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TITLE: Rise of the 'glibertarians'

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Nobody gets an easier run in Australian political debate than the modern "libertarian". You know, the politicians and commentators who are the first to cry "freedom of speech" in the face of what they see as political correctness and the first to say "individual responsibility" when someone proposes regulation such as those designed to make problem gamblers state in advance how much they are willing to lose.

What makes this version of libertarianism so easy is that many of those concerned are the first to call to silence religious preaching they believe is dangerous or for tougher laws to protect society from those who they deem to be personally irresponsible.

If you listen closely you will see that they don't have a consistent philosophical position, and nor are they consistent in their approach to pragmatism. The things they believe are black and white but the things that their rivals believe need to be examined for the workability of the smallest details.

I think it's time we renamed these folk the "glibertarians".

Just think about how easy, and how shameless, the glibertarian position on poker machine reform is. Individuals should be free to make their own decisions, we don't need governments licensing us to have a bit of fun. We are on the slippery slope of nanny stateism. Really?

Do those spouting those views really believe that individuals should be free to drive a car at 200km/h? Do they think that drivers' licences are incompatible with a free society? Are they opposed to the introduction of tough new laws to help break the business model of people smugglers so that individuals don't risk their lives on leaky boats?

The hypocrisy is gobsmacking, but it is so common, and so rarely and timidly called what it is, that it has become almost invisible.

Many of the glibertarians who are so adamant that people should be free to lose a fortune on the pokies when they are drunk or addicted are determined to prevent homosexual people from deciding who to marry when they are sober and in love.

Many of the glibertarians that are so worried about "dole bludgers" and "welfare cheats" are entirely unconcerned with tax cheats and big businesses that move their profits around the world in pursuit of the lowest tax rate they can find.

But the first rule of the glibertarians, and the key to their obvious success, is to never attack each other publicly. For example, there are a lot of market libertarians who couldn't care less who homosexual people marry, but you won't read their columns attacking Bishop Pell for trying to impose his quaint ideas on the rest of the community.

The genuinely libertarian school of thought emerged in response to the unaccountable power of sovereigns to their people. Libertarian political structures, such as democratically elected governments and the rule of law, and libertarian economic structures, such as the right of individuals to own and sell property, were literally fought for in order to take wealth and power away from the elite few.

How sad then that the most visible advocates of modern day "libertarianism" are almost universally on the side of powerful corporations and powerful churches. Just why we should have so much faith that the unelected leaders of companies and religions will make good decisions in the national interest and so little faith in the decision making of our elected parliaments is left unsaid.

But then, leaving things unsaid is rule No2 in the glibertarian handbook. Once upon a time people with strong views about how the country should be run would be required to debate those views with rivals.

They would have to respond to the evidence and arguments put up by those who disagreed. And once upon a time the media and the listening public acted as judge and jury on the quality of the ideas being put and the reliability of the evidence on which they were based.

Not anymore. Debate has been replaced with monologue and the media has morphed from umpiring the contest of ideas to simply promoting the fights.

The glibertarians thrive in such an environment. Their quick sound bites always sound so simple because they are. But their simplicity rests on a willingness to rely on arguments they have previously rebutted.

They are not trying to solve complex policy problems - they are trying to solve short-term political positions.

When Nick Minchin urged his soon-to-be-former colleagues to always support good policy Tony Abbott slapped him down with the rebuke that the Coalition had to put political pragmatism ahead of policy purity. And when the former minister for industrial relations, Peter Reith, spoke to a business lunch in 1998 he urged his supporters to remember "never forget the history of politics. And never forget which side you're on. We're on the side of making profits. We're on the side of people owning private capital."

The most fascinating question about the rise and rise of the glibertarian isn't "Why do they do it?"; the quote from Reith makes that quite clear.

The real question is, "How have they got away with it?"

Those who simultaneously rage against the nanny state but feign concern with the wellbeing of asylum-seekers have become so confident that they do not think twice about the risks of running arguments that are outrageously hypocritical.

And based on the past decade, their confidence is well placed.

Perhaps their free run is caused by the obsession by so many on the left to dedicate so much time to "developing a new narrative" that they have forgotten to fight against their opponents.

New narratives would be nice, but the left needs to walk and chew gum at the same time.

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