



RESEARCH NOTE

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Conservatism in Australian National Politics

Conservatism

For Edmund Burke and Australians of a like mind, the essence of conservatism lies not in a body of theory, but in the disposition to maintain those institutions seen as central to the beliefs and practices of society.¹

Conservatives value:

- the authority of institutions, grounded in their familiarity to those who participate in them
- institutions that have stood the test of time, proving their value against the uncertain consequences of unnecessary innovation
- individuals who can equip themselves with the appropriate skills to respond to the diverse and contingent requirements of their society, and
- authoritative institutions that provide support for individuals to live securely and well.

Conservatives view society as a moral community, rather than as an association pursuing a common purpose, whether this is understood as the maximisation of pleasure, production, freedom or equality. Institutions such as family, church and state emerge from, and give shape to, the moral beliefs and practices that constitute society.

However, whereas moral practices change gradually but inevitably, institutions require deliberate amendment if they are to remain relevant to the changing practices over which they preside. This must be done with care, because the maintenance of the authority of society's central institutions is of paramount importance in providing moral order.

Although conservatives see values such as freedom and equality as important, these are not seen as ultimate goals. Critics therefore attack the conservative preference to protect familiar social institutions as a sign that they lack an idea of moral progress.

However, conservatives do not resist change per se, but rather certain types of change. Thus, they do not seek to conserve for the sake of mere conservation, but rather to maintain particular sets of practices and arrangements, which they see as underpinning the moral life of individuals and the community.

Conservatives resist change that:

- is driven by abstract theories
- is systemic and all-encompassing rather than targeted and piecemeal
- imposes a single aim upon society, and
- weakens the authority of social institutions, and thus individual responsibility.

The main political problem for society is not an absence of moral values and directions, but the pragmatic question of how far one ought to alter an institution in order to preserve its relevance to society. While institutions need to change, change that is too frequent or too radical dissipates the authority of institutions and risks unintended undesirable social and political consequences.

Conservatism in Australia

Among those who have been grouped on the 'conservative side of politics' in Australia are social conservatives of the type described in the previous section, as well as Empire nationalists, organisations supporting rural interests, anti-socialist Catholics, fundamentalist Christians and free-market liberals. This loose alliance has primarily been based on an anti-socialist agenda of opposition to collectivism, theories of class conflict and an idealised view of social justice. It has primarily sought to keep the Australian Labor Party (ALP) from office.

Australian conservatives are more readily characterised by what they reject than by any shared set of values.

However, many argue:

- for the importance of individual responsibility
- for the social importance of extra-government institutions such as families, churches, small businesses and mutual aid societies
- for the importance of strong and decisive (but not necessarily big) government
- for the importance of national interest and security
- against most proposals for constitutional change, and
- against movements such as feminism, multiculturalism and environmentalism as well as claims for homosexual and indigenous rights.

For the first seventy years of Federation the non-Labor side of politics was dominated by moderate protectionism, which pursued an economic agenda of progressive or welfare liberalism and conservative social policies. The governments of S. M. Bruce through the 1920s and R. G. Menzies in the 1950s and 1960s established welfare liberalism and social conservatism as an orthodoxy for non-Labor politics. Bruce and Menzies opposed vigorously the perceived threats of collectivism posed by communist activity in the trade union movement and Labor policies of nationalisation. They supported the decentralisation of political power at home and the maintenance of the British Empire abroad.

On two occasions conservative elements on the non-Labor side of politics have been fuelled by major defections from the ALP. The first of these was the schism caused by the departure of W. M. Hughes' National Labor from the ALP and subsequent merger with the Liberal Party to form the pro-conscription Nationalist Party in 1917. The Nationalist Party stood for solidarity within Empire and nation, and portrayed the ALP as a party of sectional interests that sought to

isolate Australia from the Empire and divide the nation into classes.

The second occasion was the defection of an anti-communist and predominantly Catholic element from the ALP in 1955 to form what later became the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). The DLP was primarily motivated by what it saw as the increasing threat of communism, both abroad and within the labour movement at home. The DLP was not solely anti-ALP. It also expressed suspicion at the centralisation of power that accompanied monopolistic capitalism. The 1971 manifesto of The National Civic Council, an organisation informally associated with the DLP, proposed a program of what might be called 'agrarian conservatism', which linked life on the land with moral fibre and wholesome relationships.

Agrarian conservatism has also been a theme underlying the policies of the Country and National Parties. These policies have sought to encourage population movement from urban to rural areas, through the relocation of industry and upgrading of infrastructure.

From the 1980s free-market liberalism supplanted moderate protectionism as the economic orthodoxy on the conservative side of politics. Supporters of free-markets championed economic freedom but many resiled from social libertarianism. They were concerned to maintain existing institutions and sought to defend moral standards through censorship of pornography and the adoption of law and order policies in response to crime in general, and the use of illegal substances in particular.

Conservatives and the Republic

'Conservative' is an elastic term that has been used to describe beliefs ranging from agrarianism, empire, racism and nationalism to free-market liberalism. The elasticity of the term can be shown with reference to the debate concerning the constitutional and political

character of Australia. In the decades after Federation, conservatives stood for Empire, while Labor tended to argue for national self-sufficiency, particularly in the field of military capability. After World War Two and the dissolution of the Empire, conservatives stood for maintaining British constitutional links such as the authority of the monarch and the Privy Council. However, in recent debates on whether Australia ought to become a republic, some participants on both sides have identified themselves as conservative.

What allows Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy and Conservatives for a Republic both to claim to be conservative is their common disposition to maintain the relevance of responsible government. The disagreement between these groups is not over which set of abstract principles ought to be applied in assessing the value of responsible government, whether freedom, equality, the will of the people or efficiency. Rather the debate turns on how little change, if any, is required to maintain the relevance of the Australian political system to those it governs. Is constitutional monarchy the most certain way of preserving responsible government? Or, ought a so-called 'minimalist' republic be instituted as better representing the changing loyalties, aspirations and ethnic character of the population, while maintaining Westminster traditions?

Conservatives may not agree about the most certain way of protecting responsible government, but they agree in arguing that a directly elected head of state has the potential to compromise these traditions.

Two Faces of Conservatism

Conservatives have been portrayed as backward looking people who are fearful of an uncertain future, and unwilling to share their present advantages with those worse off. However, conservatives have

responded to such criticisms by pointing out that the preservation of what is presently enjoyed does not necessarily entail the exclusion of others. A corollary of national pride is ensuring that the benefits of what one enjoys are extended to others, rather than denied them.

There will always be debate concerning the direction in which Australian society ought to proceed. Conservatism does not come to these debates with a prepared blueprint, but neither does it come empty handed. Conservatism looks to the current resources enjoyed by this society, to prevailing beliefs and practices and extant institutions. It does not seek to impose change upon society but to alter institutions to keep them recognisable and relevant to those whom they govern.

Conservatives argue that the dreaming up of new directions in which a society might travel is unnecessary. Moral beliefs and practices are always changing. They also view attempts to arrest all change as being as futile as sound innovation will always be necessary to ensure the ongoing good health of society. Conservatives seek to accommodate change as the only sure way of preserving a distinctly Australian way of life.

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1. This Research Note summarises a large body of literature on conservatism. See, for example, T. Ball and R. Dagger, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal*, HarperCollins, New York, 1995; C. Hazelhurst, ed, *Australian Conservatism*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1979.