



Taking Back Control:
Restoring Universalism in
the Age of Identity Politics
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Foreword

A certain school of thought claims that what ails the centre-right of Australian politics is the failure to embrace a ‘forward-looking modern’ approach to contemporary social and cultural issues. The argument is that those who subscribe to so-called ‘reactionary’ views are fighting a losing battle, and are waging a futile struggle to hold back the so-called ‘progressive’ zeitgeist promoted by the left that is ascendant in most of our institutions.

It is viewed as an electoral liability to remind the community that the centre-right rejects the tenets of the left. The best political strategy is said to be to cease any talk of social and cultural matters, and instead focus on advancing the material wellbeing of the nation. Such timid prophets maintain that the case for economic reform should be prosecuted in splendid isolation from any discussion of traditional values and principles pertaining to subjects such as the family and identity politics.

In this essay, Senator Amanda Stoker powerfully argues that what truly ails the centre right is not that it has not become sufficiently ‘progressive’, but rather that it has failed to remain authentic. It has failed to stand up and fight for the fundamental values and principles that have historically mattered to those who identify with both classical liberal and conservative political traditions.

Stoker argues that what is really at stake in the culture wars is the future of Australia as a liberal democratic society in which citizens are free to exercise their right to speak, to think, to work, and to rise on their merits without government inhibitions of their liberty.

Unless the centre-right is prepared to defend the ‘universalist’ precepts of liberal democracy — which are under concerted assault by those who seek to tribalise society along race, gender, and class lines — the freedoms that we have long taken for granted will continue to be eroded.

If we do not defend the principles of western civilisation — which have created more freedom for all than any other society in history — we will accept the left’s view that rampant ‘racism’ and ‘inequality’ justify government restrictions on speech and greater regulation of the economy.

Likewise, if a stand is not taken in defence of traditional values of personal responsibility, many of the social problems that plague the nation will persist, and will further drive growth in welfare dependence and in the size of government programs that ameliorate — but rarely solve — our social ills.

Stoker’s point is that it is impossible to neatly separate economic and social issues, and that economics is fundamentally downstream from culture.

A society in which citizens are not trusted to take control of their own lives and care for their families and communities, is a society in which neither trust nor liberty (as properly conceived) can thrive.

The enormous stakes mean that the willingness to fight the political fight over our social and cultural direction is crucial. Refusing to participate in the battle of ideas in defence of freedom will simply create a void that allows the left’s long march through society to proceed unimpeded.

As Stoker argues, the pathway to political — and to cultural, social, and economic — renewal lies in providing the kind of leadership that inspires Australians to support the traditional values and principles that they instinctively know to be vital to the future of their families and the welfare of the nation.

Engaging in, not withdrawing from, social and cultural debates is the only way to ‘take back control’ of public debates and the future of our country as a free, fair, and liberal society.

History is won only by those who show up and fight for what they believe truly matters.

Dr Jeremy Sammut
Senior Research Fellow
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Introduction: The Loss of Trust in Our Institutions

2019 has already been a bad year for some of our hitherto most trusted institutions. However, the Hayne Royal Commission report on misconduct in the banking and financial services sector, and the conviction of Cardinal George Pell (which will continue to rock the Catholic Church for some time), have only underlined Australians' declining trust in the institutions that have traditionally been a source of stability and strength in our community.

Trust in politicians and in democracy is at an all-time low, as is trust in the judiciary. A 2018 national survey conducted by the Museum of Australian Democracy and the University of Canberra found satisfaction with Australia's democracy has more than halved between 2007 and 2018. In some communities, political distrust and disillusionment was higher than 80 per cent.

If trends continue, less than 10% of Australians will trust their politicians and political institutions by 2025. We're facing a crisis where people are turning their back on the very democratic system of governance that conferred upon them more freedom and economic prosperity than any other political system known to man.

You might expect that, if Australia were in a recession. As Professor Mark Evans from the University of Canberra observed: "It's unusual to see such a crisis in political trust when the economy is going so well."

Banks fared a little better on the trust scale, but not by much. While only 16% of Australians trust political parties and 31% trust federal government, 34% trust our banks.

Part of that loss of trust has been earned. When banks charge customers for services they didn't provide, when politicians abuse the privilege of publicly paid expenses, when figures in the church fail to protect children from harm, such misconduct understandably burns trust, and rebuilding it is a slow process.

The Legacy of the Long March

But there's more to the story than that.

When our media, our university graduates and others have been taught postmodernism — almost to the exclusion of other intellectual approaches to understanding Australia society — they are always looking for power plays, looking for the agenda behind every action with a deep cynicism.

Perhaps that reflects the way individuals now interact as a part of a society. When we don't show up for an appointment or a date; or when we don't say what we mean; when we don't look out for those around us, we break the bonds of trust with our fellow man. In this sense, our lack of trust in institutions is a mirror on our personal conduct, albeit in aggregate.

The fundamentals that have built this nation — the values that made western civilisation the freest and most prosperous known to man — have been under attack for some time. This has a great deal to do with our inability to trust.

There has been a concerted effort among the academic class, and the media and intellectual class that flows from it, to paint the legacy of western civilisation as little more than conquering and oppressing others, stripping them of their resources and dignity, and then abandoning them, once the wealth is taken.

This is a supremely negative rewriting of history. If that is all western civilisation were to stand for, then one could be forgiven for an antipathy towards it. Such negativity underpins the sense of collective guilt that permeates the teaching of history and politics today.

Is Regulation — or Self-Regulation — the answer?

The effectiveness of this intellectual effort to destroy trust in our institutions — coupled with the wrongdoing of some within them — means there are calls for greater regulation and control.

Plenty will call for more regulation of the banks — with little appreciation of the fact that the last 1000 pages of legislation regulating

their activities had little positive impact — and they will also call for more statutory interference with the work of the churches. Politicians already face detailed reporting and transparency requirements.

In Queensland, a human rights act has recently been passed that essentially empowers judges to become arbiters of controversial social questions about whose rights prevail in circumstances where there are competing rights. Those who cheered the passage of this Act played upon the notion that these matters should be above politics — as if politicians could not be trusted with them. And yet by conferring political decision making upon the judiciary (a body without the check of regular elections) we can expect the public's trust in it to be undermined further.

The implications are profound: when we don't trust our institutions, there are calls for more regulation and control of them. The problem is that such moves inevitably limit our freedom, and don't deal with the heart of the disappointment that led to the distrust.

This is compounded when freedom itself isn't even well understood in the general population. This is concerning because if we don't know what freedom is, and why it matters, it will be given away too cheaply.

Rights, Responsibilities, and Threats to Freedom

If we think of freedom as a system of obedience to the unenforceable, and as an expression of our choice to participate in a social contract to which we are not compelled, there is a deep link between freedom and self-restraint.

Understanding freedom in this way highlights its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where God gave individuals free will so that they had the capacity to choose to honour God. Without disrespecting other faiths or traditions, no other tradition conceives of freedom in this way. This tradition of freedom is deeply individualistic, and honours the capacity and value of every man and woman.

Popular consciousness doesn't really make a distinction at present between the notions of freedom *from* (or negative freedom, the idea that we should be free of the bad things, like slavery and oppression) and freedom *for* — that is, positive freedom. Making the case for

the importance of those positive freedoms — freedom of thought, of conscience, of belief, of association and of speech — has never been harder.

The threats to freedom are both internal and external. External dangers to our freedom include the idea that others are coming for our freedoms, seeking to limit them either through the use of law or by ignoring the rule of law.

The internal threats are real too, though they are perhaps harder to articulate. They are the internal corruption of freedom; so it is no longer coupled with self-restraint or self-discipline, but is instead a permissiveness or licence that descends into that which personally harms.

When we think of many of the social ills of our time that seem so hard to fix — problems with addiction, poor mental health and the knock-on problem areas of child safety or inter-generational disadvantage — the internal corruption of freedom has a good deal to do with it.

It sounds outdated now, but only a few generations ago it was the accepted wisdom that if a person — even one who started poor — finished school, got a trade or profession, married before having children and stayed that way, they would almost always end their lives middle class. Those three basic steps, as unfashionable as they are, remain true.

Saying this so plainly risks being labelled ‘judgmental’. Perhaps for that reason, this advice is less often shared today, and the failure to follow it characterises the most inter-generationally disadvantaged people in our community.

We are still a land of great opportunity; but our problem with self-restraint is undermining social outcomes and true freedom.

Our social tragedies highlight the crucial — yet too often ignored — relationship between rights and responsibilities.

People like rights for themselves. They feel virtuous when they talk about human rights — though those who do so most tend to care more about some rights (and particular people’s rights) than others. They are less keen on responsibilities — unless it is the kind of big picture problem that, in their bleating, they are really asking someone else to deliver upon.

Think about hysterical calls for action on climate change from people who enjoy in abundance the fruits of our high-electricity, high-fuel consumption age. Or of calls for other people to be taxed to pay for any number of 'worthy' initiatives. But there is no mutual responsibility: the notion that with the many rights we have, come personal responsibilities that go beyond ourselves.

Identity Politics: Victimhood & Silencing

Identity politics plays an important role in the confusion about rights, responsibilities and freedom, and it is core to postmodernist thinking, whether called anti-colonialism, critical theory or something else.

In its search for a power agenda in everything, identity politics badges every human relationship as one between victim and oppressor. Its solution is to identify victims of past injustice (often in past generations rather than in the present time) and elevate them over others, who because of their oppressor status are supposed to accept present punishment for past misdeeds.

This is toxic on many levels. The victim develops a sense of entitlement to elevated status, and if it is not given, whether by government or others, it confirms victimhood. It is deeply disempowering to the victim, who comes to believe they are not capable of transcending their minority status.

It also breeds resentment in those who are unjustly branded oppressors, based on historical misdeeds or history rewritten ungenerously. And it makes our society tribal: adhering to allegiances to groups based on skin colour, sexuality or gender.

The Jewish people seemed to understand the disempowerment of victimhood. Though the Holocaust would have given the greatest possible justification for such an attitude, their cultural leaders understood that victimhood would be self-defeating. This has played a large role in the great success of the Jewish community, despite its small size. Imagine the benefits that would be experienced for the long term if such a resilience was developed in, for example, our Indigenous community.

The elevation of particular tribes over others, as well as their story of victimhood over the history or ideas of others, is used to justify restraints upon free speech that today are greater than we have ever seen before in this nation. That confinement operates socially as well as legally. Not only can you be dragged before a tribunal for expressing a perspective that confronts the world view of a protected minority class; but you can also expect to be hauled before HR for being insufficiently politically correct at work, or attacked on social media and elsewhere for failing to conform.

The effect is to silence people whose views don't align with the new elite. Most sensible people just don't need the hassle — or indeed the cost — or the fight with HR, the courts or with the tribunals. They don't want the social awkwardness or the risk of shame that comes with this kind of confrontation. It's easier just to put your head down and mind your own business.

The effect, though, is to create the impression that the identity politics agenda is the accepted norm, and to deepen the well of silence. It doesn't however, dispel the gut instinct that something is deeply wrong.

What has always been the strength of Australian society has been that, as Robert Menzies put it in his first 'Forgotten People' speech: "The things that unite Australians are infinitely more important and enduring than the things that divide us." That was true in his time, and even as recently as during John Howard's time as Prime Minister.

But the way identity politics seeks to separate and dehumanise different tribes within our society threatens our social cohesion. Taken to its extreme, it has the potential to descend into violence, of the kind that has become civil war in more tribally oriented nations. Indeed, we have seen shades of that on university campuses already, where groups of students find a particular idea so offensive to their identity group that they feel entitled to demand the firing of those who expose them to that challenging idea; or worse, to violently riot on campus to prevent those ideas from being expressed.

These extreme reactions to mere ideas — whether it is the kind of emotional crushing we see of those who need a safe space in which to

recover with the help of play-doh and puppy cuddles, or the violent reactions we see at the other extreme — demonstrate the dangers before us.

The Politics of Polarisation

The right to freedom of conscience, to believe and to express that belief, is the core of what it means to be a free human being.

That should be enough to make most people willing to fight for it. And yet, in a nation where we did not in the first place get these freedoms through battle or the spilling of blood (though many have fought in wars subsequent in their defence), it is easy for them to be taken for granted.

We have to ask why such a toxic ideology has flourished.

Part of the answer is that we for too long assumed that Menzies' grand statement was a truth so self-evident as to be incapable of change. Another is that the new-Marxist left have been very effective in their march through the institutions. Identity politics boomed in the fertile climate of the 60s and 70s, where the women's rights movement, the growing understanding of the poor way in which minorities had been treated and the aftermath of WW2 combined to give that 'collective guilt' approach some appeal. Though we were given plenty of warning in an academic sense, we didn't heed it until the results became apparent.

Plenty has been said about the march through the institutions. I don't intend to repeat it, other than to observe that the dominance of our universities has controlled the thinking of at least two generations of young people, as well as the teacher class that now educates at the pre-school, primary and secondary level, and the media that frames the way we understand the political debates of our time. The pervasiveness of the efforts to remedy 'structural disadvantage' are now corrupted into a mechanism to promote a radical minority elite into more powerful positions, and to tear down those who represent old power structures.

Indicative of the times, though, is the way in which this march has captured the modern Labor party. The Labor Party of old is gone. It was the party that appealed to working class people like my grandparents and who promised to help the poor with its belief in universalism — the idea that we are all deeply equal — and the primacy of the traditional family.

The rise and dominance of Labor's Left faction mean that the neo-Marxist agenda is now firmly Labor's, and identity politics is its cheap road to power. The new elite — exclusive and 'woke' — in fact has disdain for the traditional family, actively seeking to break it down with new genders, new family forms, and greater dependence on the state for the roles that family used to play in education, in sharing values, and in care for those in times of need.

Hence, there is some irony in the fact that Labor's historical rise was in reaction to a conservative elite, harking back to a feudal order.

In the modern world, only the conservative side of politics now seems willing to fight for universalism. This represents a fascinating shift; it also represents our greatest road out of this horrible mess.

Liberal Leadership

It will take a rising courage from all within the Liberal Party to confront this wrong-headedness whenever it is seen, and to deeply reconnect with the fundamental values of being a classical liberal or conservative. That leadership is important because those silenced, shamed Australians who know the new order is wrong will take heart and become braver when we create the space for them to do so.

The role of women in politics and in the Liberal Party offers an opportunity to lead. There's often talk about women's role in the Party, and canvassing of the need for gender quotas. I see very little attempt made by those who support quotas on my side to reconcile that belief with the reality that it reflects an acceptance and incorporation of identity politics into our very structure. When we do that, we hollow out the very core of who we are. That doesn't work electorally, nor in reality.

But universality — that is a good fit for who we are. The deep respect for the dignity of every individual, on an equal basis before the law. It shows how far the political parties have moved; that universality and respect for family have a home in the Liberal and National Parties that they no longer have in Labor. It is also a road forward for us politically.

We have an opportunity to build a new covenant with the people who would once have been Labor's people, but whose values just don't fit any more. Our belief in universality and the value of a strong family as a bulwark against the big state will appeal if we make the effort to share it in a way that transcends superficial partisan notions of 'red good, blue bad', and vice versa. That depth of communication, that willingness to speak frankly with and with respect for the trades, nurses, labourers, hairdressers, small business men and women in our community, will pay dividends.

To use the language coined by Matthew Lesh in his book *Democracy in a Divided Australia*, we have a chance to build our trust with the "outsiders", as Labor chases the smaller but currently more powerful group of "inners" of this new elite.

Reshaping the Culture

This task should lie with politicians; but we must not forget that politics is always downstream of culture.

That means political efforts must aim to reshape culture in a way that respects fundamental freedoms. It also means that *everyone* who contributes to culture must play their role.

It's heartening to see some literary backlash against the imposition of rules forbidding cultural appropriation — the idea that you are only qualified to write about characters with whom you share a lived experience. We shape our culture by connecting better to the cultural institutions in our community and helping them develop a culture of valuing these basic freedoms, and of universality.

Everyone in corporate Australia has a role to play — and it's time for those with significant influence in this sphere to show some courage about pushing back on the flow of identity politics into corporate life.

There can be no more jumping on identity politics bandwagons, as we saw in the same-sex marriage debate, or more recently in major mining companies' push for a constitutionally entrenched Indigenous voice to parliament.

No more enforcement of the double-speak of politically correct language in the workplace. No more threats from the ASX to demand listed companies justify their 'social licence to operate'; undoubtedly by sufficient virtue signalling on the pet issues of the left — shareholder interests be damned.

No more businesses caving to demands from 'Sleeping Giants' to endorse politically correct views. For those not familiar with 'Sleeping Giants', they are groups committed to using social media trolling to (relatively anonymously) pressure companies to remove advertising from news outlets that dare to publish perspectives that deviate from leftist orthodoxy. In doing so, they provide financial penalties for operating a free press.

There can be no more skewed gender sensitivity training imposed from the administrations of universities. No more acceptance by doctors of censorship that defies biology.

It won't be easy. Notice the way mining company Glencore's decision to cap its production of coal at current levels to abate carbon emissions corresponds with the rise of large industry super funds whose leftist underpinnings are now being exercised in their capacity as shareholders. Party politics is not the only motivation, but it surely plays a role.

The difficulty of the task is proportionate to our past complacency. But take heart — the fact that such massive cultural change was achieved in a matter of around 50 years means it can similarly be undone over that time frame. But the task requires the same level of dogged commitment.

There are two reasons why this matters to everyone. The first is that basic human freedoms are under attack. They include freedom

of conscience — the right to think and believe for yourself — and its corollaries, the right to freedom of association and the right to freedom of speech. What you believe isn't worth much if you have no right to gather and share it with others.

We must fight for these freedoms because without them we are not truly free human beings, with the dignity of the individual that is the foundation of western civilisation. Without them, history tells us, tyranny follows.

Economics, too, is downstream of culture

The other reason we must fight is that without our freedoms we will not enjoy the prosperity that has blessed this nation.

Our relative wealth is not a coincidence of geography, nor the windfall of having good stuff to mine under the ground. It is the *product* of our fundamental freedoms: the equality before the law, the protection of an individual's right to property, the ability to choose the best available staff for our business. The ability to think and solve the problems we face: that is the product of intellectual freedom and freedom of conscience, association and speech.

Take these away, and we will no longer be the smart, entrepreneurial, frontier country; nor even the lucky country.

We can have none of the wealth we have come to expect without our freedoms.

Australia hasn't had a major recession in 27 years. Under the current government, unemployment is at its lowest level since mid-2011 and welfare dependency is at its lowest level in over 30 years. Jobs growth is at an all-time high. Now I might be a little biased, but the figures don't lie. For most people in most places, we're doing pretty well.

In fact, we're doing so well that most young people can't even fathom what it's like to live through tough economic times. How could they? In many places, particularly urban areas, we've had it good for so long that our definition of the 'necessities' is wildly different than even in my parents' generation. It is even starker if we go back another generation.

A sizeable portion of the younger generations of Australians who've grown up enjoying all the benefits of a booming economy are blind to the privileges afforded to them and the many opportunities they can, and should, take advantage of.

But our strong economy is the direct result of our foundational freedoms and democratic institutions.

Many of the same people who call for greater social equality and all the benefits they see as their right (at someone else's expense, of course) are blind to the benefits they enjoy because of our strong economic position.

What's especially notable is that they are wrong. A 2018 paper on inequality by the Productivity Commission found that the last 27 years of uninterrupted economic growth in Australia has significantly improved living standards for Australians in every income group. It also found that Australia's tax system has effectively reduced income inequality.

Conclusion: Shifting Public Debate

It can feel safer avoiding the conversation on the social issues that can be landmines at the best of times. But the longer those who believe in freedom and responsibility sit on the sidelines, the longer we give free rein for others to shape the debate.

Where we can start to shift debate is on the role of government and other institutions in the lives of ordinary Australians. We must start talking about freedom to the people who don't know, or have forgotten, that getting to a better place in life can — and should — start with taking responsibility for one's own life: taking back control, and owning the decisions that come with freedom, along with their consequences.

We must also continue to point out the absurdity of those calling for ever greater social equality while weakening the very economic foundations that allow genuine social improvement. We must remind people, especially younger people who just don't know their history, what the consequences will be of shattering the economy in the name of identity politics.

By doing so, we can take back the reins of public debate, and share the benefits of our fundamental freedoms with a new generation, and broader range, of Australians.

Related works:

Jeremy Sammut, *The History Wars Matter* OP159 (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2017).

Claire Lehmann, *Conflict vs Mistake: Academic cultures and explanatory conflict theory*, OP167, (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2018).



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