



An inflexible right clings to outdated ideologies

Krystian Seibert

Disagreements over climate change have divided Australia's conservative opposition, highlighting the danger of old ideological dogmas to informing climate policies

Climate change divisions in the Liberal Party are an example of the difficulties experienced by politicians when they fail to adapt to shifts in the public policy debate. To be fair, it is not a phenomenon restricted to any one side of politics.

Up until the 1980s, the left in Australia struggled to come to terms with the importance of having a liberalised and competitive market economy. This difficulty was a major problem in Australia, but it was also a particular challenge in Britain where only the arrival of Tony Blair as leader of the opposition pointed the Labour Party in a new direction.

In Australia, change was brought in by the Hawke-Keating governments. Hawke and Keating knew that the old ideological dogmas of the left were outdated, and set about reforming and liberalising the Australian economy. Their governments were an example of how important it is for parties of any political persuasion to constantly re-assess the ideological underpinnings of their approach to public policy.

This is where the Liberal Party has stumbled. While the leader of the opposition and some others in the party have realised that climate change demands a rethink of the right's traditional suspicion of government intervention and regulation, others have not been capable of making this transition.

And the trouble is, these aren't just a few eccentric backbenchers, they are prominent frontbenchers and members of the parliamentary leadership team such as Tony Abbott and Nick Minchin. They also include people who are likely to have an increased role in the parliamentary party in the future, such as Cory Bernardi. On ABC's Four Corners, Nick Minchin

stated that he believed that a majority of Liberal MPs don't believe climate change is caused by humans. While we can't be sure about whether this statement is true, given the ideological backgrounds of many Liberal MPs, it would not be surprising if it were.

There is a belief by many on the right that free markets are infallible.

Some, including George Soros, Joseph Stiglitz and Kevin Rudd, have called this "market fundamentalism".

While those on the right accuse the left of having a mistaken belief that government can solve all our problems (an allegation which may have had some substance in the now quite distant past), the evidence from Australia and countries such as Britain shows that centre-left governments are very supportive of markets, but they adopt a more reasoned and realistic approach to them.

Rather, it is more a case that many on the right have a blind belief in the virtue of free markets and hence are fervently opposed to the need for government action even where it is clearly necessary.

Accepting the reality of climate change and the consequent need for government action involves an acknowledgment that free markets are not infallible.

Indeed, as pointed out by Nicholas Stern, climate change is a result of the greatest market failure the world has seen. You can't accept that climate change is real, and still think that free markets can solve all our problems – trying to do so would lead to an uncomfortable feeling of cognitive dissonance. So instead of accepting that climate change is real, acknowledging the need for government action and tempering the fervour of their support for free markets, many on the right prefer simply to deny that climate change is real. For them, if a fact is incompatible with their ideology, they don't change their ideology but rather deny that the fact is a fact.

This leads them to cling to bizarre ideas, such as a belief that climate change is some sort of left-wing conspiracy. In the end, the most recent divisions in the Liberal Party expose what is perhaps the major issue behind the current debate about climate change, and that is the inflexible and dogmatic nature of right-wing ideology in Australia.

Of course, it is not the left's job to teach the right how to solve their problems. But given that the left has undergone a significant period of ideological transformation over the past two to three decades, the right can certainly learn from our experience. Put simply, the right needs a much more sophisticated approach to the market and to the role of government. They need to realise that markets are not infallible, and they need to develop a much more informed awareness about the strengths and weaknesses of markets.

At the same time, they need a much more informed attitude to the strengths and weaknesses of government, and to accept that sometimes government action is the only way to solve a problem.

If the right in Australia stay where they are now, they will discover that in addition to the reality of climate change, another reality is that as long as the Liberal Party clings to old ideological dogmas, it will remain a party incapable of addressing the challenges facing Australia.

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