

THE LIBERAL FEDERAL CONFERENCE.

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Politics are presented to the public only as a contest between competing factions contending for power. This view is accurate enough so far as it goes. It is fascinating in the manner of a complicated team sport like football, hockey or cricket; is great fun; and is how most of the participants themselves see it; but it misses all that really concerns the public. To the public, unlike the politicians, it matters little who governs, but how they govern can be vital.

Complicated play or simple treachery which leaves opponents stranded without support, brilliant flights of rhetoric which compel admiration and support, support bought and lost in the process of coalition building, are all fascinating stuff. They test players' skills in the greatest of all games, but account of the play belongs on the sports pages of newspapers.

Lord Keynes, the economist, observed that:

"The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood.... practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist....soon or late it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil."

(Devotees of the political game ask whose ideas prevail, whose gain ground. But a country's future is determined by which ideas prevail.) In the end it will matter little whether the authority which gives effect to the prevailing ideas is that of Fraser, Hawke or Peacock. Whether, since they are practical men, they are slaves of others' ideas as Keynes says, or whether they encourage certain ideas to prevail, matters less than WHICH ideas.

(The importance of the Liberal Party Federal Conference was not the play they adopted but the goals they chose.) Built upon the Valder Committee Report these goals are substantially long term national goals. The Liberals, over the whimperings of the party populists, settled for a remarkably clear and consistent philosophical position. It was a commitment to progressively reduce the structural rigidities

in the market place created by government regulation. It was a commitment to the general interest over that of vested interests. It was a commitment to long term goals over short term populism. It was a commitment to individuals' rights and responsibilities over state dirigisme - to smaller government. It was a commitment to a liberal rather than a conservative future Liberal Party.

The commitment was taken into specific policy domains - trade, taxation, wages policy, deregulation. Not too bad at all, and it ought to be admitted, better than I thought they would manage. It is a broad blue print for the type of government that would tackle our besetting problems.

It is easy to dismiss the whole performance as nothing more than a performance by a party in opposition, which is a time in politics when fine sentiments come easily. Comparison of 1975 Liberal rhetoric with subsequent performance does make a rational person cynical. On the other hand it is hard to imagine how a party would come to govern in a manner that was purposefully directed to a better Australia, unless it defined an approach to its task. Further, it is hard to imagine how it would build a constituency for that approach without performances something like party conferences. The expression of fine sentiment is certainly no guarantee of good government but without the expression there is little hope.

I remember, at the Kennedy Grave at Arlington Cemetery, Washington, DC, USA, making some cynical remark about fine words. Senator Chaney, who was with me at the time, tackled me, in somewhat acid terms I remind him, observing that fine ideas unless well expressed remained imprisoned.

(It is as nearly impossible for an opposition to give credible guarantees of its future performance in government as it is for an alcoholic to guarantee his sobriety.)
Best intentions are not always enough. Messrs. Peacock, Chaney and Howard did give some limited guarantee of good faith by drawing a line across the past and frankly admitting error to which they themselves contributed. Since reversal upon reversal becomes increasingly less easy to live with, they have to some extent made themselves hostage to their present positions. They are all smart enough to know what they were doing, and their courage deserves recognition. What other token of faith was available to them?

The sad feature of the conference was that too much discussion was about whether the rediscovery of the liberal philosophy would gain the treasury benches for the Liberal Party rather than whether that philosophy would serve the nation well. The cry that something must be offered to women and youth was particularly pathetic. What meaningful advantage, that would not have impossible consequences for taxes, can be offered to two groups which together, allowing for overlap, are 60% of voters? If it is merely the equal standing of these two groups within a free society that was called for, then it ought to have been understood that equality is fundamental to the liberal approach offered by the party hierarchy.

To imply that women and youth will not respond to policies that serve the long term and the general good, and that they therefore need some special bribe, is an extreme of male and senior elitism that is unwarranted by the evidence.

Finally, those followers of the political game qua game who follow the Liberals have had a very disappointing season. There are not many political prizes left that the party can lose. Taking a losing team and turning it into a premiership side is not one season's work. The side seems to have found a good non-playing coach in Valder, some of the older players are finding a bit of form and the club now has a strategy. That might not be everything but it is a start. Some of last election's injuries are needed back in the team and some old players should stay on the transfer market. Ahead are some years of recruitment and training before the Liberals should expect to be truly fit to govern, but the fans can now look forward.