On 30 March 2016 at the Elizabeth Couchman Hall in Melbourne, the Young Liberal Movement (Victoria) held the inaugural Sir George Reid Lecture entitled ‘George Reid: Champion of Liberalism’ delivered by the Hon. Dr David Kemp. The following is an excerpt from that lecture.

All of us interested in politics, and especially those who are thinking about a political career, need to decided what kind of politician we want to be. George Reid’s career raises many of the big issues, including one of the biggest: what if you stand for something and lose, as Reid did for free trade?

What if the tide of opinion is moving against you, yet you know (or believe) that what you are standing for is right—right for most people and right for the country? Is it better to be right or better to be on the winning side? Is it better to be judged by the opinion of the day or the judgement of history? On free trade, Reid is judged by the history and stands tall.
There is no getting away from the importance of ideas in politics. If you don’t have your own ideas, then your actions will be driven by someone else’s ideas. If you don’t have your own ideas, you risk becoming a pawn of the political correctness or the conventional wisdom of the day. If you don’t have your own ideas, you are likely to find yourself at the mercy of the prejudices or the selfish interests of others. Or, in some ways even worse, your own prejudices.

You can’t get away from ideas. The only question is: whose ideas are controlling your action?

Reid was a brilliant politician. He is fascinating character because his career showed a constant tension between winning on the day and sticking by principle. Overwhelmingly Reid stuck to principle, and often won, but he spent much of his energy fighting against utopian and fallacious policy ideas which he believed would damage the interests of the mass of the people and Australia, and especially those being retailed by the Labor Parties of the time.

Reid was like Menzies. He believed in a politics of principle, rather than in a politics which was driven by lobby groups and powerful pressures. If Robert Menzies is the principle founder of the Liberal Party, then probably Reid (with a bit of a stretch) could be thought of as the grandfather of the Liberal Party.

Menzies inherited from Reid many of the elements of a policy and political agenda that he used to transform Australia into one of the most successful countries in the world. Menzies was 10 years old when Reid was Prime Minister. And in many ways of course, he had faced a political situation which had deteriorated greatly since Reid’s time. And indeed it was the outcome of the battles that Reid fought that actually defined a lot of the problems, particularly the problem of socialism and communism in the unions, and in national policy leading to the attempt to nationalise the banks under Chifley, that came out of the very battles that Reid had first defined and attempted to win.

Reid was a great speaker. He was eloquent, he was highly intelligent, he was a big-hearted man with a sparkling platform wit.

He was a child of nineteenth century liberalism as represented by the British Liberal Party. Unlike Menzies, Reid grew up in a era when liberal ideas provided the dominant principles on which public policy was based. The nineteenth century was a great liberal time. The idea that society, based on individual liberty was the road to human advancement and economic progress was widely accepted.

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Freedom of speech in the press, freedom of religion, freedom to establish businesses and sell goods, freedom to trade with a conventional wisdom of the age—the central value of the age was the importance of individual liberty. By the 1880s, liberal parties of that name had been formed across the eastern colonies in Australia. Their aim was to protect liberty and advance reform.

The dominant thinkers, the sort of intellectual fathers of both that liberalism and Reid’s liberalism were people such as John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer. Mill was the main figure fighting against the political correctness of the day—and if you want to read a case against political correctness and how to deal with it, Mill’s essay on liberty remains a must-read. Mill argued for unpopular ideas, such as equal rights for men and women, freedom of speech to say unpopular things—even unchristian things. He saw the need to correct the extraordinary maldistribution of wealth and income in England which he said had never been based on the principles on which private property should be based.

Herbet Spencer was the libertarian of the age. Where Mill had faith that democratic government could reform and make society better, Spencer thought government was corrupt, inefficient, ignorant, and was likely to make things worse. He was the father of laissez-faire. Reid wasn’t a supporter of laissez-faire—he was more close to Mill than he was to Spencer. But some of the prominent liberals in Reid’s party saw Spencer as their Aristotle.

Reid had grown tired of the constant refrain that the protectionists were the true liberals. Liberalism, he said, was not invented in Victoria:

Liberalism in Australia is the child of the great liberalism of the mother country, and the child of liberalism throughout the nations. Reid also said, sounding like Menzies in this statement:

The future of humanity in Australia lies not in it curtailing its freedom nor restricting its freedom, nor limiting its opportunity, but in allowing the genius for competition, for excelling, for acquiring, to reach its utmost altitude consistent with the rights of others.

It’s appropriate in these days when liberalism is under challenge once again from political correctness and the efforts of governments to interfere in every aspect of life, to honour the memory, the example and the political courage of George Reid.