

The Liberal Campaign and the Myth of Rescue

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Much has been made of the repetitious slogans in use this election campaign, but one has received comparatively little attention: the Coalition's emphasis that Labor must not be given 'the second chance that it doesn't deserve and that Australia can't afford'.

The Liberals instead suggest that they deserve a fifth chance. The Liberal-National Coalition governed from 1996 to 2007, with Tony Abbott one of former Prime Minister John Howard's closest allies. Abbott, in effect, is arguing for another term of the Howard government – albeit with a change of CEO – so Labor's brief interruption can be forgotten. The presumption seems to be that, if it is to govern at all, the ALP merits just three years every decade or so: shades of the old 'born to rule' mentality born during 23 years of Coalition rule (1949-1972). Malcolm Turnbull opined recently that 'the Labor Party has demonstrated they are not capable of managing Australia... The Coalition is capable of governing. We have done it before and done it well'. Turnbull endeared himself to many progressives with his support for action on climate change, being applauded for crossing the floor to vote for the government's ill-fated emissions trading scheme. His language suggests, though, that behind the small-l-liberal charm lies a patrician conviction that sees Liberals as the natural party of government. Abbott echoes the sentiment, saying: 'My team is ready to govern, we won't have to learn on the job because we've done the job before'. Also revealing was Abbott's hubristic slip in referring to 'the former Gillard government'.

Overall, the Coalition campaign plays a familiar tune. While the end of the Cold War reduced the effectiveness of 'reds under the bed' fear-mongering, the battles over the resources rent tax saw terms such as 'socialist' employed for, perhaps, the first time in decades. The campaign also draws heavily on the longstanding perception that Labor is incapable of economic management, a view within its origins in the party's old working-class identity. Political historian Judith Brett has noted that in the early 1900s, liberals wondered how 'men who had never handled an amount of money bigger than their weekly wage' could be 'expected to run the country's budget'. The ALP's identity has fundamentally changed, but the myth of its inherent economic incompetence has been adapted. The emphasis of the Coalition's advertising on 'waste' and 'reckless spending' echoes past perceptions that Labor, unused to business dealings, would be unthinkingly lavish with public funds. A measure of the extraordinary strength of this myth is that it still has currency despite the current Labor government having overseen a speedy recovery from the global financial crisis that continues to affect comparable countries such as the United States and United Kingdom. Voters' economic concerns cannot be

dismissed as narrow-minded self-interest. Rather, they reflect the reality that this vast, impersonal and complicated beast – ‘the economy’ – can wreak havoc on individuals. The problem is that, globally, faith continues to be placed in the neo-liberal policies that have helped to create this beast, while the social safety nets that cushion societies from its excesses are often dismissed. And locally, the received wisdom remains – in defiance of evidence to the contrary – that Labor isn’t good with money.

The Liberals adjusted badly to life in Opposition; their past two and a half years were characterised by an almost palpable sense of outrage that ‘those opposite’ were actually in power. The party’s internal debates over its future direction were reflected in its changes of leadership: from Brendan Nelson, to Malcolm Turnbull, to Tony Abbott. Abbott is commonly described as a ‘conviction politician’, a counterintuitive label given the variety of positions he has taken on policies such as paid parental leave and climate change. If Abbott has a fundamental conviction, it seems to be this: Labor must be prevented from forming government. In this respect Abbott represents his party’s core value: it was in opposition to the ALP and its advocacy for the working classes that the Liberal Party was formed in 1944. A two-party system – labor v non-labor – had existed since, in 1909, Alfred Deakin’s Liberal protectionists and George Reid’s free traders fused. ‘Fusion’ ended the alliance between the Liberals and the Labor Party, and the latter became an increasingly powerful political force.

The Liberal Party’s website describes the party’s initial members as being united by ‘a common belief that Australians should have greater personal freedom and choice than that offered under Labor’s post-war socialist plans’. Labor remains, as Brett noted, ‘the Liberals’ fundamental opponent’: the concept of advocating for a particular sector of society – workers – always has been anathema to the Liberals, who have preferred to emphasise national unity over class difference. The Liberal worldview still has difficulty acknowledging that bosses and workers might have different interests; hence the deceptively neutral-sounding goal of ‘workplace freedom’. Abbott treads a quivering tightrope on industrial relations, trying simultaneously to appease the business sector and reassure the electorate, and has reached a position that satisfies no-one: a Coalition government would ‘monitor’ the workings of the *Fair Work Australia Act 2009* for the next three years, seeking a mandate for any changes at the following election. This wrangling hurts Abbott precisely because his party’s position defies its ideological underpinnings. The Coalition’s opposition to workplace regulation has not dissipated; it is cloaked beneath the political expediency that sees Abbott hyperbolically pronouncing Work Choices to be ‘dead, buried, cremated’. Although the Liberals acknowledge that they have ‘heard’ the electorate, they seem unable to grasp the reasons for Work Choices’ unpopularity beyond a vague sense that it ‘went too far’. When Abbott promised in February to get the ‘unfair dismissal monkey’ off the back of small business, it was clear where his sympathies lay.

The 2010 election casts doubt on the aphorism that one campaigns in poetry and governs in prose; a more prosaic campaign could scarcely be imagined. Beneath the sloganeering,

though, lies the struggle for legitimacy between conservative and Labor that has been a feature of Australian politics since the early years post-federation.

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