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'What have the neo-liberals ever done for us?' as Monty Python would (probably) ask

The *Life of Brian* is not the best Monty Python film.* Its satire of religion, unlike general Python jibes against authority, looks dated. Its political satire though—'What have the Romans ever done for us'—is an entirely different matter. For the left is as ideologically straight jacketed as it has ever been, and any politician stupid enough to clothe themselves in its philosophies is immediately constrained.

Everyone knows the scene. It is Jerusalem, in Jesus' day, and a tiny faction of Judean rebels are plotting against their Roman occupiers. 'They've bled us white, the bastards,' the leader declares. 'They've taken everything we had, and not just from us, from our fathers, and from our fathers' fathers,' he continues, before finishing off with a nicely rhetorical 'And what have they ever given us in return?' At which his hapless band start chiming in. 'The aqueduct?' 'The sanitation.' 'The roads.' 'Irrigation.' 'Medicine.' 'Education.' 'And the wine.' (Much agreement follows.) 'Public baths.' 'And it's safe to walk the streets at night.'

The time has come to shut the conservation down. 'All right,' the rebel leader begins, 'but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?' 'Brought peace?' a follower suggests. 'Shut up!' the explosion comes.

The politicians, public intellectuals and commentators who have spent much of the period since the collapse of Lehman Brothers celebrating the death of capitalism seem to have learnt from Monty Python.

They seem smart enough to avoid finishing their rabble rousing with rhetorical questions. But anyone preparing the counter case should ask: 'What

have the neo-liberals ever done for us?'

The answer, of course, is freedom and opportunity, but freedom and opportunity are complex concepts. Freedom and opportunity mean different things to different people.

The deregulation of telecommunications has combined with new technology to make an unimaginable difference to our lives, but talking about it seems impossibly wonky.

Other areas get impossibly complicated, like relaxed liquor laws. Freedom and opportunity mean different things to different people. For most people, relaxed liquor laws have been something to take advantage of. The laws though are under threat because for some people they have been something to abuse.

Travel is a different matter. What have the neo-liberals ever done for us? Well, thanks to deregulation and competition, we can fly from Sydney to Melbourne on a basic fare that costs less than the cab ride from Tullamarine to the CBD. And even that taxi ride is a little cheaper thanks to the free market. True, we pay a few dollars to travel the CityLink toll road, but we make that money up with the time we save driving down a freeway. The idling fee run up in traffic jams in city blocks once the toll road ends adds far more to the bill.

We do not travel every day. Most days, though, we buy something. Remember when the vast majority of shops closed at 5:30 on weekdays and midday on Saturdays—and stayed closed until Monday morning? (This question does not apply to residents of Western Australia. They still live with something similar.)

Remember the excitement when late night shopping first arrived? Remember when we could then do our shopping on Saturday afternoons, on more weeknights, then, finally, on Sundays?

What have the neo-liberals ever done for us?

Well, they let me buy petrol when I needed it, which lets me enjoy a whole range of other freedoms.

When I got my drivers licence most service stations in my home state of South Australia closed at 6:00 pm and 1:00 on Saturdays. Some, I think, were beginning to open on Sundays, but they were few and far between. Then there were the stations on what had been the city fringe when the legislation that governed their trading hours was proclaimed.

Fifteen kilometres or so south from the centre of Adelaide there is a suburb called Darlington. In the fifties, maybe the sixties, it was where the writ of the law ended—or at least where less restrictive trading hours began. On the main road out of the city, stretching for maybe more than a kilometre, was a string of service stations. If you lived where I grew up, though, it could be a round trip of close to an hour to get there.

The only alternatives were a handful of 24 hour self-service pumps. I only remember two, one in the CBD and one in the city's east, but there must have been more. A few more, anyway. They were fed with 20 cent coins. And they were still often your only hope of getting home as recently as the mid eighties.

I remember standing by the pump in King William Street in the middle of the city centre late one night after some university party aged 19, filling my battered old orange Gallant wearing a bed-sheet toga and an ivy wreath on my head.

What have the neo-liberals ever done for us?

Well, at least today's teenagers can look stupid somewhere a little less public.

* *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is.