COMMON SENSE: THE PAST AND FUTURE OF THE DEBATE BETWEEN LIBERTARIANS AND CONSERVATIVES

Fusing conservatism and libertarianism continues to work—so ignore any theoretical difficulties, writes **John Heard**

American conservatism

For many Australian politicians and political thinkers, being labelled a conservative is still faintly embarrassing, if the term itself is not outright pejorative. Unlike the UK Tories and the US Republicans, Australian centre-right parties, personalities, and leaders have shied away from what would appear to be the correct usage, or the most obvious way to describe their political leanings. Except when claiming to be a fiscal conservative, or perhaps a social conservative, Australians haven't tended to view *conservative* as a coherent, winning designation.

That is not the case elsewhere, certainly not in the United States, where *conservative* is a powerful omnibus brand. Wrapped up in the label is an evocative, catholic strain of American thought. Historically, it has taken in the independent-mindedness of the Jeffersonian republicans—the authors of America's westward expansion—and assimilated it with strong intersubjective sensibilities.

The social cohesion fostered by a common sense of purpose and common heritage then—the camaraderie of settlers—has often sat alongside American conservatives' commitment to self-sufficiency and a view of diluted federal power as virtuous. Such deep tensions and important similarities linked people living in the new nation's precarious townships with agrarian types struggling to master the new America that they bought, borrowed, or stole from Native Americans. American conservatives have always been, in this way, town *and* country types. The conservative tradition in America was also, by virtue of being rooted in these narratives of America's 'Manifest Destiny' and territorial expansion, effortlessly American.

Australian Liberal Party members are not often mistaken for Snowy River stockman types or bushranger heroes, but the American conservative machine, more explicitly at least since Reagan, has produced a veritable parade of archetypal, down-home, good ol' boys and girls. This is seen as a fact of life in America, something that has long hampered centre-left and Democratic Party efforts to achieve any sort of broad-based national electoral success. It has become a cliché to write of the divide between red states and blue states, and—as snarky New Yorkers have been known to quip—'blue states lose.'

Once one gets beyond the basic, sometimes contrived Americanness of the designation, though, the philosophical and political reality is much less stable. The label *conservative* is not,

John Heard has honours degrees in arts and law from the University of Melbourne, and contributes regularly to publications in Australia and overseas.

in fact, a fixed or even a known quantity. When prodded for certainties, American conservatism often tilts, and American conservative politicians too often fall over.

Certainly, the label has slipped off some previously canonical figures. The so-called paleo-conservatives, for instance, who were ascendant during the middle and late Cold War years, quickly lost influence during the first Bush administration, when the so-called neoconservatives gained the upper hand. Indeed, the title *conservative* is claimed, often with great relish and sincerity, by demagogues, movements, and ideologies once considered clearly not conservative, or at times even typically liberal.

So, the Democratic Party's Barack Obama praised Ronald Reagan during a primary-season debate, and John McCain—the maverick Republican candidate—has seemed at times to be intent on waging a near one-man campaign to have climate change rebranded as a conservative cause. And while there is a bright line that links up someone on the centre-left in America with New Deal figures such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt and ideas such as government intervention and labour protection, there is no such policy unity, or even continuity, on the centre-right.

Today's conservative is not necessarily—indeed, probably not—2004's George W. Bush-style 'compassionate conservative,' and he or she is almost certainly not a 1950s anti-Israel conservative. And, while many conservatives think they're naturally against big government spending, Republican administrations under Reagan and the younger Bush actually grew the size of the federal bureaucracy and budget, sometimes exponentially.

Even the majority of conservatives who call themselves free traders, and think they are safe to do so, are on doubtful ground, as Robert E. Lighthizer pointed out recently in the *New York Times*:

> For almost 100 years after the Civil War, the Republican Party (led by men like Lincoln and McKinley) was overtly protectionist. Theodore Roosevelt, a hero of John McCain's, wrote that 'pernicious indulgence in the doctrine of free trade seems inevitably to produce fatty degeneration of the moral fiber.'[1]

Eisenhower, who almost ran as a Democrat before he ran as the first free-trade Republican presidential candidate in 1952, actually failed to win over the conservatives in his new party. They sided with Robert Taft, a staunch protectionist.

Similar divisions persist in conservatism today. The rifts between various competing interests, affiliations, ideologies, and individuals are so marked, and apply to issues so central to any political movement's identity and structure, that it can be safely claimed that what characterises American conservatism is not—like liberalism—its first-order coherence, but rather its first-order multiplicity. There is no one issue that all conservatives align on, unless it is championing America's best interests.

Beyond that, coherence only seems to come later, and at a superficial level, if it comes at all. This means that the designation *conservative* in America denotes a deeply unstable grouping, something that no doubt contributes to the dynamism and the energy of the conservative movement, but that also makes understanding American conservatism a difficult job for outsiders.

Fusionism in America

These twin marks, the Americanness alongside the dynamism, define what Americans mean when they call someone a conservative, and have done so from the movement's outset. But what about an underlying philosophy: Is there a unified idea of what it means to be a conservative? Is conservatism a coherent political philosophy? Should it be dropped for something else?

The former question is not as interesting as the latter two. As I've argued previously in *Policy*,

> In the absence of any binding document, or a creed for instance, that dogmatically sets out conservative beliefs, conservatism is generally held to be just that which most self-identified conservatives support.[2]

However, inasmuch as there might be a set of conservative beliefs, the movement has typically been understood to rely on a form of 'fusionism.' The concept of fusionism has certainly been used to answer questions about conservatism and coherence.

Fusionism was, of course, the political mix of traditional (social) conservatism with libertarian ideas and movements. It was first championed by

the late William F. Buckley, Jr, and Frank Meyer at *National Review*, and gained widespread exposure during the candidacy of Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election. By the time of Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential contest, it had mainstreamed, becoming the preeminent political movement of the postwar era. It was the driving force behind Reagan's unprecedented second term (1984) sweep of the electoral college.

The intellectual and organisational resources (think tanks, lobby groups, student energies) invested in and unleashed by leading fusionist thinkers and leaders helped to carry George H. W. Bush to victory in 1988, and laid the groundwork for the Republican Revolution in Congress. This was a conservative ascendancy that only started to look overcooked in 2006, after voters elected a new sort of 'compassionate conservative' (George W. Bush) to two fairly miserable (and fairly non-conservative, the unstable designation having slipped again) terms in the White House.

Most conservatives in America today would trace their intellectual and political patrimony back to Buckley and the fusionism that exemplified *National Review*. What most people don't know, however, even in the U.S., is what fusionism was, and how the minds that helped to forge the modern conservative movement were split from the beginning.

Freedom or virtue?

It is often said that fusionism only arose because external factors pushed two unlikely forces together. The struggle to defeat communism abroad, and cultural and political unrest at home, is usually cited as the relevant contextual pressure, the necessary catalyst in the formation and coherence or otherwise of what became the great settlement of American conservatism.

Given the competing, perhaps conflicting, moral and political motivations of the constituent conservative and libertarian ideologies, this claim seems right. Only some sense of a grand world-historical event—the Soviet threat to the American way of life, or the civil unrest that characterised the United States in the 1960s—would push people who disagreed so fundamentally

Remember the CIS when updating your Will

When I established the CIS, it was with the intention of doing whatever I could to help create a freer society. Whilst many achievements have been made, there is still so much more that needs to be done.

It is my hope that a strong organisation dedicated to strengthening the moral legitimacy of a free market economy and a free society will be my legacy.

I hope you will consider making this your legacy too.

Your contribution will make a difference to the lives of future generations.

Greg Lindsay, Founder and Executive Director, CIS

Your Will is probably one of the most important documents you will ever sign. It is a powerful tool for change and your opportunity to make a meaningful, tangible, and lasting gift that will show your appreciation for the work of the CIS. You may decide to contribute a:

- **General Bequest**
- **Specific Purpose Bequest**
- **Endowment Fund Bequest**

However you decide to support the Centre, you can be assured that your contribution will be a lasting legacy, helping to assist the CIS to pursue its mission: securing freedom, defending core values, and creating the type of society we all want for our children and grandchildren.

For information on the CIS and its Bequest Program, please phone (02) 9438 4377 and speak with the Bequest Officer or the Executive Director, or visit our website: www.cis.org.au.

about so much (as libertarians and conservatives must do) to marry their political fortunes.

The idea that only an external force could align the conservative and libertarian movements certainly runs through the early literature produced by Buckley and his associates at *National Review*. American conservatives worried then, right at the outset, that there might be some inherent conflict in fusionism: perhaps one could not pursue freedom *and* virtue at the same time.

The anxiety seems to have been foundational, then, and historical broadsides launched from either side of the newly-aligned camps have been collected in a tidy, useful book, *Freedom and Virtue: The Conservative/Libertarian Debate*, edited by George W. Carey of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. While some notable early advocates eventually decided otherwise—Catholic thinker L. Brent Bozell's essay 'Freedom or Virtue' and his later work are apposite here—most conservatives decided they could live with the contradictions inherent in their new project. The debate itself, however, provides an invaluable insight into the early years of contemporary American conservatism, not least because it appears to rule out the idea that communism provided the glue that held fusionism together. Past debates also suggest ways the movement adapted to future challenges.

It was concern over America's decline, and not primarily the threat of communism, that bound together early fusionist thinkers.

Certainly, it was much remarked, from the earliest days of the fusionist movement, that while John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*—a seminal document in the libertarian and classical liberal traditions—stated that 'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others,'[3] conservatives more generally, 'while concerned with individual liberty, strongly believe that shared values, morals, and standards, along with accepted traditions, are necessary for the order and stability of society.'[4] Such conservative views, Carey points out, and not their libertarian complement, had always been central to American conservatism.

Jeremiah Atwater, writing before Mill in 1801, stated the inverse of Mill's freedom imperative:

> Man, from cradle to grave, is constantly learning new lessons of moral instruction, and is trained to virtue and order by perpetual and salutary restraints … restraints imposed by the family, by the schools, by government and laws, and even by … public opinion, which, in a country where Christianity is believed, compels even profligates to be outwardly virtuous.[5]

But Carey suggests that historically, 'the times' were changing, and a new threat had emerged: 'conservatives believe[d] that the damage to the fabric and cohesiveness of society due to the loss of virtue and a common morality, [was] even more devastating than that anticipated by Atwater.[6]

Many people, of various backgrounds and political affiliations—but especially conservatives—came to think that America's perceived decline required a concerted cultural effort, and a unified political one. Fusionism was the unlikely conservative-libertarian response.

That it was libertarianism and not some other ideology that conservatives decided to co-opt appears to have been an accident of sorts. As Carey notes, it was concern over America's decline, and not primarily the threat of communism, that bound together early fusionist thinkers:

> Virtually all conservatives during the Cold War period were strongly anti-Communist and, accordingly, supported a strong national government … [whereas] many libertarians felt the Soviet threat was vastly exaggerated, primarily as a cover to expand the powers of government.[7]

But it was Buckley's penchant for libertarianism (he used both *conservative* and *libertarian* to describe himself throughout his life) and the force of his personality, and influence alone, that ensured that libertarians replaced the (often anti-Semitic) authoritarians who had previously influenced American conservative thought.

For libertarians, America in the 1960s was, in many respects, nowhere near Mill's 'civilised society,' and for conservatives, the breakdown in marriages, family life more generally, faith, and other key institutions was alarming enough to warrant radical innovation—even getting into bed with libertarians. Many of the essays contained in Carey's collection have, therefore, both classical liberals and more obvious conservatives looking out at the 1960s and the years since, and deciding that America was indeed facing a 'precipitous decline.' This common cause encouraged them to sideline their philosophical differences, with the usually unspoken understanding that once things had been put right they would simply splinter off again.

Fusionism must have been, then, a shaky thing to behold. As a new political movement, it was improbably balanced between the proleptic or idealistic and the ridiculous. Indeed, many reviews of Buckley's early books, and fusionist essays in *National Review* and elsewhere, are tinged with a version of the widespread liberal derision he came in for, if not characterised by an unbridled, dismissive tone.

A liberal commentator of the time, M. Morton Auerbach, writing in the 30 January 1962 issue of *National Review* (the paper is included in the Carey collection) certainly thought he had the fusionists' number. He somewhat gleefully pointed out the historical instability of the term *conservative*. 'Anyone who has tried to apply the term,' he wrote, 'knows that the word is extremely flexible,' before taunting the young men at Buckley's new magazine with a stream of questions:

> Could this [instability] be why it has become so important for *National Review* to maintain an imaginary escape tunnel connecting [Edmund] Burke with James Madison, i.e., joining medievalism [Auerbach's pejorative description of virtue theory] with classical liberalism? Will conservatism continue to offer nothing more than an array of mutually exclusive 'principles' from which all are invited to pick what suits them? Is this the age of do-it-yourself conservatism?[8]

To which Buckley, M. Stanton Evans, Frank Meyer, and Russell Kirk answered, variously, yes. None of them, however, thought that this was a bad thing for fusionism. They were right. Indeed, in an influential early response to Auerbach, Kirk argued that 'conservatism is not an ideology,' immediately deflecting any philosophical debate on the coherence of fusionism to a winning defence of how it might work on a practical level. That it worked on a practical level soon became obvious.

> There is a solid argument that it makes no sense to ask a person to be virtuous if he or she has no chance to choose virtue.

Then it took the nation.

It didn't matter so much after that if the boys at *National Review* couldn't tell you, discursively, what fusionism was, and how precisely it worked. American conservatives simply said that it would, and demonstrated that it did. Frank Meyer showed a similarly deft hand, turning Auerbach's snide comments about feudalism and the medieval into sound-bite-sized instructions on how American conservatives could turn the movement's negatives (a history of tension, incoherence) into positives (conservatism is a dynamic showcase, teeming with ideas). Conservative think tanks in America continue to demonstrate this strength, contributing a vast network of competing ideas, platforms, and thinkers, and feeding the best examples into conservative politics at every level, on issues as diverse as abortion and the estate or 'death' tax to biofuels and the Second Amendment.

The future

In the post-Cold War era, many American conservatives have questioned fusionism. Some libertarians, buoyed by the relatively strong performance of Ron Paul in the Republican primaries, think it might be time for a fully-fledged libertarian party. Others, usually secular virtue ethicists or natural-law-inflected Catholic thinkers, worry that the pursuit of freedom, far from making space for virtue, has too often crowded right reason, religion, and transcendental ideas out of the public square. There is also talk of new alignments. For

one, Brink Lindsey of the Cato Institute has argued that libertarians and left-leaning liberals should join forces to become 'liberaltarians.'[9]

Often, critics point to the underlying philosophical incoherence of the movement and try to use that as a lever. They lift up the whole history of conservatism and pretend they have discovered some particular, wriggling instability attributable to fusionism alone. Some write as though all of the tensions, the signal rifts that have always characterised American conservatism, would melt away if only conservatives embraced some singular vision—freedom, perhaps, or virtue.

There is not room to investigate this claim closely, but it is enough to wonder why anyone would want to jeopardise the broad political appeal of fusionist conservatism.

Further, while some modern libertarian positions—on human life, marriage, sexual ethics, and censorship—would appear to offend against the conservative's deepest sensibilities, there is a solid argument that it makes no sense to ask a person to be virtuous if he or she has no chance to choose virtue.

M. Stanton Evans carries this idea further to argue that there might be, in fact, a particular conservative (fusionist) philosophy, and that

> we can contribute to it certain primary and constant affirmations. The conservative believes that ours is a God-centred, and therefore an ordered, universe; that man's purpose is to shape his life to the patterns of order proceeding from the Divine center of life; and that, in seeking this objective, man is hampered by a fallible intellect and vagrant will. Properly construed, this view is not only compatible with a due regard for human freedom, but demands it.[10]

Even in places where ... labels like 'libertarian' and 'fusionist' are often unknown, fusionism has ... an outsized influence.

Others try to argue as though those things that brought libertarians and conservatives together in the past no longer compel them with the same sense of urgency.

These critics usually mistake anti-communism for the glue that held fusionism together. The better claim would seem to be that fusionism is still needed—perhaps more so now than when Buckley was setting up *National Review*. Certainly, the cultural indicators assembled by William Bennett, and cited by Carey in the introduction to the debate collection, would horrify conservatives alarmed at American decline in the 1960s:

> Since the 1960s … [the U.S. has seen] a 560 percent increase in violent crime … a 400 percent increase in illegitimate births … and more than three times as many children living in single parent homes. In 1940 … talking out of turn; chewing gum; making noise; running in the halls … were identified as leading problems in the public schools. In the 1990s these problems were replaced by drug abuse; alcohol; pregnancy; suicide; rape; robbery; and assault.[11]

Even in places where the centre-right discourse on politics and philosophy is not as nuanced as it is in America, where labels like 'libertarian' and 'fusionist' are often unknown, if not rejected (perhaps ignorantly) outright, fusionism has continued to have an outsized influence. Around the time of his death, many British papers and commentators noted what Buckley and *National Review* meant for Britain, and how they had cleared a wide space for the distinctly fusionist phenomenon now known as Thatcherism.

In Australia, John Howard's four-term prime-ministership was quite deliberately modelled—it has since become clear—on a homegrown variant of American conservatism. Giving the 2008 Irving Kristol Lecture at the American Enterprise Institute, Howard described his 'proud record' in unambiguously fusionist terms:

> The former Australian government, which I led, was accused of many things, but never of betraying its essentially Centre-Right credo. We pursued a blend of economic liberalism—in the classical

> sense of that term connoting as it does a faith in market forces—and social conservatism. Far from being in conflict, the one reinforced the other.[12]

The final question then—should fusionism be replaced by something else?—would need to be answered in light of these facts. Fusionism was, from the beginning, an eminently practical solution to a particular political problem. If the problem has lapsed, or the solution no longer works, then it must be reexamined. In the meantime, conservatives have generally resisted navel-gazing beyond a basic statement of what fusionism can do, and the movement has been well rewarded for that common sense.

Endnotes

1 Robert E. Lighthizer, 'Grand Old Protectionists,' *New York Times* (6 March 2008), www.nytimes.com/2008/03/06/opinion/06lighthizer.html?scp=3&sq=protectionist+mccain&st=nyt.

2 John Heard, review of *The Conservative Soul: How We Lost It, How To Get It Back*, by Andrew Sullivan, *Policy* 23:1 (Autumn 2007), 64.

3 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government* (New York: Precepts, 1950), 95–96.

4 George W. Carey, 'Introduction,' in *Freedom and Virtue: The Conservative/Libertarian Debate*, ed. George W. Carey (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), xi.

5 Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz (eds), *American Political Writing During the Founding Era, 1760–1805* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983), II, 1177.

6 George W. Carey, 'Introduction,' xiii.

7 As above, xvii.

8 M. Morton Auerbach, 'Do-it-yourself Conservatism?' in *Freedom and Virtue*, 5.

9 Brink Lindsey, 'Liberaltarians,' *The New Republic* (4 December 2006), www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=6800.

10 M. Stanton Evans, 'Techniques and Circumstances,' in *Freedom and Virtue*, 6.

11 William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (Washington: Heritage Foundation/Empower America, 1993), xxi.

12 John Howard, 'Keeping Faith With Our Common Values' (The 2008 Irving Kristol Lecture, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, 5 March 2008), www.aei.org/publications/pubID.27613,filter.all/pub_detail.asp.

Capital Campaign

'We must make the building of a free society once more an intellectual adventure, a deed of courage. If we can regain that belief in the power of ideas which was the mark of liberalism at its best, the battle is not lost.'

F. A. Hayek

On its 30th Anniversary, The Centre for Independent Studies established a Capital Campaign to create a Fund in order to support a major development phase and underpin the Centre's long-term future. The Fund will allow CIS to expand and develop its research programs, and attract leading scholars to provide the ideas and resources for the ongoing promotion of liberty. It will strengthen the financial independence of the Centre and help CIS secure suitable long-term premises for its 'community of scholars.' The Fund will also help increase the Centre's influence, and will reinforce its role as one of the few truly independent voices in public policy debates.

For more information on the CIS Capital Campaign visit **www.cis.org.au**, contact the Centre on **(02) 9438 4377**, or email **cis@cis.org.au**.