

TITLE: Liberals' core conundrum laid bare by ANU row

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The Abbott government can't decide if it wants to tell people how to live their lives or free them to make their own decisions.

The Coalition's education policy, for example, reveals the contradictions between the world views of libertarianism and conservatism that the Coalition claims to represent. For many years, the balancing act has worked. But as the divestment furore over the past two weeks has shown, the seams are starting to show.

In the commercial sphere of our lives, the Liberal Party seems to believe that individuals are best placed to make their own decisions. When it comes to choosing our own lunch, car, or holiday destination, it is hard to fault such an instinct.

But when it comes to making decisions about our private lives, there is nothing liberal about the Liberal Party.

Suddenly, the party of small government is the party of state intrusion, the nanny state and wowsersism. We can't, they tell us, be trusted to decide who we can marry, when we should die or whether we wear a burqa. The seemingly libertarian government wants to collect and retain data on every website you visit and every phone call you ever make.

The combination of market liberalism and social conservatism never made philosophical sense, but for a long time, the two formed a marriage of political convenience. Big business likes the low tax and deregulation part of the equation, so it turns a blind eye to the nanny state Liberals who want to protect us from homosexuality and countless other "sins".

Conservative churches, on the other hand, are so keen on the Coalition's support for "conservative family values", that they overlook the inconvenient neoliberal hostility to the vulnerable in our community.

The book of Luke commands that the poor be invited to join when there is a feast. But despite our nation's affluence, the government's budget proposed to take from the poorest households and give to the wealthiest. Tony Abbott's fiscal policy is hardly very Christian.

Christopher Pyne is simultaneously trying to introduce a new national curriculum and deregulate the university sector. Does Canberra know best, or doesn't it? Nobody is surprised when Pyne hand picks experts to tell us what our children should be taught. He is not under attack for engaging "elite" advisers to decide what is and isn't on the curriculum.

CAN FINANCES BE MORAL?

When it comes to values, it seems the Coalition is always happy to tell us what is right and what is wrong. When it comes to university deregulation, no one is surprised that the Coalition thinks individual universities can do a better job of setting the price of their degrees than the bureaucrats in Canberra.

Such decisions are best left to the free market, we're told. After all, when it comes to financial decisions, the Coalition is always happy to let individuals make, and sometimes suffer for, their choices.

So when the Prime Minister last week attacked the Australian National University for making the "stupid" decision to divest itself of a small parcel of mining shares, people were surprised. The government that trusts universities enough to set their own prices doesn't trust them enough to invest their own funds? What's going on?

The media and political furore over a decision to sell some shares only makes sense when viewed through the prism of the Coalition's philosophical contradictions. It espouses a world view where moral decisions are the role of the state and financial decisions are the role of the individual. The ANU's divestment was a financial decision based on a moral one. That's not supposed to happen.

Business groups and the financial press have generally paid little attention to the social conservatism of the Liberal Party.

But now that the philosophical friction between the camps has been laid bare, and universities, churches, super funds, banks, and some of the world's wealthiest families are expressing their values as consumers, this looks set to change.

The reaction from the government and the business lobby to the ANU's recent divestment commitment made little sense.

Then again, the idea that our personal values and our personal investments should be entirely separate matters never made much sense either.

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