LIBERALISM AND ROBERT NESTDALE: A MEMORIAL ORATION (1994)

Robert Nestdale was a prominent Young Liberal (he was state and federal president) who later headed up the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Australia. He was a personal friend. He died tragically in his young years. The Young Liberal Movement decided to institute an annual oration in his honour and a memorial library was established.

Two weeks before he died, Robert Nestdale came to our home for lunch. He was painfully thin, was dressed immaculately in a crisp white linen suit and was his urbane, civilised and gentle self. The other guests were shocked and unnerved by the fact of a person, obviously very ill, being at table. During lunch, my wife suggested that he lie down for a rest. So Robert had a rest, then came back to join us, and was driven home, after lunch, by another guest. We never saw him alive again.

We did attend the memorial service in St Stephen's Church where tributes were read from around the world, when a former prime minister, ministers of the Crown and close friends joined together to mourn the loss of our friend. And, in the Senate that week, Sue Knowles wept as she spoke of her friendship with Robert.

How wonderful that the Liberal Party of which Robert was a liberal member, should honour him with a library and a memorial oration. His work was substantial and significant; his endeavours for UNICEF were notable, and his loss diminished us all.

To be allowed to deliver this oration is to be permitted to remember Robert, to identify with the values he always espoused, and to speak of something which is important to the orator. Thank you for the invitation. It is welcome and appreciated.

Liberalism, as practised by the Liberal Party of Australia, has meant different things to different people. To its opponents, the Liberal Party means only conservatism—they talk only of the conservatives with curling lip—but they are wrong. Some people are natural conservatives; some people are natural libertarians. Each of these strands has a coherent philosophy—but not one with which philosophical liberals like Robert Nestdale ever felt comfortable.

For the philosophical liberal, the individual is the focus, the individual is the basic unit and it is to the effects on individual people that philosophical liberals look to see the consequences of any proposal. So liberals welcomed measures, and continue to welcome measures, which empower people. Free public education empowered young people. Extension of the franchise empowered adults. Home ownership and income support empowered families. Anti-discrimination legislation empowered people otherwise powerless, consumer protection legislation gave power to consumers against corporations that are sometimes arrogant, legislation to remove gender bias empowered women, extension of Aboriginal rights and opportunity empowered the most poor and most dispossessed Aboriginal Australians, provisions of aged pensions and aged persons services empowered those who are elderly and often poor and powerless.

Each is in the liberal tradition. Each has been supported by philosophical liberals. Each has been opposed by conservatives and most have been opposed by libertarians. The opposition has sometimes been foolish, shrill, prolonged, mindless, and extreme.

The Federal Parliamentary Liberal Party has, in times past, been a natural home for philosophical liberals. In times past, it has allowed for the expression of liberal views. When, last month on television, John Gorton said that, when Prime Minister, he was a liberal and not a conservative, he was identifying the philosophy from which he came. He was—is—a wonderful man with large and generous views, with a broad vision of what our society might be. He was, arguably, the best thing the party had going for it—and it rejected him when put to the test by moralists, pragmatists and conservatives.

While ever the Federal Parliamentary Party was the party of Deakin, or contained within its parliamentary party what Patrick Weller has called 'Deakinite wets', it appealed to young women and young men. While ever the Federal Parliamentary Party believed in measures to increase individual power,

it appealed to thinking men and women. While the party continued to deliver liberal outcomes—as it did during the 1980s—it remained relevant to middle Australia.

That it seems to support these things not so readily today is unwelcome. What is happening now is an undiluted conservative hegemony. It is an aberration, a denial of what the party has been about at its best and at its most successful. And there is no sign that the federal party is changing, is learning, is moving, or is adjusting to what would make liberal members of the community want to support it.

That no one in the Federal Parliamentary Party would welcome the principles behind the Mabo decision in a way that could be seen and heard is a pity. If what appeared publicly did not represent the breadth of the party views, that is still how the public saw it. That the party which abolished the White Australia Policy officially in the 1970s was unwilling in the 1980s to support a motion in Parliament decrying racially based immigration was a pity. If the party was not really a party of racists manqué, this is not how it came across publicly. That the Federal Parliamentary Party has opposed equal employment opportunity [EEO] for women and all anti-discrimination legislation is a pity. If the party is not really against EEO, the principles of EEO, and the rights of women, this is still how it comes across.

No-one should be surprised that so many young people hold their noses when they think of our once great party at federal level.

The Young Liberal Movement might be the largest youth political group in the nation, but its membership is still just a small fraction of the numbers of young people—and the majority of the young vote for other parties. Many of the young people I talk to are interested in jobs, in opportunity, in education, in the environment. They are *not* interested in economic management, in interest rates, in mortgages, and so on. If the only people speaking for the Federal Parliamentary Liberal Party of Australia continue to be those with complicated economic messages or else grim-faced harbingers of sacrifice and hard times, if we do not present the face of hope and opportunity in terms with which the young identify, then do not be surprised if young Australians continue to desert us in droves.

What is more, the way people vote in the first couple of times they get the chance tends to be the way they continue to vote thereafter. The Liberal Party federally will dispense with the vote of young people at its peril; it may lose that vote forever.

We have a proud tradition of caring about individuals. We have a record of legislative achievement. We have a proud tradition of moving to protect the environment, of overturning the White Australia Policy, of assisting women, of assisting Aborigines, of providing necessary income support and industrial reform.

We have forgotten that tradition in recent years. We have allowed a very different perception to be projected publicly. We are seen as the racist, chauvinistic, sectional interest, development at all costs, accountant-driven, heartless party.

Political parties have a life cycle. Menzies' creation—his child—had a vigorous youth, and many original members as well as some of his successors were philosophical liberals willing to join his party of hope and opportunity.

At state level, it is very different. Many of the most positive expressions of faith come from state Liberal leaders; the most eloquent testaments about liberalism come from the Greiners and Faheys. They remain vigorous and relevant. Their governments are successful. The party holds government in five states because it has identified with the people of those states.

Parties, like governments, also have an old age. You can tell when a government is old by the fact that inspiration goes and the ministers become managers, and nothing else. Parties may show different signs of ageing. In the case of the Liberal Party, ageing is manifested in several ways. First, the membership is dropping. Second, the membership is older and tireder. Third, philosophical hegemony becomes more important than the accommodation of interests with the result, in the case of the Liberal Party of Australia, that it is no longer multi-stranded. Fourth, there is little inspirational input, or input of intellectual substance. It is right in opposition to oppose and criticise—but only as one of the necessary tasks. As a woman once said, 'You have said what you are against. But what are you for?' And it is no good having vague and banal goals; they will excite no-one.

The classical liberal prescription of caring for people is still relevant. Some of the problems have changed with time, but the need to empower people has not disappeared.

We have nearly a million people wanting employment. What has the party said recently about those aspirations or about empowering those people?

We have tens of thousands turned away from tertiary education each year—and all the party promises is more cuts to be borne by students. How long is it since the empowerment of those wanting to improve themselves was part of our message?

We have tens of thousands of people waiting for elective surgery in public hospitals and how long is it since we have said anything about helping those people?

We have tens of thousands of young couples unable to obtain decent accommodation in which to raise the next generation. And how long is it since we as a party have talked about empowering them?

We have Aboriginal Australians living still in appalling circumstances and without hope for a future. What have we said about empowering them recently?

We have tens of thousands with disability sitting at home watching daytime television because there is no better alternative. What have we said lately about empowering them?

We have old Australians who cannot get aged care services or aged care accommodation or community care programs. What have we said about empowering them?

People support political movements out of self-interest or because the vision that the movement projects appeals to them for their children. This party federally has stopped appealing to the highest, the noblest instincts of voters. It has suffered the consequences and will continue to be a minority for as long as this continues.

Let us begin to speak for Australians, for all Australians. Let us become, once again, the party of hope, the party of the future. Let us articulate the dreams of people, and let us be a vehicle by which those dreams can come true.

Robert Nestdale was heartbroken at what he saw happening to a political movement which he had loved, and into which he had poured much of himself. For his sake, for his memory, if for no other reason, we must find ways of communicating again with mainstream Australia. Our elected leaders—with a few notable exceptions—have failed dismally at this task. For our party and our nation, we deserve better.

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