

TITLE: Politicians rarely know best

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PUBLICATION: Australian Financial Review

PUBLICATION DATE: 26/06/12

LINK:

http://www.afr.com/p/opinion/politicians_rarely_know_best_zVW3I4SxMcY4RN9pSS7ZyK

The latest tragic loss of lives as asylum seekers literally risk everything to make a better life for their families highlights both the consequences and the absurdity of some of the policy positions adopted by Australian politicians.

To appear both “strong” but “compassionate” Tony Abbott argues it is necessary to be hard on the vulnerable as to do otherwise would encourage them to take risks with their lives. That is, the opposition, or an Abbott government, knows what’s best for refugees.

The idea that government knows best was once anathema to the Liberal Party. Individuals, we were once told, were best placed to make their own decisions about where to work, which school was best for their kids and even which phone company to use.

Competition and individual choice, so the story used to go, was better than compulsion and the dead hand of government intervention. But how times change. These days the Liberal Party, or its leader at least, holds onto liberal attitudes only when it comes to letting employers set wages and miners decide where mines should be built. On the big issues of the day he has become a fan of an interventionist approach.

Despite the overwhelming advice of economists, Abbott is sticking to the political advice that says opposing a price on carbon pollution is a good idea.

Rather than rely on market forces to drive reductions in emissions, his so-called “direct action” scheme will rely on an army of public servants to decide on the best ways to curb pollution.

Under the Abbott plan, companies will send in a form asking for taxpayers’ money to pursue emissions reduction.

The bureaucracy will compare the hundreds of thousands of proposals from small and large businesses alike and, having chosen the best ones, post out the cheques. Before the following year's round of applications flood in, the busy bureaucrats will check that the companies that received taxpayers' money spent it in the way they said they would.

But of course it's not just climate policy where the Liberals back their own judgment over that of the individuals concerned. When it comes to whom you should marry, or who can have a surrogate child, the Liberals again claim to know what's best for citizens.

While philosophically confused, the modern Liberals have struck upon the perfect political strategy for an era in which sound bites trump substance.

Whenever the powerful are likely to prevail over the majority, they claim to support market forces (as with industrial relations), but whenever the majority are a threat to the powerful they claim to support traditional values (as with same-sex marriage).

This half-hearted enthusiasm for individual choice is better described as Gliberalism rather than Liberalism.

Of course it is not just the Liberal Party that is struggling to reconcile its political strategy with its historic philosophical framework.

Kevin Rudd proudly positioned himself as a fiscal conservative when campaigning against John Howard and then quickly became a Keynesian when the global financial crisis hit. Either position can be electorally successful, but jumping from one to the other makes neither economic nor political sense. Similarly, the Greens have had a long-term preference for government intervention over market forces, but when it comes to tackling climate change there are few voices that are louder in singing the praises of an emissions trading scheme.

That said, it is unclear why they believe the complex financial derivatives that caused the GFC should be discouraged with a Tobin tax but relied upon to tackle climate change.

And as for the National Party, it's hard to know where to start, but it's surprising that it seems unconcerned about the way that mining is devastating agriculture, and declining public school funding is destroying regional schools, while campaigning against the broadband network that will provide regional areas with subsidised infrastructure.

Politics, like democracy, often has more to do with compromise than with consistency. But building a nation does require some form of cohesion, both between political parties and policy reforms. While it may make for good short-term politics to oppose something because those on the other side proposed it, such an approach makes for terrible long-run policy reform.

There are good arguments for letting individuals make choices and there are good arguments for restricting or even preventing choices in some instances.

But when good arguments are used for bad ideas the long-run capacity of the country to move forward is diminished, if not permanently damaged.

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