

Dispassionate observers of the Liberal Party must derive amusement from the claims of each of its factions to speak with the true voice of Liberalism; each quoting Menzies.

Menzies filled the Australian political stage for more than a quarter of a century. During all that time public opinion changed a long way. (On the whole I think it advanced but that must remain a matter of opinion.) Of course Menzies' personal views, and those public positions which he, as party leader held, also changed, and he would have been a lesser man if they had not. Like the Bible, his collected wisdom now admits a variety of interpretations.

The Young Liberals at their Annual Conference dragged the metaphorical dead cat between the Liberal sects by carrying several motions deploring government meddling in matters which might profitably be left to individual endeavour. Several of them were also critical of Sir Charles Court's sally into Queensland against Terry White's Liberal Party.

They elicited responses from Sir Charles and from Senator Peter Baume, which differed not only from prevailing Young Lib opinion, but from each other. Of the three positions only the Young Libs' position seems to me to be "liberal", but the term is in dispute. It is a dispute which might in due course have a profound influence on us.

Sir Charles attacked Eastern States trendies, blaming them for the party's defeat in so many elections. It is not at all clear to me how Eastern States trendies were responsible for defeat in W.A. but, be that as it may, the message was clearly that the party had strayed from precepts which had guided it well in the past, and which could, if followed, lead it to a better future. Sir Charles was not specific, but trendyism is normally associated with measures like the environment, land rights, sex discrimination and the human rights commission.

This year's conference agenda was dominated by economic and personal liberty questions, and 1984 Young Libs don't see themselves as trendies, but I think (traditional Young Lib concern for human rights and the environment, and opposition to arbitrary discrimination is in good hands.) They have a better understanding than the senior party and most people how those values can be advanced without sacrificing individual liberty - the most basic human right.

Terry White might not be Australia's smartest politician. In fact it is a measure of how unsmart he was that, in the kerfuffle of the Queensland poll, the really quite simple fact that he alone stood for liberal values against the statist and socialist values of both Joh and Labor, was lost - stolen from him by Joh. Even the issue on which he broke cabinet solidarity concerned the ability of parliament to restrain spendthrift use of taxpayers' money. Yet Joh was allowed to get away with implying that White, not he, was the socialist when Labor, sensing political advantage, forced a vote on a Public Accounts Committee. The way in which White was destroyed saddened many small government, free market, Liberal who admired White's courage and appreciated his values if not his political judgement. Hence the concern of some Young Liberals.

The gulf between Senator Baume's liberalism and the non-interventionist liberalism implicit in the motions the conference carried, is at least as wide as the gulf between those motions and Sir Charles' record in government. In fact Senator Baume is closer to the Bjelke-Peterson-Court position than he is to the Young Libs,- or than I think he realises.

Senator Baume used these Menzies quotes with approval: "...there is no room in Australia for a party of reaction." and "individual enterprise must drive us forward. That does not mean that we are to return to the old selfish notions of laissez-faire. The functions of the state will be much more than merely keeping the ring within which the competitors fight. Our social and industrial obligations will be increased. There will be more law not less."

only shortly after
Menzies said that ~~before~~ Senator Baume was born and a lot of water has flowed under the bridge since; not least, we have experienced the "more law" of which Menzies spoke.

Senator Baume then says, in his own words, "We are not, have never been, and should never be, a so-called 'Private Enterprise Party'." and "... we cannot...allow our party to embrace a view of society which was appropriate to the eighteenth century but which expresses none of the compassion or communal concern that are among the hallmarks of liberalism."

More about compassion shortly but what did the Senator mean by "communal concern"? Eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism curtailed seventeenth century communal concern by recognising individuals' rights not to have the concerns (or prejudices) of the community thrust upon them. I don't think Peter Baume is consciously advocating a return to seventeenth century elitism, but he manages to sound as though he is.

Further, it worries me that a Liberal shadow minister has such scant appreciation of the nature, (or pretensions if he prefers it that way), of free market capitalism that, without a justifying explanation, he can dismiss it for characteristics which only its more committed opponents impute to it.

Markets by their very nature are always testing new against the old. It is government regulation, which, by protecting old ways against change, is reactionary. It is not coincidental that the societies with the freest economies have most advanced the standards of living of all their citizens, but particularly of the poorest. It is not coincidence that police states oppress, or that police are needed when law is substituted for voluntary exchange. The spread of income levels is narrowest in societies which are most free, and under-privilege least where privilege is not maintained by law. Free societies are most effectively compassionate.

It is not reactionary to decline to be dragged into someone else's version of Utopia, yet every dictator describes every other path forward but his own, as backward. Less law is certainly not reactionary.