



Why Should Conservatives Support Malcolm Turnbull's Liberals?

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When a few days ago Immigration Minister Peter Dutton urged “rusted on conservatives” to continue supporting the Liberal Party he was giving voice to the hopes of every federal Liberal MP sitting on a close margin.

The trouble is that while Dutton wants the support of “rusted on conservatives”, his party haven’t returned the favour.

Under Tony Abbott “rusted on conservatives” saw the Liberals increase the top marginal rate of income tax and abandon the cause of freedom of speech.

Under Malcolm Turnbull “rusted on conservatives” have seen a Liberal government raid their superannuation, implement an arbitrary tax that’s reduced the value of the bank shares they own, and promise higher income tax rates by increasing the Medicare levy.



Those “rusted on conservatives” who while not personally affected by these Liberal policies, nevertheless still believe that old conservative chestnut – “you can’t tax your way to prosperity”. Many will have looked at the most recent budget papers and seen that over the next five years the taxes and revenue collected by the federal government as a share of GDP will grow by 10 per cent.

A “rusted on conservative” with a grandchild among the 700,000 Australians who are unemployed sees a Liberal government doing not much to reduce the barriers to young people getting a job.

When “rusted on conservatives” raise these issues with Liberal MPs they usually get one of two responses – “At least we stopped the boats” or [“Labor will be worse”](#).

This is not say there haven’t been some Liberal achievements. Abbott repealed the carbon tax, and on freedom of speech Turnbull went further than his predecessor dared. But, overall since the Liberals’ came to office in 2013 it’s been pretty slim pickings for “rusted on conservatives”. Indeed it’s been pretty slim pickings for anyone who believes that a Liberal government should argue for their principles instead of just copying Labor.

Preparing for worse measures

When [Tony Abbott talks of the Liberals being at risk](#) of slipping their philosophical moorings he’s reflecting the views of not only “rusted on conservatives”, but also how economic liberals see the Liberal’s policies such as the bank tax as fundamentally wrong and as preparing the ground for even worse measures from Labor. Which is exactly what happened when the Labor administration in South Australia introduced its own version of what Morrison did.

The fact that it was under Abbott himself that the Liberals’ philosophical slippage started is absolutely true. But that doesn’t negate the merits of the arguments Abbott is making. And in any case, Turnbull promised to be better than Abbott. Turnbull promised to lead a “thoroughly Liberal government”.

“Rusted on conservatives” – and many other kinds of voters beside – can easily appreciate the simple points Abbott made last week.

“We have an abundance of energy – but the world’s highest power prices; an abundance of land – and property prices to rival Hong Kong’s; some of the world’s smartest people – yet with school rankings behind Kazakhstan.”

What worries “rusted on conservatives” is that for the time being there’s no sign the Liberals are going to improve. In a speech a fortnight ago to the Liberals’ federal council, federal Treasurer Scott Morrison said the Liberals would no longer “slavishly follow past political orthodoxies, simply



because they worked before”. This statement would have been a concern to anyone who thinks that the “past political orthodoxies” of economic reform under Hawke, Keating, and Howard were actually pretty good for Australia.

The last time the Liberals warmly embraced a strategy of just giving people what they wanted the party was led by Billy McMahon.

In his speech Morrison basically said that from now on the Liberals would forget about arguing for their political principles and would concentrate instead on giving the people what they want. At one level that’s unobjectionable. Democracy is all about the government reflecting the will of the people. But for Australia, we have a problem when giving the people what they want is unaffordable, and when 51 per cent of the people receive their income from the taxes paid by the other 49 per cent.

When political parties abandon the task of policy leadership, they start to lose the reason for their existence.

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