they probably do. These regulations should be distinguished from the majority of regulations — P.T.s, tariffs, and statutory monopolies which distort markets usually at considerable cost to the consumer.

The terms "small l" and "large L" liberal are confusing.

Small l liberal once described adherents of the liberal philosophy, while large L or upper case liberals were members of the Liberal Party.

That was a simple and sadly a necessary distinction.

"Small l" has come to mean modishness or interest in particular issues including the environment, women's equality, and freedom of information legislation while "large L" means conservative.

I and most who want a market economy and smaller government yield to no one in advocacy of the desirability of protecting natural or man made wonders, or in attacking laws and practices which discriminate unfairly against women, and we have been consistent in our defence of the free flow of information.

We don't however share the socialists' faith in government power or willingness to put these matters right.

Governments have on the whole made it more difficult to get damages from polluters; governments have so limited property rights that individuals do not have the best possible property interest in preserving the beautiful or remarkable; it is governments who most indiscriminately injure the waterways, air and countryside and governments who still give women inferior property rights and still pass tax laws that discriminate against one-income families; and governments that are most secretive.

A most damaging but fallacious attack on the market economy is that it can't care about the needy. Controls protect vested interests.

There is nothing wrong with vested interests but everything wrong with governments that pander to them.

It is no accident that it is in the most controlled nations that there is the widest disparity between highest and lowest incomes. The influential always manipulate government.

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