



Big or Bigger Government?

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This edition of the *IPA Review* focuses on our current political landscape—which has been somewhat unsteady of late. The tension within the Coalition federal government was put to rest with Malcolm Turnbull assuming the prime ministership in September of this year. But despite this change, there is still a sense of uncertainty about the general direction of the federal government. There's understandable confusion as to what the Coalition stands for, or should stand for.

In their joint article, 'How to be a thoroughly Liberal government' Chris Berg and James Paterson analyse the situation inherited by Turnbull when he became prime minister, and discuss everything from tax reform to freedom of speech. Morgan Begg's article, 'Where next for freedom of speech', gives a quick update on the repeal of section 18C.

And it's an absolute delight to be able to reproduce a speech given to the IPA in 1954 by then Prime Minister Robert Menzies—and it's extraordinary how truly prescient his speech was.

Menzies' speech was a thoughtful and revealing exploration of principle, expediency and



pragmatism in politics, and also what he believed to be the greatest ‘menace’ in the political world: ‘Our great danger in Australia ... is that we should abandon political principle in favour of a series of purely *ad captandum* arguments’—the temptation to forsake principle to garner votes.

Menzies believed that ‘political principle, a genuine philosophy, a genuine body of doctrine in your own mind ... That’s the most important thing in public affairs’. In this regard, both Labor and the Coalition seem completely adrift.

Labor appears to have all but abandoned its traditional base to court the votes that would otherwise go to the Greens. And the Liberals, far from proving themselves to be steadier in government than Labor, are having just as difficult a time maintaining the image they once had of being better economic managers. Indeed the Coalition, far from being the party of lower taxation and less spending, seems to be in race against Labor to prove itself the better spender.

It is becoming that much more difficult to find the dividing line between the two major political parties. What do either stand for; what should they stand for? Are both parties now falling victim to the type of behaviour that Menzies described as ‘the greatest menace in political world’.

Political parties should stand for more than whatever will get them elected. But that requires both a clearer definition of values, and a clearer grasp on what the role of government actually is. And in the post-Soviet era, both parties are struggling to define themselves.

It’s hardly a new struggle and yet it is still at the heart of any debate between what the Anglosphere labels the left and the right. Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson famously butted heads over this discussion: strong centralised government; or limited, constrained government? And there’s good reason for this kind of discussion—the type of government we have will impact on the way we can live; it will impact on our freedom and consequently our quality of life.

But where individuals once fought to limit the power of government in our lives, today all around the Anglosphere, we’re seeing more and more protests demanding that government intervene—that government take action.

It ranges from calls for government to make higher education free (no such thing exists), to calls for government to ‘fix’ climate change (and the only solutions offered thus far would increase cost of living), and calls for government to regulate speech so ‘someone’ ‘somewhere’ won’t be ‘offended’ by ‘something’ said by ‘someone’ elsewhere. It seems that whenever a crisis emerges, there will be the inevitable call for the government to ‘do something’.

But the more a government can presume to decide for us, the less free we are to decide for ourselves. An unrestrained government will diminish freedom, and in doing so will make it that much harder for individuals to maintain or increase their prosperity. It won’t be able to help itself. It would seem that Australia’s federal government is rolling in one direction—more government—and our choice has been reduced to big or bigger government.



But the approach of a small and limited government is the best way so far discovered to ensure freedom and prosperity. It requires that government be constrained. Once a government is limited and constrained to act within a specific scope, then its citizens are free to act without interference from the state.

Freedom from government— from the potential of oppressive government—was a lesson hard won, but it seems it's been easily forgotten.