

## Chapter 3

### Cultural Self-Confidence That is What is Missing

*The Honourable Tony Abbott*

My first task is to congratulate The Samuel Griffith Society for its unflinching commitment to upholding our Constitution and to safeguarding our legal traditions. You are, if I may say so, a thoroughly conservative body – not in any partisan sense but in your respect for what has shaped us and in your determination to build on the best features of the past.

Although Sir Samuel Griffith led a 19<sup>th</sup> century Queensland version of the Liberal Party, there were occasions, he believed, when “the comfort of the individual must yield to the good of the public”.

He had a strong social conscience but no sympathy for those “who endeavour to bring about reforms by crime and violence”. He opposed indentured labour, but was more inclined to phase it out than to ban it.

And he was the principal author of the first draft of our Constitution. It has turned out to be a splendidly serviceable rule book for a practical people.

Although he once claimed no inconsistency whatsoever between any of his innumerable speeches on a huge range of topics, he was more pragmatist than ideologue. His was a pragmatism based on values: sympathy for the underdog, respect for institutions that have stood the test of time, and a preference for freedom.

#### **Vexing times for conservatives**

My second task is to confront a regrettable truth: these are vexing times for conservatives – legal conservatives no less than political ones – and we need to ask, “why?”, if better times are to come.

Take an issue that has quite rightly exercised many people here: section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act* that prohibits what might “offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate” on racial grounds.

This is a troubling law. At its worst, it limits free speech merely to prevent hurt feelings. John Howard opposed it when Paul Keating introduced it but did not repeal it in government.

After the successful prosecution of Andrew Bolt, I promised to “repeal it in its current form” but reneged after fierce criticism from Liberal premiers and a wall of opposition in the Senate.

As well, I was seeking ways to limit jihadi hate preachers and worried about the appearance of double standards.

Perhaps the cause of free speech would have fared better if my Government’s initial bid had been merely to drop “offend” and “insult” while leaving prohibitions on the more serious harms.

Still, as things stand, there is no real prospect of change – even though several young Queenslanders are now facing official persecution merely for questioning reverse discrimination

on social media and the Race Discrimination Commissioner is now itching to prosecute Australia's best-known cartoonist.

The decency and fair-mindedness of the Australian people will always be a better defence against hate speech than a law administered by ideological partisans – yet our Parliament prefers to tolerate over-the-top prosecutions than to upset thin-skinned activists.

### **Restoration of a better functioning federation**

Take another issue dear to members of The Samuel Griffith Society: the restoration of a better functioning federation – a federation that more faithfully reflects the letter and spirit of our Constitution – by allowing the different levels of government to be more sovereign in their own spheres.

In the 2014 Budget, Joe Hockey, the Treasurer, and I implemented our election pledge to limit the Rudd-Gillard school and hospital cash splash to the 2013 forward estimates. We reduced Commonwealth support for the States from the unsustainable, beyond-the-out-years, pie-in-the-sky promises of the previous government, to CPI plus population growth in the fourth year of the budget projections.

Our idea was the constitutionally correct one: to have the States and territories running public schools and public hospitals take more responsibility for funding them. The public would then know better whom to blame when things went wrong.

Again led by Liberal premiers, the response was a fusillade of criticism along the lines of cruel cuts and broken promises.

Along with a modest Medicare co-payment for otherwise bulk-billed GP visits, reductions in stay-at-home-mum payments once the youngest child was at school, CPI rather than MTAWWE (male total average weekly earnings) indexation for pensions, and insisting on learning-or-earning for school-leavers rather than going straight on the dole, these reductions-in-the-rate-of-increases to spending were sabotaged in the Senate.

So, as things stand, rather than reform a dysfunctional federation, the States would rather blame federal funding than address the shortcomings in their schools and hospitals; while the Commonwealth will not risk a scare campaign by considering real change.

There is much that my Government achieved in two short years: abolishing taxes, stopping the boats, finalising free trade agreements, boosting small business, starting big projects like Sydney's second airport, keeping our country safe – and not shirking Budget repair.

Still, I have to take responsibility for our inability to reform section 18C and to deliver the beginnings of federation reform.

Free speech is worth the risk of giving offence.

The Commonwealth cannot be the States' ATM if our federation is to work.

Government cannot continue to live beyond its means.

I did make these points but not often enough or persuasively enough to bring about the changes I sought; the changes, I suspect, that you wanted, too.

Hence the need for all of us to ponder how these good causes and other good causes might better prosper in the future.

## **Time as Leader of the Opposition**

You will not be surprised that I have been reflecting on my time as Leader of the Opposition as well as Prime Minister.

Interestingly, while less than 50 percent of the current government's legislation has passed the Parliament, almost 90 percent of the former Labor Government's legislation passed without a division.

I think the Abbott Opposition was right not to oppose means-testing family tax benefits and means-testing the private health insurance rebate; because, although these measures hit the aspirational families the Coalition most wanted to help, they also helped to rein-in an increasingly out-of-control Budget deficit.

Unquestionably, we were right to oppose the carbon tax which was not just a broken promise but the antithesis of the Labor Government's 2010 election commitment.

We were right to oppose the mining tax which destroyed investment, cost jobs, and boosted red tape without raising serious revenue.

We were right to oppose the over-priced school halls program and the combustible roof batts program and the live cattle ban that threatened Indonesia's food security; because these were all bad policies incompetently implemented.

I wonder, though, about the former Government's people swap with Malaysia. The 800 boat people that could have been sent to Malaysia was less than a month's intake, even then.

I doubt it would have worked. Still, letting it stand would have been an acknowledgement of the government-of-the-day's mandate to do the best it could, by its own lights, to meet our nation's challenges.

It would have been a step back from the hyper-partisanship that now poisons our public life.

In the last Parliament, 2013-16, I could invariably count on Bill Shorten's support on national security issues. On deploying the Defence Force or strengthening anti-terror laws, there were Cabinet ministers harder-to-persuade than the Leader of the Opposition!

The challenge for the new Parliament elected in July 2016 will be to be as sensible about economic security as the old one was about national security; because we cannot keep pretending that economic growth on its own will take care of debt and deficit.

Labor's instinct is for more tax and the Coalition's preference is for less spending – but if Labor wants spending legacies such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme to survive, it should be prepared to work with the Government in dealing with the spending overhang that it created.

## **The sensible centre**

After an election where the Government all-but-lost its majority, yet the Opposition recorded its third worst vote in 70 years, the sensible centre needs to focus even more intently on what really matters to middle-of-the-road voters.

All of us need to dwell less on what divides us and more on what unites us, and to have an open mind for good ideas – as the Howard Opposition did with the economic reforms of the Hawke Government.

Still, we are much more likely to rebuild trust by telling the truth than by running away from hard decisions. We have to keep reform alive because it is the reforms of today that create the prosperity of tomorrow.

Budget repair, federation reform, productivity reform and tax reform cannot stay in the too-hard basket for the whole term of this Parliament.

All significant change has costs that need to be taken into account. And, yes, it is easy enough to make a bad situation worse with ill-considered change.

Yet often enough we must change merely to keep what we have. We are free because we are strong. We are fair because we can afford to be.

But every day we must ask how we can be better, smarter, stronger – and adjust as circumstances require.

This is not ideology; it is common sense.

It should not be a crisis that forces Parliament to face facts: everything has to be paid for; every dollar government spends ultimately comes from taxpayers; and taxpayers are also voters with a vested interest in getting value for their money.

## **Constitutional and legal heritage**

My job here is less to address the challenges of government than to address the challenges facing those wishing to build incrementally on our constitutional and legal heritage. The main problem is that fewer and fewer people actually know what that heritage is.

Some years ago, after John Howard had questioned the state of history teaching in our schools, I quizzed my then teenage daughters about some of the big events in Australia's past.

"We haven't been taught that", one shot back. Her history study had been ancient Egypt, "pharaohs and stuff", she told me, "and the Rosetta Stone".

If people do not know the Bible and Gospel stories; if they have not read Shakespeare or Dickens; if they have not heard about ancient Greece and Rome; if they have not studied the political evolution of England; if they know little of the Great War and the struggles against Nazism and communism; how can they fully appreciate the society they live in, or deeply grasp Australian democracy, let alone the subtleties of the relationships between the different branches and levels of government?

With less common knowledge, shared understandings become more difficult. Without moorings and without maps, inevitably, we are adrift and directionless.

What is deep and lasting becomes harder to distinguish from the ephemeral. We end up taking sport more seriously than religion.

A few weeks ago, I addressed my old school and spoke briefly about the debt that the modern world owed to Christianity: how democracy rested on an appreciation of the innate dignity of every person; and justice on the imperative to treat others as you would have them treat you; or to love your neighbour as you love yourself.

The subsequent questions, I have to say, focussed on the alleged cruelty of the Abbott Government's border protection policies: the inadequacy of its climate change policies; and the insensitivity of its approach to same-sex marriage!

And why would not these be students' concerns, given teachers' preoccupations with multiculturalism, reconciliation and global warming?

At least the Safe Schools program is not yet mandatory at Catholic schools in New South Wales.

But there is hope; one Year Nine student I questioned recently, from a different school, volunteered that our biggest national problem was the Budget deficit. It turned out that during the election he had been exposed to a heavy dose of Sky News!

There would not be a person here – not one of you – who would say that our civilisation is more secure today than five, ten or twenty years ago. The new tribalism, the loss of civility, and reality TV politics is taking its toll across the Western world.

Yet for all our present discontents, there would hardly be any one, here, unconvinced that Western civilisation, especially its English-speaking version, is mankind's greatest achievement.

To be an Australian is to have won first prize in the lottery of life. A culture which welcomes diversity; which values women; which offers respect to everyone; with universal social security; with political and social and economic opportunity; which encourages people to look out for each other; which urges everyone to be his or her best self and which is always looking for ways to improve ... deserves to be much better thought of.

Yet what is readily extended to other cultures is only grudgingly extended to our own: credit where it is due.

What is missing from the public discourse and what makes consideration of so many issues so contentious is an appreciation of our society's strengths as well as its weaknesses.

I will not try to persuade you that there has never been a better time to be an Australian – for cultural conservatives there are too many frustrations for that – but surely the contention, even now, that there is no better country to live in ought to be self-evident.

Cultural self-confidence: that is what is missing; and that is what is required for more of our debates to tilt the right way.

You appreciate what more of us should: that our national story has far more to celebrate than to apologise for.

The challenge for all of us who seek a better Australia is rarely to throw things out and start again. It is to build on the great strengths we have.