



Enjoying Freedom

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The colonisation and development of modern Australia represented one of the great projects of British liberalism. The liberal tradition of Edmund Burke and his fellow members of the Whig party easily took root in Australian soil, where it thrived. Its influence and legacy matters profoundly to the making of modern Australia and its conception of freedom and democracy. By contrast, the alternative tradition represented by Burke's opponents in the Tory party, with its emphasis on social order and suspicion of democracy, failed to find a lasting purchase.

In his multi-volume work, *Land of Dreams* (MUP 2018), Liberal Party elder and historian, Dr David Kemp, identified three main philosophical tributaries that contributed to the stream of early Australian liberalism, namely, the classical liberalism stemming from Adam Smith, the humanitarian liberalism inspired by the Wilberforce generation of Evangelicals, and finally, the utilitarian liberalism of Jeremy Bentham.

From the classical liberal tradition, Australia adopted its faith in private enterprise, open markets and free trade as the great driving forces for economic progress and prosperity. From the utilitarian tradition, Australia derived its belief that the objective of government is to deliver the greatest happiness to the greatest number of citizens by governing in the interests of the many rather than the few. From the humanitarian liberal strand, Australia imbibed its affirmation of a common humanity and a belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. The interplay between these strands of liberalism in Australian life has been frequently complementary, and, on occasions, conflicting.

Liberalism has been a force for moral, social and economic progress in Australia. From the enlightened Whig liberalism of Captain Arthur Phillip, who pleaded for the humane treatment of Australia's indigenous people, to the reforming liberalism of NSW Governor Richard Bourke, who championed free trade, trial-by-jury, education and religious toleration, liberalism arguably gave inspiration and dynamism to the development of colonial Australian life. The philosophy played a critical role in the transformation of Australia from a disparate collection of convict and free-settler colonies in the 1860s, to a cohesive, independent nation with its own constitution by 1901.

Later known as the "Father of Federation", Sir Henry Parkes emerged as a leading Australian liberal of the latter colonial period. Emigrating from England in 1839, Parkes soon immersed himself in colonial NSW politics, where he championed self-government, free trade, anti-transportation, religious toleration and universal suffrage. Parkes had brought his liberal principles to bear in his support for democratic reforms and in his twin vision for personal liberty flourishing under a constitutional monarchy and a federated Australian nation with its own constitution.

Liberalism made its presence felt in both the Free Trade and Protectionist parties

According to the historian Greg Melleuish, liberalism also influenced the other pioneers of the Australian Constitution, namely, Samuel Griffith, Henry Higgins, Isaac Isaacs, John Downer, Edmund Barton, Alfred Deakin and George Reid. For the most part, they adhered to the classic Whig political philosophy of progress and reform guided by tradition and historical precedent.

By setting a relatively high threshold for the Constitution to be altered by a popular referendum, the drafters reflected Burke's caution about inserting new and untested provisions in the instrument that would certify Australia's nationhood from 1901.

In the early years of Federation, liberalism made its presence felt in both the Free Trade and Protectionist parties. Australia's first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, exhibited Whiggish liberal

instincts in his constitutionalism and moderate conservatism. At the same time, George Reid's agenda for low tariffs and open markets stood in the free trade liberal tradition of John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith and Edmund Burke. While diverging sharply from Reid and his free trade agenda, the protectionist Prime Minister Alfred Deakin nonetheless also embodied liberal principles in his advocacy for humane social reforms, his belief in society as a community of individuals bound together by reciprocal rights, and his overriding commitment to British constitutional liberty.

Menzies vowed to make his new Liberal Party a movement for all Australians, serving the nation as a whole

In what is historically referred to as the 'liberal fusion', the (Liberal) Protectionist Party and the Free Trade Party eventually joined forces in 1909 to form the Commonwealth Liberal Party (CLP) under the leadership of Alfred Deakin and then Joseph Cook. As a broad centre-right party, it represented the first antecedent to the present-day Liberal Party of Australia. The liberal fusion was partly a response to the ascendancy of the Australian Labor Party, which, in 1908, was elected to office for the second time under Prime Minister Andrew Fisher.

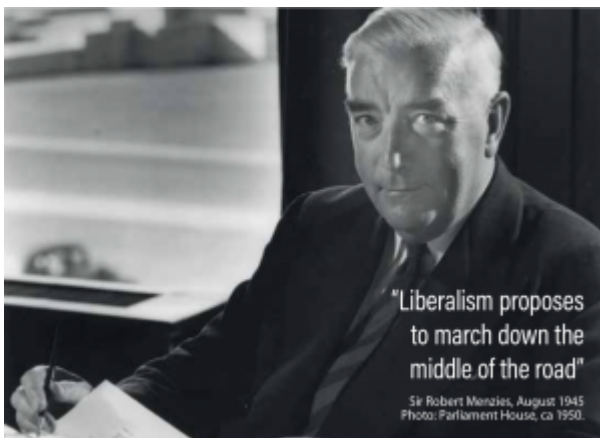
In the Australian context, the liberal tradition is most often seen as shaping the parties of the centre-right yet it also had a palpable influence on the competing centre-left Labor Party, particularly in that Party's emphasis on the individual rights of workers. As Kemp observed, "the first labour party political programs were largely in line with the Liberal consensus of the times". The ALP's moderate approach in its early years meant it would not officially adopt its 'socialist objective' until 1921.

After the outbreak of the Great War, the dominant liberal tradition on the centre-right was eclipsed by a more nationalist ideology as the CLP morphed into the Nationalist Party in 1917 under the leadership of Billy Hughes. In the interwar years, the Nationalist Party itself merged into the United Australia Party (UAP) in 1931 led by Joseph Lyons, Robert Menzies and then Hughes.

It was not until the latter stages of World War II that a more pure form of liberalism was revived with Menzies founding the Liberal Party of Australia in December 1944. Born in 1894, Menzies represented the Australian liberal tradition of Deakin as well as the British Whig liberalism of Gladstone, Macaulay and Edmund Burke. Built from the remnants of the old UAP, the platform of Menzies' new Liberal Party affirmed private property rights, free enterprise, class harmony, cooperation between employer and employee as well as the freedoms of speech, religion and association.

Eschewing the old sectional politics of class warfare and sectarian conflict, Menzies vowed to make his new Liberal Party a movement for all Australians which would serve the interests of the nation as a whole. As Prime Minister for a second time from 1949 to 1966, Menzies presided over a government that would work to resist communism, build the post-war economy, expand education and promote greater opportunities for all individuals.

Following the retirement of Menzies in 1966, the Liberal cause found new advocates. Successive leaders from Harold Holt to John Gorton, William McMahon and Malcolm Fraser applied liberal principles to domestic and foreign policy, favouring a US-led free international order that kept Soviet aggression in check. On necessary economic and social changes, such as the dismantling of the White Australia Policy, they typically adopted a measured and gradualist approach. With the Anglo-American trend towards free-market economics in the 1980s and '90s, Australia followed suit. Even under the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, Australia went down the path of deregulating the financial sector, reducing tariffs, floating the currency and privatising government assets. Despite maintaining the 'socialist objective', the ALP in the Hawke and Keating years, with the support of the Liberal Opposition, envisioned a more economically liberal Australia.



That said, the election of John Howard as Prime Minister in 1996 revitalised Australian liberalism in the modern age. In his exposition of Australian liberalism, Howard described the modern Liberal Party as a 'broad church' of 'classical liberalism and conservatism'. According to Howard, the classical liberal tradition largely stemmed from the philosophy of John Stuart Mill with its emphasis on individual freedom, while the conservative stream flowed from the thought of Edmund Burke with its appeal to tradition and social order.

The election of John Howard as Prime Minister in 1996 revitalised Australian liberalism in the modern age

In office, the Howard government continued the policies of deregulation and privatisation, but also

applied liberal principles to tax reform and industrial relations. Rejecting the illiberal dogma of political correctness and refusing to be held captive to sectional interests, the Howard government defended free speech and affirmed its intention to govern in the broad national interest.

Like Menzies, Howard believed society's citizens were bound together by a Lockean social contract of rights and responsibilities. This essentially underpinned his government's approach of 'mutual obligation' to social welfare policy and citizenship.

After the big-spending habits and highly regulatory approach of the Rudd and Gillard governments, the return of the Coalition to office under Tony Abbott from 2013 helped to restore much of Australia's liberal predisposition. The Abbott government and its successors to date have pursued a liberal agenda of deregulation, free trade, mutual obligation and modest tax reform, even though many argue that the Coalition could go further in the areas of free speech and corporate tax cuts.

Liberalism in Australia has demonstrably been a positive force for human progress, enlightenment and civilisation.

With Scott Morrison replacing Malcom Turnbull as Prime Minister in August 2018, in yet another leadership change, it was widely expected that the Coalition government would lose to Labor at the May 2019 election. The surprise victory of the Morrison government, however, represented a vote of confidence by the 'quiet Australians' for its promises of budget surpluses, personal income tax cuts, job creation and reward for aspiration. Moreover, at a cultural level, the election victory represented an affirmation of traditional Australian freedoms, such as religious liberty and free speech, as well as a repudiation of illiberal government intervention, class warfare and progressive ideology imposed from above. Drawing a line under the past leadership battles, this election victory gives the re-elected Morrison government a clear mandate and opportunity to execute a liberal policy agenda.

While contributing to individual and national progress, liberalism in Australia has had its shortcomings which reflect the fallibility of its human practitioners. In earlier times, avowed liberals frequently betrayed their own creed in the poor treatment of Indigenous Australians, displays of racial prejudice and sexual discrimination, and the fanning of class-conflict and sectarianism.

Contemporary liberals, likewise, have fallen short of their own ideals, particularly in their flirtation with the fad of identity politics, a phenomenon negating both the dignity of individuals and the common humanity affirmed by liberalism. For all these blind-spots, however, liberalism in Australia has demonstrably been a positive force for human progress, enlightenment and civilisation.

While its meaning and application will remain forever contested, it can continue to further the common good providing its apologists remain true to its moral compass and founding ideals



expounded by such figures as Locke, Burke, Wilberforce, Mill, Deakin and Menzies.

David Furse-Roberts is a Research Fellow at the Menzies Research Centre and holds a PhD from the University of New South Wales.