



How the Liberals have found their inner Kevin

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Whether there's now much difference between the Liberals and the ALP is a constant topic of conversation among the members of each party. Liberals ask how a \$1 trillion of debt and a commitment to net zero emissions is different from anything Labor would do, while ALP members question whether there is any point to a future Labor government if it's not promising to raise taxes.

Speeches to the National Press Club over the past week by Scott Morrison and Anthony Albanese don't provide much of an indication of what is the difference between them. Each might protest there are differences in philosophy, and there might be, but those differences can be difficult to spot in practice.

A section from [the Prime Minister's speech this week](#) is an example.

"The government's University Commercialisation Plan will align these research priorities with our Modern Manufacturing Strategy. We're going to fuse them. It will focus research effort on the



same six National Manufacturing Priorities. In November, I announced the first element of this plan, once [*sic*] I am particularly excited about, the Trailblazer Universities programme [*sic*].”

And a little later: “Today I am announcing the cornerstone of the government’s new approach to turning great Australian ideas into commercial success – a \$1.6 billion program [*sic*] called Australia’s Economic Accelerator.”

Once upon a time Liberals believed an Economic Accelerator was a policy to cut tax and red tape.

Leaving aside the issue of an Australian prime minister promising to “fuse” together things, his plans, priorities, strategies, programmes, programs, trailblazers and accelerators smack of a bureaucratic and technocratic mindset the Coalition appears to be in thrall to.

It’s a language and a way of speaking straight out of the Kevin Rudd School of Management. On some issues the Liberals and Labor might differ, but their method of governing is identical. Eventually, the way something is done turns into what is done, which is a point lost on the Coalition and is the great insight of the old saying about hammers and nails and problems.

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In his Press Club speech, Morrison talked of his “plans” more than a dozen times. In his speech, Albanese of his “plans” no less than 20 times. Presumably the parties’ focus group testing is telling them voters want not just one plan, but many.

Few Liberal MPs would have heard of [Friedrich Hayek](#), and even fewer would know what he said about planning – “The more the state ‘plans’ the more difficult planning becomes for the individual”. When the people want “plans” and politicians agree it’s no mystery why the trajectory of public policy in Australia is towards more planning and bigger government.

Towards the end of his Press Club speech Morrison lamented the fact that “only 40 per cent of Australia’s researchers work in private industry, well below the OECD average”. Surely part of the reason for this is that when the government showers the country’s public universities with plans and promises, there’s little incentive for a bright young researcher to swap the largesse of the taxpayer for the uncertainty of the private sector and the free market.

It’s worth putting into context the Prime Minister’s speech this week. It’s the product of 8½ years of Coalition government. More than one Liberal Party supporter (and more than one Liberal MP) might ask what’s changed in that time. To many it seems as if the big things haven’t changed much and neither have the little things.

At the end of last year the Australia Council awarded \$80,000 to a cabaret artist whose



performance includes writing abusive messages about the Prime Minister on particular parts of her body. This is in the wake of COVID-19, when the performing arts around the country are devastated and an organisation such as the [Sydney Symphony Orchestra is on the verge of going broke](#).

Gifts of \$80,000 from the government to cabaret singers makes the claim “We’re all in this together” somewhat hollow.

As small business owners struggle through the effects of shadow lockdowns and plan how to make the following week’s payroll they can contemplate how different their life would have been had they become a taxpayer-funded cabaret singer – or a public servant or a politician.

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