

How not to win government: The GOP drifting without a rudder

Tim Wilson

In the 2008 presidential primary season, the Republican Party has split into at least half a dozen constituencies. Looking at just how divided the Grand Old Party is on substantive issues of policy and philosophy provides a lesson for Australian Liberals—the Republicans have fallen into a trap of their own making.

When parties lose government soul searching and a blame game ensues. The divisions within the party become apparent. This is particularly a problem for parties of the right. They tend to be united by an opposition to the left, more than a deeply rooted, uniting philosophical thread.

Following the Goldwater/Reagan era it was clear what the Republicans stood for—free markets, conservative (but not reactionary) social policy, strong defence and winding back the welfare state. In 2008 it is far from a united front. Instead the GOP has almost completely split into its different constituent bases—small government conservatives, libertarians, and social and religious conservatives.

Trade policy provides a stark illustration of how deeply the GOP is splitting. The Goldwater/Reagan narrative of the ‘promise’ of free trade no longer unites Republicans. In the current presidential primary season, each candidate position on trade policy reflects their different constituencies.

Ron Paul represents the GOP libertarians who believe government should have no role in trade policy and fights against free trade agreements (FTAs) and participation in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Mitt Romney and John McCain represent economic conservatives who maintain a strong commitment to open trade and they seek to achieve it through the best possible means, including FTAs and the WTO, as well as a commitment to retraining affected Americans. Until his withdrawal, Giuliani rep-

resented the sceptical Republicans that question free trade, but ultimately accept it is more beneficial than not.

And then, there is Mike Huckabee. Huckabee questions deeply the benefits of free trade, with passion that would win accolades in a Fabian Society meeting. He argues that America needs ‘fair trade’; that free trade is hurting jobs and uses trade policy as justification for China bashing. There is as much xenophobic thrust in his opposition, as there are distortions in his understanding of trade economics.

But trade policy is not an isolated problem for Republicans. Often conservative criticism of the left attacks its capacity to be captured by vested interests. The tag now applies to much of the Republican Party; following years of infiltration from religious groups. The party now suffers from a myopic focus on religious conservative values, rather than on uniting principles such as small government, fiscal discipline and individual responsibility.

Paul and Huckabee are at the ideological extremes of a very diverse GOP. But the moderate candidates are not much more attractive to a broad Republican base. Ultimately Giuliani’s ‘progressive’ views alienated him from too many Republicans, and Romney’s Mormonism dogs him in a party that has over-indulged in evangelical Christians.

The comeback kid, John McCain is probably the closest candidate to uniting a broad Republicanism. McCain is socially conservative, but lacks overt religiosity and hence doesn’t alienate the more progressive arms, while having a fearless record on government spending and tax cuts. McCain also crosses the political divide by recognising a role for government to address externalities such as climate change; which is becoming a big issue for religious conservatives who believe we need to be better custodians of God’s earth.

The real challenge for the Republican Party lies ahead of it, not behind it. The party is not at its lowest ebb yet. The ori-

gins of the problems Republicans now face come from using social policy as a means to foster a more exclusive Republicanism. The effect was to strain relations with many of the historically core supporters of the GOP. The only members who remain happy are some religious conservatives.

The lesson for Australian Liberals is to avoid the ideological split that has crippled the Republicans. Since the 2007 election there has been a lot of chatter about whether Liberals should become the new champions for social progressivism or stick with an electorally populist social conservatism. It should do neither.

The Liberal Party should not seek to become the new political party for social change. But equally it should not perpetuate social positions the public-at-large has moved on from. It should find common ground amongst its members and seek a position that is palatable to the broadest diversity of its constituency, focused around the uniting principle of individual responsibility.

Thankfully, unlike Republicans, Liberals are not considering a departure from economic conservatism. The most recently controlled Republican Congresses used big government conservatism to offset the affect of narrowing its base through exclusive social policy.

Towards the end of its eleven years in power, the Howard government departed from its commitment to economic conservatism. In 2007 the Labor Party went into polling day arguing for tighter government spending. Nevertheless, the Liberal Party’s commitment to economic conservatism remains much deeper than a short blight on its otherwise attractive record.

In the end the Republican Party has a constituency with very narrow social views that are obsessed with a few minority issues, and a small band of conservatives who are disinterested in fiscal prudence. The Liberal Party would do poorly to follow their lead.

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