

PEACOCK'S DEAKIN LECTURE

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R.G.Menzies' speech to the leaders of most of the shattered remnants of the non-socialist political forces confronted their failure with plain statement. He must have touched a few raw spots. The speech had its share of philosophical generalities but on the essential points it was clear. It led, within five years, to a political force so strong that it governed continuously for the next twenty-three years.

Nearly forty years later the non-socialist forces are again mostly in opposition and again in some disarray. It is again 'the member for Kooyong' who must lead. It is Andrew Peacock's job to define direction and build cohesion. His Deakin Lecture speech is an important statement.

A political party without philosophical commitment is directionless. To advance themselves or their party politicians without philosophical guidance espouse inconsistent causes and blur necessary distinctions.

The Liberal Party often talks in general terms of relying on private entrepreneurship, controlling public expenditure, and guaranteeing individual liberty. Too often it shrinks from admitting, even to itself, that to do these things it must reduce specific expenditures and remove specific regulations, offending entrenched vested interests. (Without consistent and determined philosophical leadership it will never be liberal in office; vested interests will control it.)

Unreliable guide to the shape of future governments though they may be, the philosophical speeches of opposition leaders are important. Sometimes they show the direction that new governments will follow. With hindsight we can say that Whitlam gave us a pretty fair indication of the direction that his government would go, even if the consequences of going there were never comprehended.

Opposition leaders' speeches influence the climate of opinion; at least marginally the speeches change what is politically feasible. Both Whitlam and Fraser did this.

In varying degrees, for good or ill, politicians are bound by their own words. (Remember Fraser's promise to retain Medibank).

Finally opposition leaders' speeches are important because we have so little else to show what sort of government an opposition will become.

In due course, maybe even at the next election, the Liberal Party will be returned to office. In the meantime Mr. Peacock's prime task should be that of preparing his party to handle office well. Office gained but badly used is pointless.

Even though the opposition can destabilize the government a bit or improve its own image, ^{at} the next election ^{the electorate} will mostly compare the Hawke government with the last Liberal government.

Mr. Peacock's task should be to restore the Liberal Party's reputation for responsibility and direction - more than that, his task is to give the Liberal Party responsibility and direction. Those MPs who have been urging him to go on the attack more - to score more political points - to be more aggressive, are childish. Politics is not a football match. His criticisms should be reasoned, constructive, calm and above all consistent with the way that in due course he would wish to govern. There is no long term good in opposing expenditure cuts, demanding more help for BHP, or defending superannuants, when, if he were Prime Minister, Mr. Peacock would be forced to face up to the cost of those populist courses. It is not his task to provide a circus for the shallowest members of his back bench, but to develop a Liberal approach to government.

(The Deakin Lecture goes some way toward showing a way ahead but lacks the believability, and hence influence, it could have had if it had more directly confronted the inevitable tough choices.)

Andrew Peacock nails his colours reasonably firmly to a 'liberal' or 'dry' mast. He eloquently describes the rewards of serving in a liberal ship, but not the risks for himself, or a government he may lead, of mutiny. I wish he had, not because I can't identify them for myself, but because I remember only too well how far Fraser was induced to leave the course charted by his sallies into liberal philosophy. On balance, I think it better to confront difficulties near the outset. Let us therefore look in those areas where vested interests are strongest, at where Peacock's liberal course would take a future Liberal government. The areas are import barriers, wages, regulation and taxation.

In general terms the speech is pretty clear. Key elements of his philosophy include: "The right to individual freedom and choice in all aspects of human endeavour." (Even a libertarian like myself doesn't go quite that far.)

A private sector "... free of unnecessary Government regulation," (Good).

"An approach to government which takes equal account of the interests of all Australians, with no commitment to powerful pressure groups," (This is the essence of liberal philosophy that distinguishes it from both conservatives and socialists, but which automatically brings its adherents into confrontation with such powerful vested interests as protected industries, trade unions, and middle class welfare recipients.)

At other points in the speech he is a bit more specific. On trade: he speaks of the virtues of "change" and "outward-looking, trade-oriented industrial strategies", and of the dangers of keeping new industries out. He does not quite say that if Australia is to prosper we must reduce existing trade barriers. Blurring the point may keep the Victorian manufacturers off his back for the moment but in the end it must be confronted.

On wages: he talks of the need to keep wages within an industry's capacity to sell and of need for changes in industrial relations but does not quite condemn wages that are too high now or centralised wage fixing.

On regulation: he spoke of a more competitive banking and transport structure but did not quite admit foreign banks, or phase out the two airline agreement, the maritime acts and the shipping conference cartel.

On tax: he didn't quite advocate means testing the remaining untested welfare benefits.

There is not much doubt that Andrew Peacock understands what is necessary to make Australia both free and strong, or that he can present the case. It still remains for him to show us, that given the responsibility of Prime Ministership, he will have the fortitude to confront tough issues which proved too much for Fraser. It will be in his own interest, the Liberal Party's interest and ultimately the nation's interest if he can shake off the Gucci toothbrush image, demonstrating there is a sterner side to him.