

It's time liberals put away childish things

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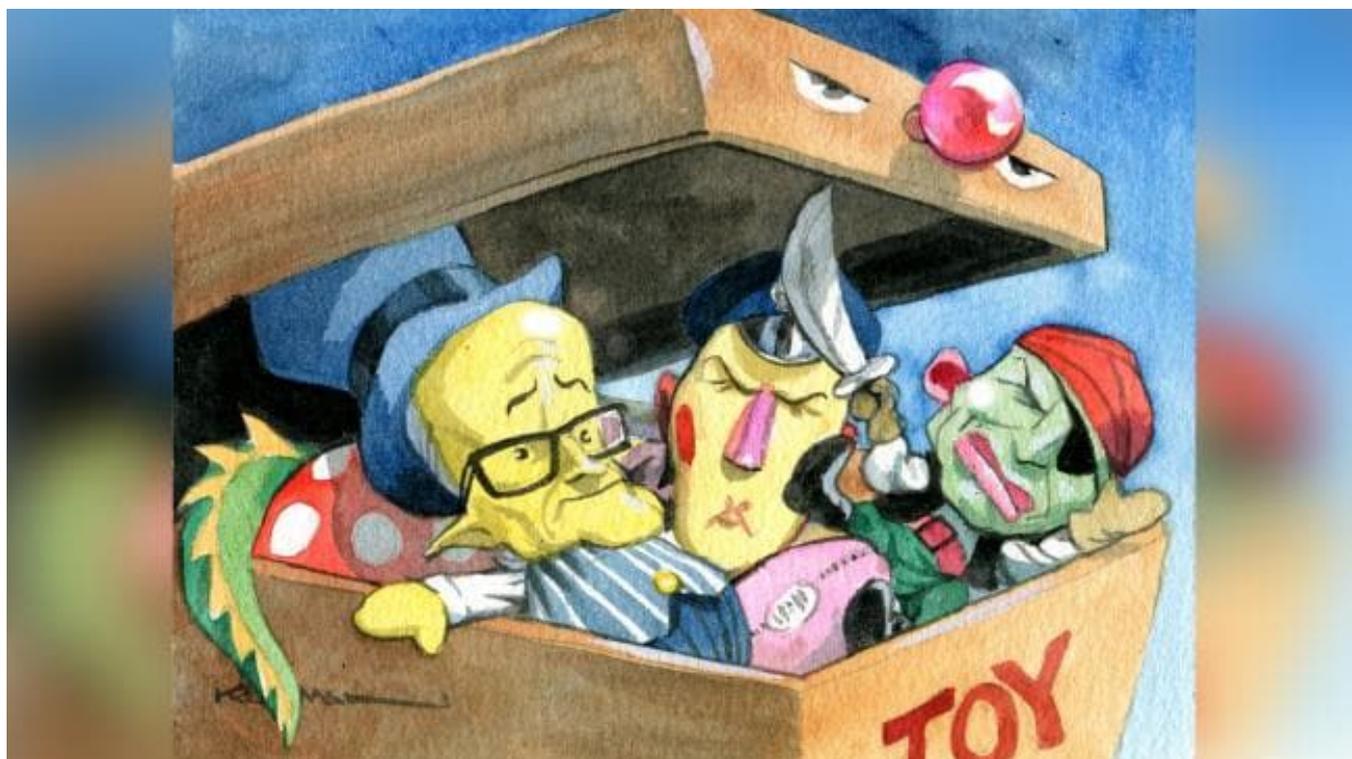


Illustration: Sturt Krygsman.

One of the beauties of democracy is that when things don't work out, there is plenty of blame to spread around. What happened in Wentworth is no exception.

That it was a by-election didn't help, as it made the choice less stark. The circumstances in which it was held added to the difficulties Dave Sharma faced.

As for the electorate, Wentworth is hardly representative of the nation as a whole. The secret to a good life, said Gandhi, is "simple living and high thinking"; the voters of Wentworth, like so many of Australia's top earners, seem more inclined to do the opposite.

Yet those excuses only go so far. Yes, Wentworth is different; but it is different in ways that until now made it a rock-solid Liberal seat. It is, in other words, the sort of seat the Liberals ought to be in a position to count on. If they can't, they should be asking why.

Doubtless, many factors are involved. Ultimately, however, the salient feature of this government has been its inability to articulate a narrative that brings together the political principles that guide its decisions, the achievements those decisions have yielded, and the direction in which they will take the country.

To say that is not to downplay the government's record. Restoring Australia's fiscal position, in part by more than halving the trend growth rate of public spending, merits high praise.

But its ability to communicate has been so poor that there are entire areas of policy — such as healthcare — for which the electorate could reasonably conclude that the government lacks any broader program, instead dealing with issues as they come.

And in climate change policy, which attracted such attention in the by-election, the government has managed both to undersell the carbon emissions it has secured and to systematically understate the vast costs securing them imposes, inviting the incessant clamour for more.

In essence, it has acted as if good stewardship would sell itself. But politics involves far more than competent management. Rather, it is a contest to control the meaning voters place on the actions a government has taken and intends to take.

That is why the first and most primal act of political leadership remains that of defining what is at stake, not just materially but also in terms of basic values, in the choices the country faces.

A government that fails at that task, as the Coalition has, may have power, but it loses the authority exercising power requires. And every bit as importantly, it finds it ever harder to mobilise the support needed to retain office.

Lacking a unifying theme, the backbenchers who are its frontline troops struggle to reassure supporters and win over the unconvinced.

As for the voters, who can blame them if, deprived of any coherent account of the principles for which the government stands, they evaluate its record solely on the basis of the devious turnings of political events and the tangle of party controversy?

And given how bitter and twisted those have been, is it surprising that, when they undertook that evaluation, even long-time Liberal voters in Wentworth recoiled at what they saw, and opted for an independent untainted by the muck and gore?

Yet the government's failure in these respects is not merely a cause of the difficulties it faces; it is also a symptom of the absence of any agreement within the Liberal Party on the party's nature, goals and strategy.

Australian liberalism has, for sure, always been a movement formed from the overlap, rather than convergence, of many streams, each with its own sensibilities. But instead of merging, those streams seem to be moving apart. And there are good reasons to believe the structural changes under way in the electorate will press that divergence further.

It is, in particular, clear that mass electorates are fragmenting and realigning, not merely in Australia but in all the mature democracies. Traditionally, wealthier voters backed the centre-Right, while voters in the industrial working class largely backed the centre-Left; but those patterns, which stabilised electoral outcomes and gave the major parties

ballast, have weakened over time.

Thus, as Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley show in their brilliant analysis of British voting data, *The New Politics of Class*, the “intelligentsia”, who are relatively highly educated and work in the professions, the “new economy” or the public sector, have moved sharply left on economic and social issues.

The middle class is therefore now deeply split between those newer elements and its traditional components of white-collar workers and small business owners, who remain conservative and are still anchored to the Right.

Working-class voters, on the other hand, have become significantly more socially conservative while simultaneously shifting left on economic issues.

Adding to this complex mosaic, the relative size of the different groups has changed. The intelligentsia has steadily increased its share of electorate, largely at the expense of the working class and of the lower-income segment of the traditional middle class.

Those trends make it increasingly difficult for “catch-all” parties — as both our main parties have been — to position themselves in such a way as to aggregate a winning coalition. The concept of the “average” or “median” voter, which used to help orient the parties’ choices, has lost its substance, as has the notion of “the centre”. And almost any major party program, if clearly expressed, becomes vulnerable to cherrypicking as third parties and independents target disaffected segments that are large enough to swing the contest. Our voting system (and the development of new forms of communications) greatly facilitate their task.

In theory, adjusting to those changes should have proven easier for the centre-Right, which has always represented a diverse base, than for

labour and social democratic parties, which relied primarily on the industrial working class. In practice, both are reeling almost everywhere.

Neither of our main parties has properly taken the measure of those transformations: years of politics as trench warfare has relieved them of the burden of thought, reducing an already thin topsoil of ideas into an intellectual wasteland. And as that process has played itself out, the Liberal Party, which was never unduly burdened by philosophical clarity, has descended from mere ambiguity into outright confusion.

But if the party is to survive, it needs, against its every instinct, to show some maturity, including that involved in taking ideas seriously. To quote 1 Corinthians 13-11, it is time to put away childish things. Otherwise, the outcome in Wentworth will be only an hors d'oeuvre.