

# Where have all the conservatives gone?

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The two great political traditions of liberalism and conservatism have underpinned the expansion of human freedom.

With its emphasis on individual rights, personal choice and limited government, liberalism is rightly regarded as the philosophy which provided the framework for the acceptance of political and economic liberty. Economic liberalisation has improved the living conditions for hundreds of millions of individuals around the globe, and the free market still remains the best hope for overcoming the poverty in which so much of the world remains mired.

Conservatism, on the other hand, hasn't had such a good press. Some of the problem is with terminology. When the words 'social' and 'conservative' are put together, the usual image conjured up is of Big Brother censoring choice and casting moral judgement. Often, those in academia or in the media who are neither liberal nor conservative, but who are simply left-wing, attempt to portray every social policy question as one between 'social conservatives' and 'social liberals'. Certainly there are many differences in the community over 'social' issues, but to frame social policy debate as having only two sides is wrong, just as it is to label those sides as either conservative or liberal.

In its true sense, and as expressed by its most significant theorist Edmund Burke, conservatism is actually a political philosophy. Political conservatives are not resistant to change but they are opposed to change for

the sake of change. If change is undertaken, the case for change must be clearly articulated. Changing political arrangements is particularly perilous. Systems of government affect every single person in a society, and the consequences of change in those systems are unpredictable and potentially irreversible.

But at its core, conservatism is not really a philosophy about change. Despite what their opponents might argue, conservatives are not obsessed with maintaining the *status quo*. Opponents of conservatism use similar tactics to those employed by critics of economic liberalisation when they claim that economic liberals are only concerned about money.

The basis of political conservatism is the recognition that the best way to make decisions is to allow individuals to make decisions for themselves. Individuals will act according to their own biases, preferences, traditions, and their collective and personal histories. The knowledge gained from the accumulation of those individual experiences will be a far better guide to future conduct than anything that could be provided by an external authority. Political conservatism is profoundly democratic because it embraces the idea that in the masses there is wisdom.

Individuals themselves not only know what is in their best interest, they also understand their own situation better than anyone else and, perhaps most importantly, they know what they don't know. Such information might be imperfect, but it will still be better than anything that could be collected by government. For these reasons, central planning, of any sort,

will always fail in the long-run.

The principles of political conservatism are precisely those of economic liberalism. The question that arises, therefore, is why doesn't political conservatism have the same sort of influence in politics as is enjoyed by economic liberalism in economics? *Where have all the conservatives gone?*

Some of the explanation is that because of the connotations associated with social conservatism, political conservatives have been reluctant to espouse their position openly. Another reason is that, in Australia, there is no intellectual heritage of conservatism as exists in Britain and the United States. Also, it shouldn't be forgotten that economic liberalisation of Australia in the 1980s was forced upon the country as a result of an acute financial crisis, and perhaps fortunately no such crisis has yet occurred to our political system. (1975 was a product of one political institution, the Federal Parliament—it was not the outcome of our political system as a whole.)

The consequences of Australian political conservatives' having gone missing are profound. Increasing regulation that hands decision-making powers from individuals to government means that company directors can't run their businesses, farmers can't manage their land, and consumers can't make choices. The gains of two decades of economic reform are being undone by regulation. The community simply cannot afford to have political conservatives missing from the public debate.

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