

WHERE WILL THE IDEAS COME FROM?

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Liberal Party losses in New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia and finally Federal, only relieved by the Tasmanian victory, have many people asking what is the future of free enterprise ideals. In some other parts of the Western World, after losing ground for decades, these ideals are again gaining political allegiance. Reagan, Thatcher and Kohl are pointers, and a straw in the wind that might prove even more significant is Mitterand's retreat from some socialist ideas.

Australia has not gone as sharply to socialism as a tally of Labor governments shows; the Labor Party governments are, in some matters proving more liberal than their predecessors. Never-the-less Australia has been left out of the ^{in other countries} ~~return~~ to free enterprise, ^{and} The presence of five governments which claim allegiance to socialist values makes a sharp turn towards a more controlled society an ever present possibility. The left wing of the Labor movement will do what they can to encourage their more pragmatic leadership to bring our lives more under state control.

In Germany, the U.K. and the U.S.A. the election of parties offering less intrusive government was preceded by several years of public debate. They were elected only after individual liberty had gained in public esteem. Statist policies had failed to live up to their promise in all three countries ^{so that} Government's inability to cope with many of society's problems was evident to well informed and impartial electors. Further, government itself was seen to be the root cause of many of the worst difficulties.

On the other hand, amid the hyperbole that characterises democratic political debate it is hard for an elector to identify reality. ~~He~~ ^{He} is confused by exaggerated claims and by politicians who espouse one philosophy while practising another. In the end it was not the politicians who identified reality, ^{for him.} The explaining was done largely by people outside party politics who dealt in ideas.

~~Even the dedicated government intervention of Eastern Europe has difficulty maintaining monopoly over ideas. In the presence of Western Europe's traditions~~

~~it is impossible to stop new ideas but our governments do influence the balance.~~

By providing collectivist support for ideas governments effectively subsidise collectivist ideas. Most modern thinking emanates from state run universities or is financed by government grants, and even thinkers tend not to bite the hand that feeds them. A check of bookshop shelves shows that books advocating collectivist ways outnumber ^{Manfred Hise} books advocating free ways ~~manifold~~. Fortunately the power of ideas is not determined by volume alone; a well argued position will balance a lot of waffle.

Though small in volume,
 (c) Some of the most influential thinking about public policy is now done outside universities in independent research foundations set up for that purpose. They employ the disciplines of the social sciences. Most have a clear philosophical preference. Not all are on the libertarian side of the argument, in fact some of the oldest are those which advocate collectivist solutions for consumer protection and preservation of the environment. Some, like the Australian Conservation Foundation, now rely on government funding.

The effective advocates for a freer society have all been organisations which fiercely guard their independence from influence by any vested interest, either within politics, the government, or in private or corporate life. Giving their allegiance to nothing above the integrity of their argument they have been able to gain the attention of all sides of politics. The Institute of Economic Affairs in London is the archetype but many others in the United States are equally well known.

Each successful foundation has gradually won the respect of politicians, the media, and the community at large, and its influence has depended on that respect alone. It was an influence that was not available to trade unions, industry lobbies, or for that matter to public policy foundations which have been tamed by vested interest. In the United States and in Great Britain the influence proved more than sufficient to balance the votes that the vested interests could deliver. The policy foundations by better argument had significantly changed the climate of opinion. Margaret Thatcher credited the IEA with creating the climate that made her first victory possible.

This claim does not sound so extravagant when we think about how it is that democratic politicians follow public opinion. They are keen students of opinion polls, always trying to assemble coalitions of interests that will give them more than half the votes. A vested interest that can deliver a parcel of votes in exchange for a tariff, a higher wage or welfare benefit is in a powerful position, but it is not in an unassailable position. If in meeting a narrow interest's demands the government is seen to be prejudicing the general interest, the public is wise enough to punish what is plainly bad government. What is seen as bad government, however, depends entirely on the public's understanding of the issues. If only a vested interest's argument is heard then it will be accepted. If only collectivist ideas are advanced then it is inevitable that 'collectivist' will equate with 'good'. Substantially this has been the scene in Australia since the Second World War and Australians have been increasingly controlled by their governments.

Some businessmen saw what was happening. They realised that it was not good for industry but in opposing big government they equated business interests with the national interest. Their position was too often too inconsistent to capture the public's allegiance. They were too plainly defending their own interests and were seen as just another sectional lobby like a union or trade association. Worse, ~~most~~ organisations did at times advance special pleading for their backers. It is not ~~wrong~~ ^{improper} for a group to argue its own cause, but ~~its~~ ^{such} argument is not as convincing as disinterested argument.

The success of the IEA and ~~other~~ organisations like it was that they were clearly above special pleading. With few resources they were thus able to change public opinion. In Australia we have the Centre For Independent Studies, which has done magnificent work, but so far, is pitifully small for the size of the task. There are other institutions entering the field. I am involved with one of them. But we have a long way to go before independent policy foundations have the influence in Australia ~~that~~ they have already had in Britain and the U.S.A.

The ideas that sustain a free society are much less likely to come from organisation cossetted with public money or vested interests' money than from independent bodies that must sell themselves by the quality of what they produce. Australia needs a better funded Centre For Independent Studies and more like it.