



## End The Nanny State To Win

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As the polls plunge and a tide of sleaze threatens the government, Labor has responded with a storm of class war rhetoric unseen in decades.

The prime minister has declared the next election will be about 'whether you stand for the privileged few or whether you stand for working Australians.'

'We have decided they are the people we stand for,' she insisted the day after the budget, 'not the Clive Palmers, not the Gina Rineharts, but working families.'

The political strategy is clear. It is a pitch to an old Labor demographic that has gone straying from the party for more than a quarter of a century: blue collar conservatives.



This group elected John Howard and kept him in power for 11 years until his mishandling of WorkChoices and Kevin Rudd's carefully modulated tones drove them back to the ALP.

Now, the carbon tax, concern about rising prices and job losses seem certain to push them back towards Tony Abbott and the Coalition.

But the mood in the electorate is volatile. Both Abbott and the prime minister have poor approval ratings. The percentage of the electorate who tell Newspoll researchers they would vote 'other' if an election was held today recently reached six year highs.

Abbott is at an advantage. He has already shored up his own base with his opposition to the carbon tax, while Labor's primary vote seems stuck in the high 20s.

He could cement his grip on disgruntled Labor voters with a clear-cut commitment to getting government out of the faces-and pockets-of voters by dismantling the wasteful, moralising and ultimately socially divisive apparatus of the Nanny State.

The man in charge of Coalition policy has already identified it as an issue.

Andrew Robb is doing more than assembling a platform. He is attempting to foster a philosophy that will serve as both a unifying force and a source of discipline for the Liberals, while also having clear electoral appeal.

'We have reached a point in Australian governance where philosophy really does matter,' Robb says.

He believes that instead of little separating the two sides of politics, there are fundamental differences between the Coalition and the ALP.

'It is the difference between a Nanny State "government knows best" approach compared with the personal dignity and control that comes from the freedom to make your own choices while taking responsibility for those choices,' Robb explains.

'Under the respective leaderships of Rudd and Gillard we have seen the greatest growth of government in our lives, notwithstanding the chaotic Whitlam years.'

He cites the re-regulation of the labour market, the re-nationalisation of telecommunications under the NBN and the overnight shutting-down of the live cattle export trade by ministerial fiat, despite its implications for northern communities and relations with Indonesia.

Robb points to the now-abandoned internet filtering plans, the original resources super-profits tax-'the failed attempt to nationalise 40 per cent of the mining industry'-and the carbon tax, which he slams as 'the highest taxing, most bureaucratic and interventionist model imaginable', coming 'at the worst possible time for industry and jobs'.



To complement his policy work Robb has formulated four key principles he believes reflect the Coalition's core values, but also serve to illustrate the fundamental differences with the government 'regardless of who is leading it'.

The principles are living within our means, reversing the Nanny State, backing our strengths, and restoring a sense of personal responsibility.

'It is true that in isolation these sound like little more than slogans,' Robb admits, 'but in combination they present a powerful set of markers, the ballast of which guide the direction a Coalition government would take the country. 'They reflect our policy priorities of reducing and removing taxes, debt and deficit and unwinding the welter of red tape and regulation which is the product of big government.

'We want to back people, businesses and organisations to get on with what they do best, without the reach of government constantly interfering in their concerns.'

In an opinion piece in *The Australian* late last year where he first publicly aired his four principles, Robb offered a broad definition of the Nanny State.

He called reversing its grip 'a philosophical shift from "government knows best" to one where government involvement in business and people's lives is minimised.'

Robb said, 'Getting rid of productivity-sapping reporting requirements across sectors, adding flexibility to the labour market and providing greater autonomy are all powerful ways of reversing government's reach.'

He is right, but a focus on the more traditional interpretation of the Nanny State is a smart political strategy to give the Coalition a boost.

Not only will it help attract and hold the blue collar, traditionally Labor-voting demographic that is disaffected with the ALP, such a strategy may also help broaden and extend the group.

It only rated a brief mention at the start of the 2010 Victorian state election campaign, but a leaked Labor strategy document revealed fears the party was vulnerable to a backlash on Nanny State issues.

'White males aged between 30 and 50', along with farmers and regional city residents-the voters who so unexpectedly tipped Jeff Kennett out in 1999-were angry at speed camera fines and a perception that they lived under excessive government regulation.

Galaxy polling taken for the Institute of Public Affairs last year found a majority of Australians-55 per cent-believe the country is becoming a Nanny State with too much government intervention and control of people's day to day lives. The figure was unchanged from 18 months before, when the question had last been asked.

What had changed, however, was the vehemence with which voters agreed with the proposition. 'In the latest study, 29 per cent strongly agreed that Australia is becoming a Nanny State, up from 24 per cent last year,' Galaxy reported.

The increase appeared to reflect policy debates over tobacco plain packaging, alcopops and preventive health measures that had left respondents unimpressed.

'The majority of Australians do not believe that plain packaging will be effective in reducing consumption for a range of products,' Galaxy found. 'Overall, 66 per cent do not believe that plain packaging will be effective in reducing consumption of cigarettes, little different to fast food (68 per cent) and alcohol (74 per cent).'

Yet other than Robb's broad remarks-and the odd intervention by mavericks such as Barnaby Joyce-the Coalition has ignored these public concerns. It has been silent-or worse, acquiescent-on Nanny State policy.

It has been late recognising the free speech implications of the Andrew Bolt case and insufficiently strident on the threats to media freedom contained in the Finkelstein report.

It is also ignoring the sprawling, expensive, anti-choice and antibusiness public health bureaucracy and publicly funded client groups of researchers, lobbyists and various other moralising busybodies that accompany, support and do their best to expand this Nanny Statism at a time when finding major savings is not just a priority, but crucial to its policy credibility.

The Nanny State is obsessed with talking down people. It tells them the views they hold and the way they lives their lives are wrong. When governments talk down at people who are already down the social strata-or feel ignored or put-upon it fosters resentment. It builds a sense of marginalisation, the opposite of community.

Nanny Statism may give its enthusiasts a sense of moral superiority and general worthiness. But everyone else finds it simply offensive.

Leftist lobbying firm Essential Communications, the group best known for the ACTU's Your Rights at Work campaign, issued polling in April that claimed to show close to two thirds of Australians or higher supported governments making laws to regulate smoking in public places, buying and consuming alcohol, cigarette packaging and junk food advertising.

'These findings expose the disconnect between the Nanny State rhetoric and the attitudes of the public whose activities are being regulated,' Essential claimed.

They saw a conspiracy of 'business and industry lobby groups who oppose public health and safety measures on commercial groups but invoke the 'nanny' as a rhetorical device' and 'right-wing think tanks.'

Essential insisted 'At the end of the day, most of us quite like the idea of a nanny-someone to



anticipate danger and intervene if we are walking into it...we'd much rather have Mary Poppins than Lord of the Flies.'

Essential have obviously forgotten Mary Poppins-literally-soared above hordes of far more ordinary nannies. She was the exception.

The question they asked their sample groups was neutral, as pollsters' questions should be, but was probably too sweeping and general.

And their findings contradicted international Ipsos research released weeks earlier that showed one in two Australians rejected the idea that governments should get involved in what they choose to eat.

That found 57 per cent of Australians opposed a fat tax to fight obesity and 41 per cent said governments should not get involved in people's decisions to smoke.

The Ipsos research pointed to a possible cultural element to Australians' attitudes, politicians should note. It found that citizens of countries with less easy-going mores, such as Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and China, tended to be more likely to support bans on smoking and unhealthy food.

This explains other studies that reflect the Ipsos rather than the Essential findings.

Liquor industry research that leaked in the wake of the release of the National Preventative Health Taskforce report-the report that recommended, in all seriousness, the creation of a body called the National Prevention Agency-in 2009 found that Australians were overwhelmingly opposed to government plans to tell them to drink and smoke less and cut down on junk food.

Monitoring of calls to talkback radio, letters to the editor and comments on news websites shows ordinary people reacted overwhelmingly against the taskforce's recommendations. Seventy-seven per cent of recorded comments were negative. Further quantitative research found 60 per cent of Australians regarded the report's recommendations as attacks on their lifestyles, civil liberties, and the way they operated businesses-while 57 per cent were concerned about its implications for social engineering.

Fifty-four per cent of respondents said there were problems with obesity, smoking and alcohol, but added 'this report is not about targeting them'. Instead, more than half were concerned that the report was a political document 'intent on overturning much of the way we choose to live'.

At the time, a prominent social trends researcher revealed the government was taking the wrong approach. 'Anything that can be seen as a criticism of people's own behaviour is immediately discounted and responded to quite angrily,' Neer Korn said.

'The idea of the Nanny State really hits home with people,' he continued. 'People just don't want outsiders to interfere, particularly government or corporations, in their own private lives. They're very sensitive. You can't tell people anything negative.'

Noel Turnbull, a giant of the public relations industry and an adjunct professor in the School of Applied Communications at RMIT University, who helped establish one of the nation's more generously funded bossy-boots, Vic Health, as a Labor staffer in the 1980s, agreed.

He warned campaigns designed to tackle problems such as alcohol abuse do not work, calling for an end to Nanny State efforts that 'generate widespread community hostility and seek to control the bulk of moderate consumers of alcohol as if they were people with significant alcohol problems'.

He pointed to the ridicule heaped on draft guidelines issued by the National Health and Medical Research Council in 2008, which said that more than four standard drinks a day constituted a binge.

'There are alternatives available which treat people as citizens capable of changing behaviour without draconian regulation and punitive taxation,' Turnbull said.

'We're not going to solve social problems purely and simply by regulating them out of existence,' he continued. 'It's no good telling people this is the wrong thing to do. Long-term solutions are about building social capital and people's own capacity to change.'

He cited research into a Howard government campaign on youth drinking that showed young people vomiting and falling about. 'A significant response was "that's like the sort of, like, party, like I'd like to go to".'

Yet the Commonwealth Department of Health alone spent just under \$40 million last financial year attempting to change our behaviour. The day in early March when the first report came through in Geneva that an official objection was about to be lodged in the World Trade Organisation against the new tobacco plain packaging regime, Health Minister Tanya Plibersek handed over close to \$400,000 to the University of Melbourne and Cancer Council Victoria researchers to try to bulletproof similar measures against challenge in global forums.

The government has failed to provide a scientific rationale for its tobacco plain packaging laws, just as it failed to do with the tax hike on alcopops. Indeed, it actively distorted the facts when it moved to increase excise on pre-mixed spirits by 70 per cent, the biggest tax grab of Swan's first budget.

Then health minister Nicola Roxon portrayed the tax hike as a step to help the health and safety of young women. With higher prices for alcopops, there would be less binge drinking among young women and less of the drunkenness that could expose them to risk. Yet about 75 per cent of ready to drink beverages sold in the country at the time were based on dark spirits-rum and bourbon. The market was dominated by blokes in utes, not wannabe Kardashians.

The Coalition originally opposed the alcopops tax hike, then instead waved it through so the revenue could fund commitments of their own. They fell meekly silent in the plain packaging debate when Roxon huffed and puffed about their donations from 'big tobacco'.



The electorate finds Nanny Statism exasperating, yet the Opposition has had virtually nothing to say: no riposte, no rebuttal, no dismissal of this extraordinary bossing about. When offered opportunities to speak against it, health spokesman Peter Dutton has appeared not just meek, but weak.

There is a tacit admission in the Coalition's lack of a response that they never bothered to tackle the bossy-boots in the Howard years.

But the Howard years are gone. The Coalition has to set new directions-and find major savings.

They may want to avoid talking specifics at the moment, but they cannot stay silent on the principles.

Robb's work is an excellent starting point. So is legal affairs spokesman George Brandis' awakening to the implications of the Bolt case. Abbott's head on assault on what he calls the 'misguided' recommendations of the Finkelstein media inquiry is welcome too. But more is needed.

Nanny Statists are convinced they know best. They are divisive. By taking a strong stand against them Abbott can broaden his support, show his determination to enforce real change and save money by ceasing to fund the follies of a group who will only ever campaign against him.

Even better, the opposition leader can say he is standing up for the worst-off Australians when doing so.

After all, the Institute of Public Affairs' own Julie Novak has shown that Nanny State taxes hit the poorest the hardest.

Her research shows that alcohol and tobacco excises raised an estimated \$9.236 billion in the 2010-11 financial year, and GST on supposedly unhealthy processed foods-fresh food is GST free-raised a further \$3 billion, to reach a total of \$13.1 billion in revenue.

'To put this amount into perspective,' Novak observes, 'these taxes raised more revenue last year than the \$11.4 billion expected to be raised by the controversial carbon and mining taxes next year.'

As Novak spells out, the available evidence shows that Australian households in the lowest income brackets pay up to three times as much in taxes on alcohol, food and tobacco as those on high incomes.

Labor's class war rhetoric is a pitch to old blue collar voters who are deserting Labor. Abbott can play this game too. Nanny Staters forget these people have brains of their own. They know bullshit when they see it. And that is what so much of the Nanny Statists agenda is-moralising, self-aggrandising bullshit.

Australians, as Treasurer Wayne Swan said when Labor first started road testing their new lines



earlier this year, believe in a fair go. They also do not like being talked down to.

There is the Swan fair go; and then there is that old Australian response of 'Fair go, mate'- meaning 'You're joking', 'Come off it' or 'Leave it alone!'

That is how we respond to the Nanny State. The Coalition can win the workers if it captures this mood.