

The Australia Institute

Research that matters.

TITLE: Shifting debate of personal freedom spells trouble for Liberals

AUTHOR: Richard Denniss

PUBLICATION: The Age

PUBLICATION DATE: 20/05/08

Alcopops, selling kidneys and lasers all point to a wider issue.

They might not know it yet, but the Liberal Party have got more to fear from alcopops, the sale of human kidneys and the regulation of laser pointers than they do from the internal bickering and leadership speculation they are currently enduring.

Should teens have the right to low taxes on alcohol, or should the government intervene to protect them from themselves? Should individuals be free to do what they want with their bodies, including selling their kidneys for \$50,000, or does the government know what's best?

Under John Howard, the Liberal Party was able to walk both sides of the philosophical street. On "economic" issues they were opposed to government interference in the individual's "right to choose", but on "social" issues the Liberals seemed comfortable with the idea that government knew best.

The rights of individuals to choose what to buy was seen as sacrosanct, but not so the rights of individuals to choose when to end their own lives, or who they could marry.

This unholy alliance between libertarians and social conservatives could only be held together by a leader as politically skilled, and philosophically flexible, as John Howard - a man who knew how to keep his troops in line. The only new feature of the stoush about what the Liberal Party stands for is that it has become public.

It is far easier for a prime minister to contain such battles than it is for an opposition leader, because governments can deliver while oppositions can only promise.

Mr Howard kept delivering reforms, such as WorkChoices, to keep the libertarians in his party happy, while at the same time resisting pressure to let individuals take more control over their personal lives in order to appease his socially conservative supporters.

From time to time, the contradiction that lay at the heart of the former prime minister's strategy would be revealed.

Cardinal George Pell, while seen as a strong supporter of Mr Howard, was publicly critical of the unfairness of the WorkChoices legislation. Despite most churches expressing concern with the equity impact of IR reforms, Mr Howard no doubt thought he could retain their support if he maintained a "strong stance" on same-sex marriage and other social issues. The libertarians in his party cringed in silence.

The Liberals will find it much harder to unite their broad church while they are in Opposition for two distinct reasons. First, because all you can deliver in Opposition is words, your members and supporters care much more about them. A prime minister can placate competing groups with different policies, while an opposition leader must invent a language, and a policy agenda, that unites and excites their whole party.

The second challenge is the increasing irrelevance of the "market good, government bad" distinction that has defined the Liberals in recent decades.

While the rhetoric of efficiency, competitiveness and individual freedom helped the Liberals achieve state and federal political success in the 1990s, this language is becoming increasingly outmoded.

The best example is the recent debate about laser pointers. Two months ago, calls for a ban on laser pointers were described with the well-worn response of "red-tape nanny-statism". The last thing we needed, it seemed, was more government intervention and bureaucrats telling us what we can and cannot buy.

But then the debate shifted. Calls for regulation of laser pointers should not, it was argued, be considered in terms of economic efficiency but in terms of our ongoing war on terror. In that case, because terrorists might buy laser pointers and aim them at planes, the responsible thing for governments to do was to classify the laser pointers as weapons and ban them at once. And so it came to pass.

It wasn't the laser pointer, or even the risk assessment, that changed. All that happened was that the debate was reframed away from "Are markets better than governments?" towards "What is the most responsible decision for society?"

And that is the big problem for the Liberal Party and - while it is in government at least - for the ALP: the debate is shifting.

Airline passengers have been told they can't carry deodorant and must take their shoes off, but at the same time we are told it would be wrong to make people buy fuel-efficient cars. Citizens have been told that in a war on terror we all have to accept a reduced right to privacy, but it would be wrong to make all companies report regularly on their executive salaries and pollution output.

The debate about whether markets are better than government was always phoney, but it used to be effective. It is running out of steam. Issues such as terrorism forced governments to reconsider their role, and issues such as climate change are hastening the shift in thinking.

The real issues, though, such as whether people should be able to sell their kidneys and whether we should tax alcohol or ban poker machines, will never go away. They are

moral issues that might have been concealed by a fake debate about governments versus markets, but they have never been resolved.

Sooner or later the Liberal Party will have to answer these hard questions and - whoever the opposition leader is - they will always find it harder than the prime minister of the day.