



## Searching For The Fundamentals

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For many Australians, Tony Abbott's first year in office has been marked by a sense of paradox; a sense of a man in government but not in power, left in limbo by an unpopular budget and a belligerent Senate.

For many of the Liberal faithful the mood is simpler. It is merely one of disappointment—disappointment at miscommunication, a misconceived budget strategy, and solemn pledges broken.

Yes: the government has stopped the boats and repealed the mining and carbon taxes. But who supports trade in human misery and tax imposts based on the crassest politics of envy or, worse, of gesture?



These were the basics, the most fundamental of changes. Good red meat, yes, but nothing to really satisfy more epicurean appetites.

Repeal days and a refusal to submit to the endless blackmail of the automotive industry have been similar. Indeed, they should not have been notable. They should be standard practice for any government wanting a competitive and forward-focused economy.

The government has been left floundering in the polls. True, the gap between it and Labor has narrowed to little more than margin of error territory. But it has not truly earned its current standing. It is again a matter of basics. The electorate has acknowledged that it is a government doing what needs to be done at a time of not just international instability but never before seen chaos, horror, barbarity and fear.

But this is a government that has also failed on the fundamentals. It has betrayed one of the most solemn promises it made to its most faithful supporters. It has failed to stand for liberty.

What does this government stand for? The electorate is largely confused. And so are the people who might be able to articulate a message. Both have been betrayed by the broken promise to repeal Section 18C.

The Coalition opposed the measure back in 1995. 'This bill represents an improper and undue restriction on freedom of speech in this country,' Nick Minchin told the Senate at the time.

To justify what we regard as an undue restriction, the government would need overwhelming and compelling evidence that such drastic legislation was necessary for the cohesion of Australian society. In my view, the government has not produced any convincing evidence to justify this draconian law.

I think there is universal agreement on both sides of this chamber—throughout Australian society and probably internationally as well—that Australia is one of the most extraordinarily tolerant nations in the world', he continued. 'We all are proud of the absorption of migrants from all over the world that has occurred particularly since World War II. There has been a remarkable absorption of peoples from all over the world by this society. That is why I really do believe that this law is an insult to the tolerance and acceptance which Australian society has exhibited for the last 50 years.

His words are even truer in an age of suburban jihadis—and so is the need to be able to speak freely.

In opposition, Tony Abbott made this a moral cause; at a time when there are few moral causes in our politics. In government his Attorney-General first mishandled it. He then not only ditched it but ditched it in passing. His moral cause was not even put to a vote in the House of Representatives, let alone the Senate. He left his base confused.



In politics there is one thing worse than having a tin ear. It is standing for nothing.

‘We’ll build a stronger economy so everyone can get ahead’, Abbott said in his campaign speech last August. ‘We’ll scrap the carbon tax ... We’ll get the budget back under control by ending Labor’s waste. We’ll stop the boats. And we’ll build the roads of the 21st century because I hope to be an infrastructure prime minister who puts bulldozers on the ground and cranes into our skies.’

The boats and carbon tax may have disappeared but the rest remains amorphous.

At the end of the five-week winter parliamentary recess, the Liberals’ chief poll strategist, federal director Brian Loughnane, reportedly told the federal cabinet there should be ‘no more ideology’.

It would have been better to tell them—and the backbench too—that the bumbles, gaffes and mixed messaging on budget items and other policies that filled the period the government should have used to regather and refine its strategy should come to an end.

Ideology is vital in government. Ideology creates a sense of purpose and legitimacy. A government with an ideology can say, ‘We are here because of this, to do that’.

When the 2010 election produced a hung parliament, the Coalition needed to be ready to go to the polls at any time. Policy work began immediately.

Andrew Robb, the man in charge of the task, knew his side needed to keep their powder dry. He knew they needed policies available immediately in case the minority government fell, but at the same time the frontbench might have a full three years to refine the detail.

To deal with the issues, Robb formulated four key principles he believed reflect the Coalition’s core values, but also served to illustrate the fundamental differences with Labor—four principles that would provide the pillars for the platform when the time came for it to be unveiled.

They were: living within our means, reversing the Nanny State, backing our strengths, and restoring a sense of personal responsibility.

In the end they were almost superfluous. Labor was the story: its failures, its broken promises, its leadership.

The Coalition and its plans received little scrutiny. They were elected because they were not Labor. Even despite the current polling, should an election be held tomorrow they would probably be returned again for exactly the same reason.

But this has meant the Coalition has been elected because of what they are not, not because of what they are. And to use that most hackneyed of beltway phrases, they have failed to provide an adequate narrative, an explanation of what they are about and what they intend to do.

It is an irony that the best explanation of Australian liberalism delivered since the Abbott

government came into power, came from someone who left politics a decade ago, David Kemp. His Alfred Deakin Lecture, delivered a week ahead of the budget, has been one of the strongest statements securing the mantle of good government for the Liberal Party.

He talked of Labor as a party of sectional interests, of the state socialism that had caused the Australian economy to stagnate in the first three decades of federation and contrasted that with what Menzies ushered in.

For Menzies, liberal thought and good government were all about the elevation of the individual,' Kemp said. 'The public interest, he believed, consisted in the shared interests of each of the individuals who made up society. While every individual was different, and each had, Menzies believed, a divine spark within them, each shared common interests which it was the obligation of government to attempt to advance. Menzies brought back to the centre of Australian politics and government, through the Liberal Party, the understanding that the power of creativity, innovation and invention, of enterprise, and entrepreneurship that drove economic and social progress came from the individual and nowhere else, and that it was the shared interest of all, the public interest, for government policy to recognise that freedom was essential for those capacities to be expressed.

Economic liberalism was but one aspect of his wider philosophy of government and society. His emphasis on choice in health, education, housing, low debt, restraint in spending, his belief in private enterprise, reward for effort and opposition to centralised economic planning, all reflected his deep sense of the spirit of liberal thought—that people knew their own best interests, that education and reason would empower them to achieve these interests, and that Australia would thrive if government supported them in their endeavours by good laws and honest administration.

There was an echo of his words in part of the message Abbott delivered to mark his first twelve months in office. 'Over the next two years, the government will continue its work building a stronger economy because that means more jobs and more prosperity.'

There have been moments when Treasurer Joe Hockey appeared to begin tackling perceptions that the budget is unfair by talking about how growth increases fairness by increasing national prosperity.

But these have been isolated examples. Bizarrely, in the seventieth anniversary of the creation of the Liberal Party, Menzies' heirs have been unable to articulate what he spelt out so clearly in the 1940s. Their sole borrowing of 'lifters, not leaners' has served as an embarrassment. It has been robbed of context.

The government's message has been confused. Its purpose is unclear. It has left its strongest supporters disappointed.



No wonder it is failing to carry the electorate.