



What The Liberals Must Learn From Labor

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The Labor Party's [review of its federal election debacle](#) was delivered to the party's national executive on Thursday. Apparently the review has concluded the ALP ran a poor campaign, had too many policies and was led by an unpopular leader. Labor didn't need six months to work that out – they knew that on the Sunday morning after the election. Since the poll in May, as the former deputy leader Tanya Plibersek so nicely put it, the ALP has been doing “its therapy in public”.

While Labor engages in its seemingly endless soul-searching, it should remember one thing: it's losing elections but it's winning the battle of ideas.

That Labor has won only three of the last 10 federal elections has been pointed out endlessly. It's true that if you judge Labor only by the number of its victories at the polls, it's lost many more electoral battles than it has won.

However, if you judge Labor not by its election results but by its success in deciding the nation's policy agenda, on any fair assessment you'd have to say that for at least the past two decades



Labor has been winning comprehensively.

Almost every contour of public discussion about economic and social policy in Australia has in recent years been determined by the Labor Party and its allies on the left. The only two exceptions to this rule are foreign policy and border security.

Discussion about taxes is centred on [debates about fairness and inequality](#), not on how to cut them. Industrial relations policy is regarded as the means to punish bad bosses, not to create jobs. And energy policy is focused on how to increase renewables, not how to bring down power costs to internationally competitive levels. The big social policy programs implemented by Coalition governments since 2013 have been the [National Disability Insurance Scheme](#) and the so-called [Gonski education reforms](#). Both were Labor initiatives. That's happening at the macro level.

At the micro level taxpayer-funded universities are sacking academics who challenge the extremist climate change orthodoxy. Meanwhile, Commonwealth public servants are using arbitrary and unchecked powers under a law designed to curb foreign influence and passed by the Liberals themselves to persecute individuals organising and participating in conferences aligned with conservative causes. Not a single left-wing or green-aligned group has had the law applied to it. Attorney-General Christian Porter, who is responsible for the law, says he's got no problem with the law and the only issue is the way it's been administered. (Presumably the Attorney-General will have that same attitude to the law when Labor is in power.)

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It's no consolation to the Labor MPs sitting in Parliament on the opposition benches, but there's lots of parallels between the ALP in the 2010s and the Liberals in the 1980s.

Back then Labor governments were implementing the policies of the centre-right. Since 2013, Liberal governments have been implementing the policies of the centre-left.

All of this goes to the question of the purpose of political parties. Success and failure can't be measured only by parliamentary seats and ministerial salaries won and lost – a point which hopefully will be made by Labor's election review.

Why Labor has been so successful in the battle of ideas and so bad at elections is the subject of a much longer discussion. Partly it might be because the labour movement has always a movement of philosophy, not politics. On the flip side, the Liberal Party has traditionally disdained philosophy for pragmatism. Of course there's nothing wrong with pragmatism. It wins you elections. But pragmatism doesn't change anything.

The ALP and the left have a far better appreciation of the role and power of bureaucratic and



cultural institutions than do the Liberals. Labor doesn't win as many elections as the Liberals, but when Labor does win it does things. When the Liberals win elections, they're in government but not in power.

The global financial crisis and its ongoing consequences must also help explain what's happened. The times suit the ideology of the centre-left. And depending on the results of the British general election and the American presidential ballot, we could discover that the times might even suit a modern-day version of socialism.

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