

A Philosophy of Liberalism

A personal reflection on a busy life and on the importance of individual responsibility

Andrew Robb AO

From as early as I can remember, my mother and father instilled in me and my eight brothers and sisters the conviction that opportunity and freedom would come through education, personal responsibility and self-belief; that our destiny was largely in our own hands—how hard we studied and worked, the opportunities we took, and how we dealt with people. I grew to believe that I was responsible for charting my own course—that I was free to follow my dreams, make my own mistakes, and take the consequences of my decisions.

Importantly, my parents never seemed to convey any resentment or jealousy that others might have more than we had. There was no chip on the shoulder; rather, there was a notion of ‘blue sky’, a sense that if we really wanted what others had—whatever that might be—then the opportunity was there to achieve it. Ambition was presented as a good thing, something to be nurtured and applauded, and not only in sport. I embraced these simple truths as a philosophy.

Many other life experiences have served to further trench, but also add to, these principles.

I have worked in the public sector, the private sector and the very private sector—the political machine. In the early to mid-1980s, I was the chief executive of the Cattle Council of Australia and then the National Farmers Federation. During those years I was involved in negotiating Federal land rights legislation pertaining to the Northern Territory.

As it turned out, the land rights legislation was a totally inadequate response to the real issue—namely, the collapse of personal dignity and self-esteem

among many Aborigines, particularly the young. In seeking to come to grips with indigenous issues, I spent many, many weeks over a period of years in the Northern Territory, the Kimberley and North Queensland talking to cattlemen, to business people, to officials and to other locals. I visited Aboriginal settlements and outback towns.

On many occasions, I would be taken to a bend in a river on a cattle station and shown where 100, 200 or 300 Aborigines had lived for decades, with the men employed on the stations as stockmen and drovers, the older men as gardeners, and the women in the homestead. In many cases, schools were provided for the children. Aboriginal people were disadvantaged, but they had work and self-esteem, a reasonable quality of life, strong mentoring from their elders, schooling and strict controls on alcohol.

Of course, all that ceased in the early 1970s following the understandable granting of equal wages in the pastoral industry, along with the misplaced provision of unfettered and generous welfare handouts. The related exodus of these people from their ancestral lands saw them living in settlements and on the fringes of towns. The highly disturbing result in many Aboriginal communities today is that we have basically poisoned recent generations; poisoned their bodies with alcohol and other substances and poisoned their spirit and self-belief with handouts and welfare dependency. In many places, we are seeing a total breakdown in the social order.

As I was driven around vast cattle stations, I witnessed cattlemen come across an Aboriginal elder known to them. The mutual respect was palpable.

On the same day, I saw the same cattlemen come across young Aboriginal men seriously affected by years of alcohol and aimlessness, young men stripped of any personal dignity or self-esteem. The cattlemen’s contempt was palpable. The chilling fact is that the very fabric of a proud and fascinating culture, many thousands of years in the making, has been brought to its knees in less than 30 years by well-intentioned but seriously misguided policy.

For me, the lesson is clear. People are very, very responsive to incentives, for good or bad. The wrong incentives, no matter how well-meaning, can debilitate a community in no time. In this case, unconditional handouts have provided the seeds of destruction in a breathtakingly short period of time. It is why every piece of public policy in this place is important. It is why every piece of public policy must be measured against a set of principles. It is why philosophy matters.

Clearly, restoring personal dignity and self-esteem is the bedrock of any solution for our Aboriginal communities. In many places this means replacing the grog, the petrol and the paint with work. To this end, I commend the direction outlined by the Governor-General in his speech to the opening of the 41st Parliament.

During my years at the National Farmers Federation I was involved with two major industrial disputes: the Mudginberri abattoir dispute and the wide combs dispute. These two disputes proved that success is never easy, regardless of the merits of any particular cause. Importantly, they also proved the underlying strength of the employer–employee relationship in Australia. Mudginberri sought ►

to establish a right for employer and employees to negotiate terms and conditions which best met the particular nature of that abattoir's operation. The wide combs dispute sought to establish the right of employers and employees to agree to adopt new technology—in this case, a wider shearing comb—on a workplace-by-workplace basis.

Nearly 20 years later, it is now difficult to conceive that these rights were in dispute. Yet Mudginberri took 27 court cases, two years of litigation and a \$10 million farmers' fighting fund to win. The wide combs dispute had to contend with bullets flying, shearing sheds being torched and paid thugs intimidating communities. These two disputes were only won, despite the belligerent stance of the unions, because there existed—and, I believe, still exists—a fundamentally healthy and mature relationship between employer and employee in Australia, with a mutual trust that the benefits of change can and will be shared.

The disputes also highlighted the fact that no two workplaces among the millions of workplaces in Australia are the same. The more the Liberal Government does to free up employers and their employees to settle on terms and conditions which maximize the unique opportunities in each workplace, the more jobs and the more prosperity we will see. From my experience, many employers have come to realize that, if they give their team the right incentives, they can move mountains.

I have also observed that this power of negotiating one to one has parallels in the international trade arena. My experience on the international scene includes expanding a commercial business into the New Zealand market in the late 1990s; advising major New Zealand companies on their move into Australia; facilitating large commercial projects in Asia, particularly in Thailand; employing trade lobbyists in Washington in the 1980s and negotiating with the European Union, the United States and Japan on agricultural trade matters over a decade. These ex-

periences have long convinced me that the growing emphasis on trade agreements negotiated bilaterally is not only in Australia's best interests, but also a harbinger of real progress on trade liberalization on a global basis.

While multi-country World Trade Organisation negotiations obviously hold out the prospect of more comprehensive liberalization, they proceed at a snail's pace, if at all, whereas bilateral trade agreements are delivering major

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benefits in our lifetime. The Closer Economic Relations agreement with New Zealand is a wonderful case in point. Successful bilateral agreements, rather than stymieing progress on multi-country agreements, are in fact creating a competitive imperative for non-participating countries to be involved, leading the way incrementally to a more comprehensive removal of trade barriers.

Over the last 33 years in my roles as an animal health officer working in abattoirs and saleyards and on farms; as a tutor in macro-economics working with highly motivated, mature-age university students; as an agricultural economist and farm organization and political party executive setting up and running an Australia-wide direct marketing IT company and, in recent years, as an adviser on business strategy to global companies and large organizations, I have been regularly to all corners of Australia. Working with people and communities from Albany to Cairns and from Hobart to the North West Shelf has left me a committed federalist. I have a great distrust of any central

power, by itself, understanding and effectively meeting the needs of far-flung communities and businesses.

While I see the Federal Government having a critical leadership role to play, I agree strongly with the sentiment expressed by Sir Robert Menzies in 1960 when he said:

there is a deep instinct in the Australian mind for a system of Government which, by a division of legislative and administrative powers, limits centralisation (or 'control from Canberra') and protects a measure of individual freedom by not giving us one set of rules—even elected rulers—who have absolute power. In a great island continent with widely scattered communities, this is a healthy sentiment.

No matter how much it might irk members of parliament from time to time—and, I suspect, me in the future—I believe that our great history of stability and resourcefulness owes much to the decisions about local issues being taken locally. It owes much to the balance between our three tiers of government, including the sovereignty and authority of the States and the role played by local government in Australia. This balance has served Australia well.

The federalist imperative was further reflected in the intent of our founding fathers that the Senate be a States' house of review, a chamber designed to ensure that the interests of communities in each State, large and small, were taken into account by the government of the day. In recent decades, this intent has been progressively eroded, especially with minor parties in some cases being far more concerned about propagating an extreme Left, international agenda than considering the impact of national policies on local communities in their State. This is one key reason why I favour consideration being given by a simple act of parliament to dividing each State into six regions with two Senators selected from each

region—one at each election.

Drawing Senators from a smaller area within a State and being accountable to that area would go some way to restoring the original intent of the founding fathers for a strong State perspective to be present in the Federal Parliament without requiring any change to our proven institutions. This imperative to preserve our proven institutions underscored my support for an Australian head of state involving only minimal change to our Constitution. I still see, some time in the future, an Australian head of state providing a powerful and stabilizing symbol without detracting from our proud history and the stability of our institutions.

My last seven years working with the top end of town suggest to me that our capacity for risk-taking is fading. Our great entrepreneurial spirit is residing in fewer and fewer people. Perhaps

our self-belief is being eroded. The clamour for endless reporting, misplaced accountability and draconian regulations are choking the boldness of business and need a serious rethink. In my view, you cannot legislate for ethical behaviour. The values of a society and its institutions dictate acceptable ethical behaviour.

From the perspective of personal responsibility within the national and international context, I do expect that two types of security issues will dominate in the years ahead. The first is our national security. The world has changed dramatically since 9/11. Terrorists have declared war on us for ideological reasons of their own, and there is no easy way out of this conflict, which is not of our making. Appeasement is not an option. It will be a long fight, and we will need our traditional friends.

The second security issue is one of

personal security. My years of political observation have led me to understand very clearly that what the majority of Australians aspire to most is a secure life—put simply, food on the table, a job, a manageable mortgage, a holiday, a movie with the kids, an ability to exercise some choices. To this end, maintaining a strong economy is paramount. In particular, I would like to convey, especially to our young people, that true happiness and true freedom come from achievement—using whatever God-given talents we have to chart our own course, to take the consequences of our decisions, to have a go. If we do this, success and security will follow.

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IPA

Failing to Indoctrinate

Kevin Donnelly

Is education too politically correct and are students in danger of being indoctrinated? Judged by the actions of Professor Wayne Sawyer, President of the NSW English Teachers Association and editor of *English in Australia*, the answer is 'yes'.

In the current issue of the journal, Sawyer bemoans the fact that ex-students voted to re-elect the Howard Government and argues that this is evidence that English teachers have failed in their job.

Sawyer states: 'We knew the truth about Iraq before the election. Did our former students just not care? We knew before the election that 'children overboard' was a crock, but, as it was yesterday's news, did they not care about that either? Has English failed not only to create critical generations, but also failed to create humane ones?'

Such is the current state of English

teaching that it is possible for a senior representative of the subject's professional association, the AATE, to openly argue that it is the role of the English teacher to teach students, as future voters, the correct way to think and the correct way to decide controversial political matters.

In Sawyer's defence, he does make it clear that the editorial is only his opinion and that teachers in the classroom are balanced in their approach. Whether teachers, as a profession, are politically biased, is difficult to prove either way, but what is in no doubt is that professional associations, teacher unions and curriculum guidelines consistently adopt a left-wing, New Age approach to education.

One obvious example of political activism in the classroom is the call to arms made by the Australian Education Union and the NSW Teachers Federa-

tion in response to Australia's involvement in the war in Iraq. When the conflict began, teachers were told to protest against the war and to support those students who wanted to demonstrate publicly.

The AEU curriculum policy also argues that such is the capitalist nature of Australian society that our community is inherently inequitable and socially unjust. As the education system reinforces this inequality, it is the role of teachers to oppose competitive assessment, the academic curriculum and a belief in meritocracy and equality of opportunity.

The English Teachers Association has for some years now championed what is termed social-critical literacy. Based on the writings of the Brazilian Marxist, Paulo Freire, the argument is that students must be 'empowered to deconstruct texts' in terms