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**RECURRING THEMES IN LIBERAL HISTORY**

**Transcript of an address by**

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## **“Recurring Themes in Liberal History”**

**Transcript of an address by  
Ian Hancock  
to the Menzies Research Centre  
Canberra, 21 February 2008**

I should like to begin by summarising part of a report on the condition of the Liberal Party. The report described the Party as consisting of six separate entities whose ‘weak and spasmodic’ organisation varied in extent and effectiveness. There was ‘a general desire to think federally’, and a recognition that a greater cohesion was ‘not only desirable but necessary’. Yet the Liberal Party had not found ‘the attractiveness, development and cohesion which is absolutely essential . . .’. The Australia-wide Party had maintained six different and separate methods for choosing its national candidates. There was no proper liaison at either the State or Federal level between the Parliamentary Wing and the Organisation. Hearing murmurs of discontent about the Federal parliamentary leadership, the report saw ‘an urgent need’ for discipline and ‘a true sense of loyalty’. Loyalty must be ‘the very core of the Party’s activities’. Financial support depended upon results; to achieve results, the Party needed finance; to break the circle, Party members and potential supporters should be given a clearer sense of direction through the Party platform, thus re-kindling enthusiasm in the branches while overcoming ‘the general apathy’ evident in all the Divisions.

Although aspects of that report may sound familiar it was actually written in December 1945, a few months after the formal launch of the Liberal Party of Australia in the Sydney Town Hall. The two authors were the recently-appointed Federal Director (Donald Cleland) and the Federal Public Relations Officer (Eric White) who had visited each of the six State Divisions over a period of eight weeks. Their report was compiled after the Party had already split in Victoria, and had secured just 10 seats (three of them uncontested) out of 65 in elections for the Legislative Assembly. Yet they wrote at a time when the new Liberal Party was supposedly riding a high tide of enthusiasm, driven by the hundreds of ex-service men and women who wanted to save Australia from the deadening hand of socialism and the threat of Communism.

One of the striking things about the Cleland-White report is that, like other internal analyses undertaken in the first twenty years of the Liberal Party’s history, it identified problems, issues and points of tension which have cropped up, albeit in different guises, ever since. For example, there have always been debates and conflicts about the relationship between the Parliamentary Parties and the State and Federal Organisations, between the Federal Organisation and the State Divisions and, within the State Organisations, between the headquarters and the branches.

You can take any point in the period from the 1950s to the 1990s, and you will find all these matters being discussed, argued or contested at both the State and Federal levels. The relationship between the Parliamentary Parties and the Organisation has always been at the forefront. Holy Writ might have dictated a clear division of responsibilities: Party policy would be determined by the relevant Parliamentary Party, and the Platform would be determined by the relevant Organisation. At various stages, however, members of the Organisation, who considered that they had worked hard to secure the election of Liberals to Parliament, resented having their views overridden or ignored. There was anger in the Victorian State Council in 1959 because the Bolte Government had disregarded some of its resolutions. Ivor Greenwood, the future Fraser Government Minister, chaired a committee

which set out to reconcile the irreconcilable, namely the right of the State Council to be the supreme governing body in Victoria and the right of the State Parliamentary Party to be the supreme governing body of itself. The committee's answer was well short of definitive: try to avoid a disagreement. Two Federal Presidents – W.H. Anderson, one of the outstanding holders of the post, and Lyle Moore, one of the least distinguished – led the complaints in the mid and late 1950s that the Menzies Government was using 'socialist controls' to halt inflation and was running down the federal system in defiance of the views of Federal Council and the Federal Executive. In the event, everyone agreed that it was better to concentrate on winning elections. But the objections continued. For instance, from the late 1970s an increasing number of Party members across Australia attacked the Fraser Government for failing to implement the Party Platform in relation to private enterprise and smaller government. A few went further and demanded changes to allow the Organisation to force Liberal Governments to practice what they preached.

To a degree it depended on where you stood. In 1985 in a newspaper article John Hewson questioned the principle of allowing the Parliamentary Party almost the sole prerogative for determining policy. Much later, he did not think it inappropriate for the Parliamentary leadership to impose *Fightback!* on the Liberal Party. John Fahey as Premier told the NSW State Council in 1993 that loyalty was a 'two-way street', that too often Party members, who had shown their loyalty, found themselves ignored by the State Parliamentary Party. David Harris, a lawyer with conservative connections, reacted to the defeat of the Fahey Government in 1995 by pointing out that the politicians 'love to tell us' that they are not, and should not, be bound by the policy dictates of the Organisation. They saw themselves as the 'generals' in the field, alone capable of handling the detail of public policy formation. Harris pointed out that the foot soldiers did not staff polling booths so that John Fahey could 'unilaterally determine the course of government in New South Wales'.

One Liberal Party committee dwelt for some time on this issue. Following the defeat of the Fraser Government in 1983, the high-powered Committee of Review, chaired by John Valder, reached several unexceptional conclusions: the Parliamentary Party and the Organisation should not be subject to each other; the potential for disagreement continued to exist; serious disagreements could be avoided only through consultation and communication; and loyalty and unity will protect the Party's long term interests from damage caused by serious disagreement. Clearly, the Party had not, and could not, find a cast-iron formula.

One obvious reason why issues of this kind keep reappearing is that they are simply not susceptible to final solutions. But there were other problem areas – like structural reform – where the Party has proved to be sometimes irresolute about solving those which were solvable. A committee would be appointed to look at some aspect of a Division's structure and performance. The relevant State Executive might then appoint a committee to review the first committee's report and, eventually, recommendations would be taken to State Council. At Council the bush and professional lawyers would make clever points and fine distinctions, procedural motions would be moved and amendments proposed, words would be subtracted or added, and perhaps another sub-clause or sub-sub clause might be added to an already expanding Party Constitution. Because nothing of real substance would be settled, the same issue could be revisited down the track, allowing new members to believe they were breaking fresh ground. The Spanish essayist and philosopher, George Santayana, had a saying for such circumstances: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'

On matters of review and reform the Liberal Party is exceptionally good at two things: sustained introspection and sustained immobility. Every now and then, however, someone in the Party – somewhere – will take note of this phenomenon. In 1984 in NSW the Chairman of the Metropolitan Regions Branch Development Committee, which was considering structural reform, remarked that long-serving members of the State Executive might have developed a sense of *déjà vu* when ‘the re-invention of the wheel again seemed a possibility’, and when ‘the work of this committee would, like so many others, become pigeonholed’. Yet he did discern ‘frank and meaningful agreement’, and did not believe that previous resistance to change precluded recommending the same changes once again. This particular committee, whose membership embraced both the main factions, produced a wide-ranging and sensible set of recommendations, not one of which was implemented.

It is exceptional for Liberals to begin a review by reviewing the previous reviews. Andrew Peacock, then the Federal Parliamentary Leader, said that the Valder Committee had produced the ‘first comprehensive reappraisal of the Liberal Party’. The reappraisal did not include any explicit analysis of earlier investigations undertaken at Federal or State level. What the Valder Committee did was to assemble almost all the criticisms, ideas and options relating to the Organisation which had been circulating within the principal non-Labor Party since the Fusion of 1909. Whether or how far the members of the Committee were aware that they were treading some well-trodden ground is immaterial. The more important point is that anything which is said and done in the Liberal Party has probably been said and done before in the Liberal Party, and by its predecessors. Writing repetitively about such repetitive history makes it hard to avoid being negative.

In one respect the internal history of the Liberal Party of Australia is a history of recurring grumbles: in NSW Policy committees complain about being ignored; policy conveners complain about policy committees failing to meet; finance committees complain about parsimonious business houses; country members complain about State Council or State Executive failing to address their needs; committees formed to increase the membership complain that the politicians prefer a smaller membership which they can manipulate; branch and Electorate Conference office bearers complain about apathy: branch members complain that meetings are boring and pointless: the list is inexhaustible and exhausting to follow.

A constant theme is that the Party must revive moribund branches and actively recruit new members. The post-war generation knew all about these problems. In 1951 a West Australian report described branch meetings as ‘a complete washout’. In Tasmania in 1954 they were thought to be so poorly attended and uninteresting that alternative entertainment was considered: an ‘Ugly Man’ competition, a Royal Visit Ball, a fete, a beach picnic with competitions, a square dance competition and auction of donated primary produce and furniture. At least with those options no one would have suffered cerebral indigestion. As for reforming the branch system, and voting rights on State Councils, the post-war and the pre-war generations also knew all about the obstacles, including the actions of individuals and groups determined to protect their personal and tribal domains.

As for recruitment, few dare to state the obvious: that the Labor Party is the Liberal Party’s best recruiting agent. A couple of its Leaders deserve a special mention for their contribution. Gough Whitlam almost single-handedly more than doubled the Liberal Party membership in NSW to 45,000 in 1974-5, its highest-ever enrolment but, I should add, fewer than half of the 100,000 the Division’s many membership committees identified as the Holy Grail. Branch stackers are also useful recruiters: there is nothing like a preselection to start a

membership drive and, for all the regulations which have been tried, no one has yet devised a system to curb a dedicated stacker. Even so, modern stackers should stand in awe of what happened in the United Australia Party's North Sydney State Electorate Conference in April 1932. On 1 April the Conference had 816 members. Within 30 days another 944 members were enrolled, courtesy of the right-wing New Guard. While 65 of the recruits were not even on the State electoral roll all of them could at least speak English. A committee investigated the stack, declared its disapproval and wrung its hands.

Another area of revisited history concerns the relationship with the Country or National Party. Three options were debated in the late 1940s: to amalgamate, to co-operate, or to annihilate. The hard men, like Bill Spooner, the first and one of the great NSW State Presidents, and W.H. Anderson, wanted to go to war. Anderson once said that the Country Party, like Carthage, should be destroyed. Others argued that demographic changes would cause a natural decline in Country Party support. But, again, take any point in the history of the Liberal Party, and you will find that, in those States where the Country or National Party has had a significant presence, Liberals have regularly talked about two matters: whether to press – yet again – for amalgamation; and whether, or to what extent, to take on the Country or National Party in contests for rural seats. For many country Liberals it was at once hypocritical and frustrating when the message came down from State headquarters or from Canberra that, in the interests of the anti-socialist cause or just Coalition harmony, the Party should desist from nominating candidates in particular seats: hypocritical, because the Liberals wanted to present themselves as an Australia-wide party; and frustrating because local branches died if the membership was reduced to handing out How-to-Vote cards for what they often thought to be second-class candidates.

The Party's response to electoral setbacks or disasters has followed much the same routine. After Victoria and DLP preferences saved the Menzies Government from an ignominious and unforeseen defeat in 1961, the General Secretary in Tasmania expressed the widespread view within the Party that the public lacked confidence in Menzies, and that the Prime Minister, MPs and the Organisation had been too smug and complacent. The Victorian State Executive passed a five-part resolution which began by accusing the Federal Government of presenting an image of 'indifference and arrogance' which was 'unwelcome' to the electorate. W. H. Anderson emphasised 'the insolence of office', claiming that the Government would have lost fewer votes through its economic policies if it had not exhibited a 'casual lightheartedness' and senior ministers had not engendered an attitude of 'we know best, little people'. He also blamed the stress on 'performance and reputation' which, he thought, merely demonstrated a 'complacency and omniscience' which, in turn, hardened the electors' hearts.

The critical step was to find someone or something on your own side to blame. Defeated Liberals are not usually revered as martyrs. The routine would go something like this. There would be days or weeks of agonising self-examination and recrimination. Party members would send letters to the Federal or State headquarters pelting them with ideas – some of them sane – and often abusing everyone and everything. Incidentally, one Queensland branch managed to find 40 things wrong with the *Fightback!* campaign in 1993, which might just be a record. There would be pleas for loyalty and unity, calls for continuous campaigning and structural reform, and demands for early candidate selection and policy development – countered by demands for later candidate selection and delayed policy development. Campaign approaches which went largely uncriticised when elections were won, were found to be fatally flawed when they were lost. Committees would be appointed;

sub-committees would report to the committees; and the committees would send reports to State or Federal Council or to State or Federal Executives. True, there have been vast changes in electioneering since the days of Town Hall and street corner meetings. True, there has been a marked improvement in statistical sophistication: in 1961 there was a general assumption that the Party had 'lost' the youth vote; in 1993 the Federal Secretariat could show that the Party went down because of an 8 per cent swing to Labor of female support in the 25-34 age group. But for all the improvements in technology so many of the words and phrases remained strikingly similar: 'stopped listening', 'out of touch', 'arrogant', 'uncaring'.

One word or concept - 'renewal' – always gets a good run after an election reverse. The wiser heads see the need before the need becomes pressing. Two men who did so, and who remain unsurpassed for their skills and acumen as Party apparatchiks, looked about them in some despair in November 1965. John Carrick, the NSW General Secretary, and John McConnell, the Victorian General Secretary, were attending the celebrations in Canberra to mark what the Liberal Party decreed to be its 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Never mind that everyone got the date wrong, or that most Liberals are blissfully ignorant of their own history and blissfully unconcerned about their ignorance. In November 1965 Menzies and the Liberals were in a triumphalist and expansive mood. And why not? At that time the Federal Liberals had been in government since 1949 and the Liberal Party was in power alone or in coalition in four of the six States. The economy was booming, the Red Menace had been curbed, and the Labor Party under Arthur Calwell appeared to be no threat.

But Carrick and McConnell were worried about the condition and long-term prospects of their Liberal Party. They knew that it was not as strong as it was assumed to be. The major reason, they thought, was its failure to become the Party its founders had planned. In 1944-5 the object had been to create a national, permanent and independently-financed organisation, combining volunteers and paid officials in a professional political party. Policies were important but the more immediate task was to ensure that the principal non-Labor party existed outside as well as inside Parliament, that for the first time it would be a truly Australia-wide Party, and that it would function on a day-to-day basis between, as well as during, elections. The aims were also to supplant Labor as the 'popular' party, to enable Party members to participate in policy formation, to develop its own 'soul rousing gospel', and to be strong enough to survive electoral setbacks and not have to rely on a Messiah to lead everyone to the Promised Land, and to keep them there.

According to Carrick and McConnell, the post-war Liberal Party had run its course. The so-called 'spirit of 1949' no longer had any vitality. Menzies Policy Speech of that year, and the arrival in the Federal Parliament of all those idealistic ex-servicemen, were not the inspiring events they had once been. In 1949 the Liberal Party had witnessed its epiphany, liked what saw, and venerated the moment while the Organisation, from which the ideas and drive had to come, settled for the mechanical exercise of prolonging the experience by winning some more elections. Renewal was necessary but had to be postponed as the Cold War lingered in the form of the Vietnam commitment. Defeat in 1972 helped to concentrate the mind, and the Federal Party began to work on the Platform and also came up with a novel idea: to fight national elections it made sense to appoint a national campaign committee, even though the Party had won seven elections on the trot without ever really having one. Renewal was supposed to occur after the 1983 Federal defeat. Changes did take place, most notably eleven years later by increasing the powers of the Federal bodies. Nevertheless, reading the Party's records up to the end of the last century does reinforce the sense of so much remaining the same.

Yet the curious thing about the Liberal Party is that while it constantly relives its own history the Party itself has changed markedly with a changing Australia. It is no longer the closed shop for Anglo-Scottish Protestants of 1945, although it has been better in embracing Catholics than those for whom English is a second language. Once a Party of wall-to-wall monarchists it now includes a significant number of republicans. It is no longer an exclusive male preserve, or a household of committed Keynesians who believe in development at all costs. In the 1950s it fought socialists and communists; in the 1990s the soldier saints in its ranks were warning us about Sodom and Gomorrah. While some, as economic liberals, wanted to free private enterprise from government intervention, as moral conservatives they wanted to maintain or increase the role of the State to deal with the after-shock of the permissive society.

Not all the changes have been to the Party's benefit. The growth of factionalism has not, at least in the case of NSW, been accompanied by an ordered division of power, nor has it helped the cause of structural reform. Each faction liked to claim the high moral ground, and did do in a Party – in its moments of being precious – which differentiates itself from the thugs of Sussex Street. In terms of the methods used, however, both sets of factional warriors, and especially their spear carriers among the Young Liberals, considered few deeds too dastardly in their pursuit of factional advantage. Ideological differences, overlaid and reinforced by tribal and personal animosities, the resolute defence of fiefdoms, and the 'winner-take-all' mentality all ensured that the NSW Division by the late 1990s had achieved something new in its history and pre-history: the marked decline of civility.

A call for renewal usually translates into one for reform. Mechanical tinkering or root and branch change might well place the Liberal Party in a better position to fight Federal and State elections. But it is easy to forget that the much-abused structures have delivered some handsome election victories. Moreover, the Liberal Party has never been so comprehensively thrashed federally as the United Australia Party was in 1943 when it won just 14 out of 74 Lower House seats.

On elections, it is worth revisiting the past. In doing so, it might be a good idea to treat Harold Wilson's memorable remark – that a week is a long time in politics – as no more than a commentary on the attention span of too many politicians and members of the fourth estate. After all, a week is a very short time in the electoral cycle, especially judging by the Federal electoral record since the Second World War. There have been just six changes in government since 1945, five occurring through a Federal election. With the exception of Labor in 1949 and 1975, no Party has been rejected by the electorate after serving just two elected terms in office. The road back from Opposition has proved to be a long one. And Liberal Leaders of the Opposition have proved to be expendable. Of five Federal Opposition Leaders only one - Menzies – has fought consecutive elections as Opposition Leader. Labor has been more tolerant of its losers.

It would not hurt to visit, or re-visit, the thoughts of those who founded the modern Liberal Party. It was W.H. Anderson who put his finger on what has been the Party's enduring problem since its creation. He didn't need a committee or sub-committee to work it out. How, he asked, do you persuade Australians to vote *for* the Liberal Party and not merely against Labor, and to do so because they passionately believe in something the Liberals represent?