

Now is the Turn of the Right: ‘Ditch the base’

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Elite neoliberal policy consensus requires traditional parties of the left and right to progressively sever their connection with their traditional party bases. The task fell first on parties of the left, but now it falls too on parties of the right. Tony Abbott's Liberal National Party government provides a case study in how this challenge impacts on parties of the right, and how this impact is likely to play out.

Introduction

What are we to make of Tony Abbott's rise to leadership of the Liberal Party, his almost two years as Prime Minister¹, and his eventual deposition by Malcolm Turnbull, the man he had deposed as Leader of the Opposition in 2009, and had, a mere seven months before his loss of the leadership, convincingly defeated in an earlier spill?

There are numerous ways of approaching this question, some deeper than others and all interconnected. On one level there is the question of Abbott himself – his political skills and lack thereof, his qualities as opposition leader and prime minister, his ‘core values’ and ‘captain's picks’. On a deeper level there are questions of the competency and unity of the Federal Liberal Party and, deeper still, to its connections to those business and media interests (often one and the same) from which it draws its publicity and policy ideas while ensuring their public visibility and support. But on the deepest level of all we have an instance or example of a more general and international story; a story concerning a challenge all neoliberal committed political parties face in our representative democracies and, in the end, a challenge for representative democracy itself. It is the challenge of ditching the party base so as to free party elites from any commitments or loyalties that might hinder their determined pursuit of neoliberal policy ends. The interest in Abbott's prime ministership is that his rise and fall makes it clear that this challenge is not, as many have tended to think, merely for parties of the left – who have pretty much already ditched their base – but something that now confronts the parties of the right, and in ways that press even harder on the democratic credentials and political security of neoliberalism triumphant.²

Neoliberalism and the Parties of the Left: Convergence Right

There was a time in representative democracies when competition for office was, at its heart, a competition

between the parties of labour and capital: a battle, in colloquial terms, between left and right, business and workers. That contest, and the use of these terms as fundamental to understanding the politics of representative democracies has, since the 1970s, meant increasingly less with the rise of neoliberalism as the bipartisan framework for public policy (a process in Australia to be dated from Hawke and Keating, though with green shoots already springing up under Whitlam³). This is because neoliberalism is unashamedly about foregrounding the interests of capital. Our business elites took the stagflation of the 1970s as an opportunity to undermine the Keynesian social democratic state that had delivered what still remains the highest levels of economic growth in human history, and had done so in a context of lessening inequality, which meant a rising share of profits being returned to that productive labour from which it arose.

In this context the established parties of the left did not, as one might have expected, unashamedly side with their labour base and look for innovative ways of mastering shocks that, in comparative terms, were far less than those neoliberalism produced with its rolling financial crises, culminating in the yet (if ever) to be emerged from the global financial crisis of 2008.⁴ Instead we saw a convergence of left and right on the need for business friendly, entrepreneurial, policies that meant a determined effort to outsource and privatise public services, infrastructure and assets; reduce ‘red tape’ on business interests and projects; reduce the tax levied on business and the rich generally; and to undermine the bargaining power of organised labour both directly, through restrictive legislation and penalties, and indirectly through a general assault on the provision of public goods and services as a morale destroying ‘culture of entitlement’, suitable only for ‘leaners, not lifters’.

This convergence of left and right on the primary importance of the interests of capital – on the need for a business friendly, smaller, more efficient, ‘fiscally

responsible' government whose balanced budget imperative meant the end of Keynesian counter cyclical macroeconomic policies; a political policy refocus from full employment to managing inflation; and a move towards debt funded rather than taxation funded government spending – amounted in reality to a convergence that was a matter of the left moving to the right. It was not a matter of the right shifting to the centre, but of the party of labour changing its spots to that of a new 'caring', 'socially inclusive', party of capital. And it ceded to the right the social justice vocabulary of the left, now shorn of its class analysis and equalitarian essence. For if jobs were what mattered to a universal 'aspirational class' driven by the desire to keep up with or match the achievements of their wealth and job creator betters, and if ever increasing productivity was the key to economic growth and wellbeing, then the desire for social improvement meant empowering capital and 'incentivising' an entrepreneurial workforce so that the invisible hand might be free to do its disciplinary work. In this world, the world of capitalism according to the interests of capital alone, a rising tide would lift all boats (the much trumpeted 'trickledown effect'), a level playing field would sort the fit from the unfit for the benefit of all, and people would take responsibility for their own lives without any spurious appeals to group or class interests, or any hope or expectation that government might step in if things went badly. The entrepreneur, after all, is the self-made man powered by a greed that benefits us all; he is not dependent on the kindness or altruism of others, nor that of government.

Depending on when traditionally labour centred parties started this move-to-the-right convergence and from what established social capital stock, things moved with greater or lesser speed and resistance, though invariably the Anglo-American world was to the forefront, with the United States and the United Kingdom leading, and with Australian politicians of both parties setting their policy ideas and goals by the same light. At this point, in terms of underlying structural/institutional logic, we no longer have the left/right, parties of labour and capital, or the duopolistic oppositional dynamic characteristic of representative democracies during most of the twentieth century. We have, instead, the 'third way' 'radical centerism' of a left becoming ever more right, first exemplified in the Bling regimes of Clinton, Blair and Schroeder. Not only had public policy become that of capital, and not only had the social justice rhetoric of the left become advocacy for the greed-produced miracles of the invisible hand, but this very process changed (and wanted to change) the very nature of left parties in just those ways that saw them converge with the right by moving to the right. By severing their roots with the class interests of working families as mediated through work, unionism, and the shared vulnerability to unemployment, and by identifying with 'aspirational' and 'incentivising' advocates of the magic of the private greed-powered invisible hand, parties of the left became policy convergent professional organisations who acted as gatekeepers for their own increasingly autonomous (if deeply capital friendly) interests. No-one who has been

a member of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) over the last three decades or so will have missed this fact.

All this radical centring, this third waying, of the left as it moved to the right and embraced neoliberalism as political orthodoxy has almost destroyed the traditional social foundations of such parties. They no longer rest on effectively representing the interests of labour as on two feet. The first is that of 'caring' neoliberalism or 'lesser evilism'; while the second is a concern for 'liberation', 'freedom' and 'rights' pitched at the level of an identity politics that, however worthy it might be, systematically obliterates the basic labour/capital divide to celebrate a depoliticised capacity for identity choice.⁵ 'Lesser evilism', as well as an economically detached, class ignoring, identity politics, replaces on the left what used to be a politics of working class interests and achievements. This process does not mean (at least not yet) that there might not be – as there is in the United Kingdom with the rise to the party leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and as, perhaps, there is in the campaign of Bernie Sanders in the US – some occasional populist inspired counter-assaults on the capital friendly neoliberalism of the party elites; however, it does mean that such counter-assaults must come from outside those elites. As a consequence such revanchist efforts are (as Corbyn in particular is finding) perennially vulnerable to well-organised counter-revolutions, must fight against the accumulated weight of decades of neoliberal rhetoric and social atomisation and do so in a media environment shaped by those whose interests are precisely, even paradigmatically, corporate and neoliberal.

Under such conditions it is not hard to see why such efforts have thus far amounted to little or nothing and why I doubt they will amount to anything more. If they were to matter and if they were to change things in any serious way, then they would have to be able to appeal to, motivate and, to a great degree, recreate just that social base or consistency that has been intentionally marginalised. But as we have seen, that social base was jettisoned in the convergence-right logic that underpinned third way 'caring' centrism and in such a way – with its aspirational individualism and appeals to private greed – that forming or appealing to any social base at all now seems, to party elites, either treasonous or impossible.⁶ Such elites do not appeal to a social base that bears collective interests, but, as Tony Blair says (and as 'a result of the way the world works these days') to aspirational individuals driven by the anxious and envy inducing attractions of wealth, motivated by the altruism destroying avarice of perpetual entrepreneurship (Sparrow 2016). In other words, they appeal to pretty much the same people as the right, the parties of capital, have always appealed to. What marks out the third way as in any way distinctive is nothing elemental or structural, but an ungrounded, insecure and shallowly sentimental, lesser evilism. It is 'bleeding heart' neoliberalism for the squeamish that leaves its logic entirely untouched.

Neoliberalism and the Parties of the Right: The (Early) Pleasures of Stasis

It is for this reason – the social base ditching move of parties of the left as they move right in a one-sided process of convergence now pretty much completed – that I suggest that understanding the contemporary politics of neoliberalism, isn't much served by depressing if accurate accounts of the travails of the Vichy-style neoliberalism of traditional parties of labour. The real politics of neoliberalism today – and so the place to look for any tensions or contradictions that might inhere in its otherwise triumphant logic – is the politics of the right and the politics of capital, for this is the convergent centre to which all tends. And this is true even though it is not true that parties of the right have always been in power, even mostly in power, across the world of neoliberal governance. Given the left's move to the right in the context of professionalised political elites dedicated to neoliberalism, such permanent ascendancy isn't needed or expected. But it does mean that the parties of the right contain the purest expression of neoliberal governance, for they have no weight of labour tradition or its late occasional efflorescence to confuse its expression, or to deceive its proponents.

So let us look at how neoliberal governance plays out in its natural home, the party of the right, and let's look at this in the light of Tony Abbott's story as leader of the Opposition, then prime minister, and then not. And let us begin with Abbott the success.

Abbott's Story

Success

The Abbott leadership was not, as some mistakenly think, a series of unmitigated disasters. In at least two ways it was a success. It was, in terms of the neoliberal policy project and despite its apparent failure, a success in so far as it pushed that project forward. Also, it was a success in electioneering terms in that it showed what political opposition means for parties of the right in a world of converged-to-the-right politics. Let us begin with the first point.

The thing to notice is this: as parties of the left move right on issues of economic policy, and in ways that favour (and are favoured by) corporate elites, parties of the right have the space and incentive to themselves move further to the right. As the general policy direction is the same, what matters now is the speed and radicalism of policy implementation. Thus parties of the right – most obviously and pretty much first with Margaret Thatcher – are our foremost proponents of radical change, of 'shock-treatment', of (today) 'austerity'. This burgeoning space for pro-capital radicalism not only tends to capture the money and support of those whose interests are furthered by neoliberalism's innate tendency to upwards redistribution, it defines the residual political difference between left and right. And so the radicalism of the Abbott Government's first budget with its GP 'co-payment', cuts

to unemployment benefits, family benefits and pensions, its swingeing cuts in education and health, its 'tighten your belts', become 'lifters not leaners' rhetoric of 'personal responsibility' in which the task is to get a good job and a mortgage (and if not, then not to drive a car); and its major legislative moves, eliminating the mining tax and the carbon trading scheme, and rebranding and reinvigorating the anti-asylum seeking regime as 'Sovereign Borders'.⁷

As we saw with Abbott, this increased capacity for policy radicalism may have an adverse impact on contemporaneous opinion polling – which places pressure on the leader as it did with Abbott – but in terms of the neoliberal governance regime it functions rather to break open new areas for policy making. Given that the supposed party of the left is itself committed to neoliberalism (so deeply indeed, that its one moment of brilliantly successful anti-neoliberal policy making – the Rudd Stimulus – was something the party refused to articulate and defend as the Keynesian remedy it was, and which saw the then Treasurer Wayne Swan talk endlessly and uselessly about the need to 'balance the budget'), then all it can object to is the 'insensitivity' and 'unfortunate timing' of the policy presentation rather than its essential content. The Shadow Treasurer Chris Bowen's reply to the 2014 budget at the National Press Club did not see him attack a budget more than 60% of the public found 'unfair' (News.com.au 2014), but saw him promise to do it all a bit more slowly: 'The commitment to more saving than spending over the decade is an important one for Labor. It will be an important one for us in office, as well as opposition' (Bourke 2015).

On this level – that of the neoliberal governance regime itself rather than Abbott's personal aspirations – Abbott did not fail. All that he, through his Treasurer, the jovially plutocratic Joe Hockey, pressed for will come about, either through the hands of his successor, Malcolm Turnbull, or (all wishful thinking aside) through the hands of Bill Shorten and Chris Bowen if the ALP had won the coming election. Indeed, it will very likely go further, now the gates have been opened. This is why, it appears, Abbott still seems to think he would have won the next election and will be fondly remembered by 'history'. He feels, quite rightly, that he was doing what will be – in neoliberal language, what *has* to be done, and that this is what the electorate will itself have to face up to and accept.

In truth, the change of leadership from Abbott to Turnbull has no real policy, as opposed to presentational, dimension at all. On this level it is, in the colloquial sense, pure Kabuki Theatre. It had, however, a clear electoral logic, though for reasons I shall come to shortly, that logic has not played out in quite the way the Liberal National Party (LNP) hoped. The logic itself is clear. For Turnbull's leadership was clearly meant to see him playing the role the ALP wants to play: that is to say, the lesser of two evils when it comes to a set of capital

friendly policy imperatives. The beauty of Turnbull as Abbott's replacement was precisely this status, for if it worked it made the ALP utterly irrelevant. As the 'lesser evil' to the Abbott Government, Turnbull was to be seen as doing no more or less than the ALP claimed as the basis for its vote-worthiness.

The second Abbott success was unambiguously a personal, as well as a policy, success. It was his successful campaign against the Gillard/Rudd Government, and it was a campaign that exploited the vulnerability of the lesser evilism government of the convergent left.

Because, on the level of policy commitments, all major parties today are neoliberal – the right unashamedly so, without even the sentimentalist reservations of 'caring' and 'inclusive' neoliberalism the left may offer up – the right does not even have to pretend that it is presenting a new or different or novel policy package or direction. After all, rather like the standard metre in Paris, and as the convergent destination of the left, it defines the policy environment as such. What the right has to do, and what Abbott did, was to expose the empty sentimentalism of a bleeding heart lesser evilism through a project of incessant and unremitting assaults on pretty much all that a left neoliberal government does. Unable to defend itself in any meaningful way on substantive policy grounds, and having already turned class interests into economically and socially ungrounded, thus politically indefensible, sentiment, all the ALP could do was object to the 'negativity' of it all.⁸ Add to this the real (and growing) hostility many have come to feel at the results of neoliberal policies, one may well ask what the angry or upset voter is to do? The answer is either a weightless vote for the Greens or an independent, or a determined effort to have an effect by 'throwing out the bums we now have' – even if, as in Australia and with Abbott, this means more of the same bums, doing even more of what the poor voter would like to effectively repudiate, but cannot.

Failure

If on these two levels – acquiring office and furthering neoliberalism – Abbott was far from a failure, he was still tossed aside by his party as leader and prime minister. Here is where the story becomes interesting and revealing. The crudest level of analysis rightly points to Abbott and the LNP's falling poll figures, though in truth a fall – from the high of the election – was not unexpected (it is the norm), and the fall itself (from 53% at election to around 46%) was not out of the range for a government at that period in office, and not something with a further budget invariably insurmountable. Any decent politician with a high opinion of themselves (as Abbott's recent comments make clear) would back themselves to get re-elected from such a position, especially as a first term government in a nation that traditionally tends to favour allowing governments a second term. After all, we are talking of a situation in which, out of 13 million voters,

around 480 000 have changed their voting intentions since the election.

So why not Tony? What was the problem? It was, I suggest, a problem that only a party of the right could have, at least, could still have, in our bipartisan and neoliberal policy world. The problem was that Tony Abbott was in a party that still had its own defining, distinctive, social base; something not true of the convergence-right left, and for quite some time; and that he clearly felt some basic or absolute commitment to that base to such a degree that it threatened to make the poll changes unsurmountable. I do not mean here the business base, which is equally there for the 'caring' neoliberalism of the ALP and as such is not a base for *this* or *that* party at all, but the shared policy ideology of both party elites. I mean a base that is particular to a party and committed to that party as such. Further, this base for parties of the right in Australia, as in the United States and the UK and elsewhere, is a socially conservative base.

While the parties of labour and the left had to move right, and so had to cut themselves free from their traditional social base in order to pursue the neoliberal goals of capital rather than the interests of labour, initially things were different for parties of the right. Indeed, rather than abandon their social conservative base for an untrammelled commitment to neoliberalism, they found it useful to encourage that base, both for rhetorical and for electoral purposes. On the rhetorical level, pandering to the prejudices of the socially conservative served a number of purposes. It undermined the welfare state by turning structural and institutional forces into matters of personalised virtue and vice, which itself functioned to deny the legitimacy (even reality) of claims of generalised class interests for an individualised world of 'personal responsibility' and moral probity. It was also a brilliantly effective weapon to deploy against the converging parties of the left as they tried to transmute their moral opposition to untrammelled capitalism into a concern for the rights of minority identities defined not in terms of class or economic location, but sexuality, gender, or a general (unanalysed) 'social' oppression. Here is the place of the notorious 'culture wars' that produced mighty levels of rhetorical heat and steam, but placed no pressure at all on neoliberal policy development.

Electorally, the social conservative base ensured – as the left was in the process of losing its base – an absolutely secure voting bloc that, so long as the rhetorical charge was high and constant enough, could be relied on to vote with the party as its policy program became even more turbo-charged in pursuit of the interests of business and capital. Clearly this advantage was greater in places with non-compulsory voting, but it had its place in Australia, if mainly in terms of efficient electorate targeting and expenditures.

Next – and this is the point on which, it seems, the

political logic of Turnbull's election to the leadership may be foundering – by holding onto its base the LNP managed to retain a strongly motivated party machine. What seems to have happened is that the pure neoliberal elements of the LNP, secure in the bipartisan neoliberal consensus and dedicated to furthering their personal business interests and wealth, left much party activism to those with stronger ties to and roots in the traditional social conservative base. This was not an option for the neoliberal left, but on the right it had its obvious advantages even though that advantage, as we will see, may now have become a liability.

Having a secure party base, and so a strongly motivated party cadre of the kind the left now generally lacked, allowed the LNP to maintain a sense of solidarity between the social conservative base and the neoliberal business base which, in reality, could equally well identify with and pursue its ends through the socially gutted ALP.

The Problem

The problem, the one that ultimately sank Abbott's prime ministership, is that these advantages are not necessarily permanent or enduring advantages. Indeed, they may become absolute disadvantages in the context of an established and bipartisan commitment to neoliberalism. If neoliberalism saw the parties of the left excise their social base early on, now it seems the parties of the right see the same need.

The need for excision arises because what was once an advantage rhetorically, electorally, and motivationally, fades away, even inverts, the more neoliberalism becomes the bipartisan norm, the more it has its inevitable adverse economic and social consequences for the social conservative base, and the longer the rhetoric that solidifies and animates that base remains merely that – *rhetoric*. The difficulty with ditching the base for the right is that they have retained their base, they have used and exploited it, and they have bound the two together in a cadre of motivated politicians who cannot see that this commitment runs against the interests of their patrons in the business sector.

Here was Tony Abbott's problem, for he was the prime minister and he had identified himself as – indeed, perhaps had always simply been – a member of the socially conservative party base, indeed a manifestation of that base in the party and for a long time. It was just this identification that made him increasingly problematic for two crucial constituencies. Ironically – though out of success – it constituted a problem for the bipartisan business base. Abbott may have furthered neoliberal policy possibilities, but he also exhibited a commitment to a set of socially conservative values that were useful rhetorically, but were never meant to be truly, let alone fully, implemented, if only because if that were the case, then these values might swamp or trump the ends of

neoliberal policy in unexpected ways. A commitment to 'family values' is fine, but not if it means a Paid Parental Leave policy that allows women six months leave at their replacement wage and superannuation. Equally, hostility to 'radical greenies' is one thing, but an active climate change denialism that closes off new areas for commodification is quite another. Perhaps even worse from the point of view of those 54 colleagues who voted him out of the leadership, it might mean standing firm against the socially powerful – and certainly mainstream media dominant – sweep of LGBT rights advancement and the extension of marriage beyond its traditional social boundaries, pushing away swinging voters. Finally – and most fundamentally – having any core or basic values of whatever kind, makes one unpredictable and unreliable when it comes to the smooth deployment of neoliberal policies.

This latter problem – that of 'core' or 'basic' values – is a special problem for neoliberal parties of the right. Parties of the left, having ditched their base long ago and embraced an identity politics empty of political and economic content, don't have absolute values – or rather, have them only outside their fundamental neoliberalism in the politically weightless space of identity politics – but parties of the right have held onto and used their base in articulating and furthering their neoliberal ends, so encouraging in that base, and in the cadre committed to that base, the thought that *their* values are central to politics and power. It is just this thought that we see playing out today with the Republican Party in the United States. There the base insist, and increasingly insist, that the party turn the rhetoric of social exclusion and revenge into reality and – the most terrifying thought of all for our bipartisan neoliberal policy elites – that they do this *whatever the cost*.

Ditching Abbott as leader was the LNP finally trying to do what the ALP had long been doing, and ditching the party base. That this was the case saw the extraordinary infighting between Rupert Murdoch's papers of the right, the socially conservative *Telegraph* and the big end of town *Australian* (Tsvirko 2015).

In some places such a battle might assume the epic proportions of a real civil war (or 'fight for the party's soul'). With the LNP, in the context of compulsory voting and after more than 40 years of neoliberal embedding and triumph, this may seem far less likely. But as we have seen since Turnbull's accession, the tie on the neoliberal right between party cadres and the still committed social conservative base is not something that can be as easily or quickly severed. The Turnbull Government seems, to the surprise of many, to be unable to free its neoliberal policy direction from the electorally damaging socially conservative values that the Abbott Government epitomised.

Ruling the Void

If this analysis is correct and if the LNP can do as the ALP has long done, then we have, or pretty soon will have, a representative democracy based on political parties which have no real, no defining, social base at all. In such circumstances, as Rudy Andeweg puts it, 'the party ... becomes the government's representative in the society rather than the society's bridgehead in the state' (Farrell 2015). Of course, in a world of bipartisan neoliberalism, whichever party is in government, the policy agenda remains the same. So finally we will, with a little tweaking, have made Marx's understanding of the modern state true:

The executive of the modern state is nothing but a committee for managing the common affairs of the kleptocratic rich.

In an appalling irony of history this outcome for Australia may have been furthered by the destruction of Abbott's prime ministership: the final nail in the coffin of party democracy.

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End Notes

1. At 1 year 362 days, Abbott's term as Prime Minister was the third shortest of Australian prime ministers elected as leader of their party. Harold Holt disappeared off Portsea Beach in 1967 after 1 year 327 days in office, and in 1914 Sir Joseph Cook lost office in a double dissolution after 1 year and 85 days.
2. This essay owes much to Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, 2013. What it adds is a focus on the distinctive way parties of the right have related to their base and so the distinctive issues associated with their – eventual – attempts to ditch the base.
3. Many forget that when stagflation hit Australia in 1975 the Treasurer, Jim Cairns (Cairns, 1975a), reacted this way: 'We live in a society where the determinants, the things that happen in society as a whole are taking place in the private sector ... If we're to keep people in work or get them back to work, we have to work on the private sector.' Thus the government's first challenge is to ensure 'a reasonable rate of return on investment'. And this means 'planning to get the domestic deficit down to the lowest possible figure' (Cairns, 1975b).
4. For the story of the Left's opportunities and failures in meeting the challenges of rising inflation and unemployment see Harvey 2007.
5. That such a depoliticised identity politics will certainly have its own politics is undeniable, but it will not be a politics that challenges the neoliberal trajectory. A nice example of this is Madeleine Albright's defence of the neoliberal candidacy of Hillary Clinton against the social democratic candidacy of Bernie Sander's: 'There's a special place in hell for women who don't help each other!' (Albright 2016).
6. Consider Tony Blair on the Corbyn challenge (Blair 2015). The headline: 'Even if you hate me, please don't take Labour over the cliff edge'. The message: 'The party is walking eyes shut, arms outstretched, over the cliff's edge to the jagged rocks below. This is not a moment to refrain from disturbing the serenity of the walk on the basis it causes "disunity". It is a moment for a rugby tackle if that were possible.' To which he later added, the icing on the cake: 'If your heart is with Jeremy Corbyn, get a transplant.'
7. For a detailed account of the full neoliberal dimensions of the Abbott Government's first budget, see Matt Ryan's essay 'Austerity for some: Tony Abbott's economic legacy' in this issue of *Social Alternatives*.
8. Things here can become ridiculously confused (and self-delusional). Consider this (Fyfe and Bachelard 2011): 'As one Labor backbencher told *The Sunday Age*, the Opposition Leader's [Abbott's] approach was fraught with danger because "you can use negativity to frame your opponents, but at the end of the day it frames you".'