

THE AUSTRALIAN

Australian liberalism is conservative in sense Disraeli would appreciate

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM July 22, 2017

A dogma, Groucho Marx might have said, is a man's best friend. After all, no one could deny that a fixed set of beliefs can sustain good combat, soothe defeat and simplify hard choices.

But in democratic politics, the blinkers dogmas impose are the surest road to ruin.

Malcolm Turnbull was therefore right, in his recent Disraeli Prize oration, to raise the fundamental question of what the Liberal Party stands for. And the mere fact that his speech fuelled yet more debilitating infighting does not detract from the importance of the issues he raised.

Yes, disunity can be death; but suppressing debate is a recipe for extinction.

Of course, Labor doesn't have that problem.

As a coalition of rent-snatchers — going from the thugs of the CFMEU through to the interest groups that live off the taxes of others — the only dilemma that seems to torment it is how to extract the resources needed to fund its many promises.

Little wonder then that any real thought perished long ago, smothered in the rhetoric of fairness, with Julia Gillard's effort at articulating the ALP's *raison d'être* highlighting the intellectual collapse: Labor, she famously declared, is as it is because "we are us".

But Labor's determination to imitate the sea squirt — which starts life swimming with the aid of a brain but once it finds a home, digests the now redundant organ and basks in the life of a vegetable — cannot excuse the Liberal Party from re-engaging with its history, values and principles.

To say that is not to suggest those form a monolithic whole, whose meaning can be discerned by consulting a sacred source. For all his enormous merits, Menzies was not a prophet, and nothing he wrote or said amounts to holy writ.

Indeed, it is hard to conceive of an approach more antithetical to liberalism than the belief that, as Isaiah Berlin put it, "somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of the uncorrupted man, there is a final solution" to the practical problems of governing.

It is precisely because liberalism dismisses that Promethean conceit that it respects institutions that have stood the test of time, rejects grand projects of social transformation and accepts the inevitability of trade-offs between equally meritorious ends.

Like Dr Bernard Rieux, the hero of Camus's *The Plague* — who says: "Salvation is just too big a word for me. I don't aim so high. I'm concerned with man's health; and for me, his health comes first" — its goal is not to endow life with splendour and greatness.

Rather, in resisting the temptation to put too high a hope on political achievement, it contents itself, as Michael Oakeshott suggested, with providing a framework for "the gradual readjustment of human relationships by fallible men".

That is necessarily a matter of time and place.

And Menzies' genius lay precisely in grasping the changing realities of postwar Australia and attracting the social forces Labor had ignored and ill-treated. It is that achievement the Liberals need to emulate, instead of descending into scholastic disputes about Menzies' views.

The difficulties that lie in the way of replicating Menzies' achievement are formidable.

In the postwar world, the threat of communism created a natural fault line; today's adversaries are less sharply defined. Australian society is also far more heterogeneous, and has lost all sense of a shared past or a common future.

Moreover, although liberalism is not tied to any religion, its underlying premise — that men are not gods, and that salvation, like ultimate truth, is not of this world — clashes with the unbounded self-assurance of a secular age.

Yet the threats Liberals need to confront are as great as ever. At one end are the jackboots of the unions, whose lawlessness has been condoned by the ACTU secretary; at the other, the new totalitarians whose belief in the ability to reshape the messiness of human affairs along "rational" lines, whatever the cost, reaches its peak among the climate change zealots.

How Benjamin Disraeli would have reacted to all of that is impossible to know. What is certain is that many viewers would have felt an element of irony in watching Turnbull receive a prize honouring a man of whom it was said, only slightly unfairly, that “he never thought seriously of anything except his career”.

That Disraeli coined the phrase “the greasy pole” was therefore unsurprising; and it was unsurprising too that in his rush to dislodge Robert Peel, he launched what David Cesarani, in a brilliant study, terms an “unprecedented parliamentary vendetta”, with his triumph of “intellect and unscrupulousness” transforming the Tories into “a party in chronic revolt and unceasing conspiracy”.

Yet it is equally certain that no one better understood that, as Disraeli himself put it, “Great politicians must feel comfortable both in themselves and in their times.”

Whatever his flaws, he forced the Tories to adapt to a society reshaped by the Industrial Revolution; and his greatest political achievements — the Reform Act of 1867, which gave ordinary working men the vote, and the avalanche of social legislation that followed it — reflected a conviction that workers, far from wishing to destroy society, were natural conservatives, united in their respect for national institutions and in the aspiration for a better future.

In that sense, Australian liberalism has also always been conservative: not in trying to preserve the past but in balancing continuity and change, stability and aspiration, self-reliance and mutual assistance.

Reasserting its core principles requires lucidity, not dogma, and mature reflection, not personal attacks.

Whether our political class is capable of that remains, at best, unproven.

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