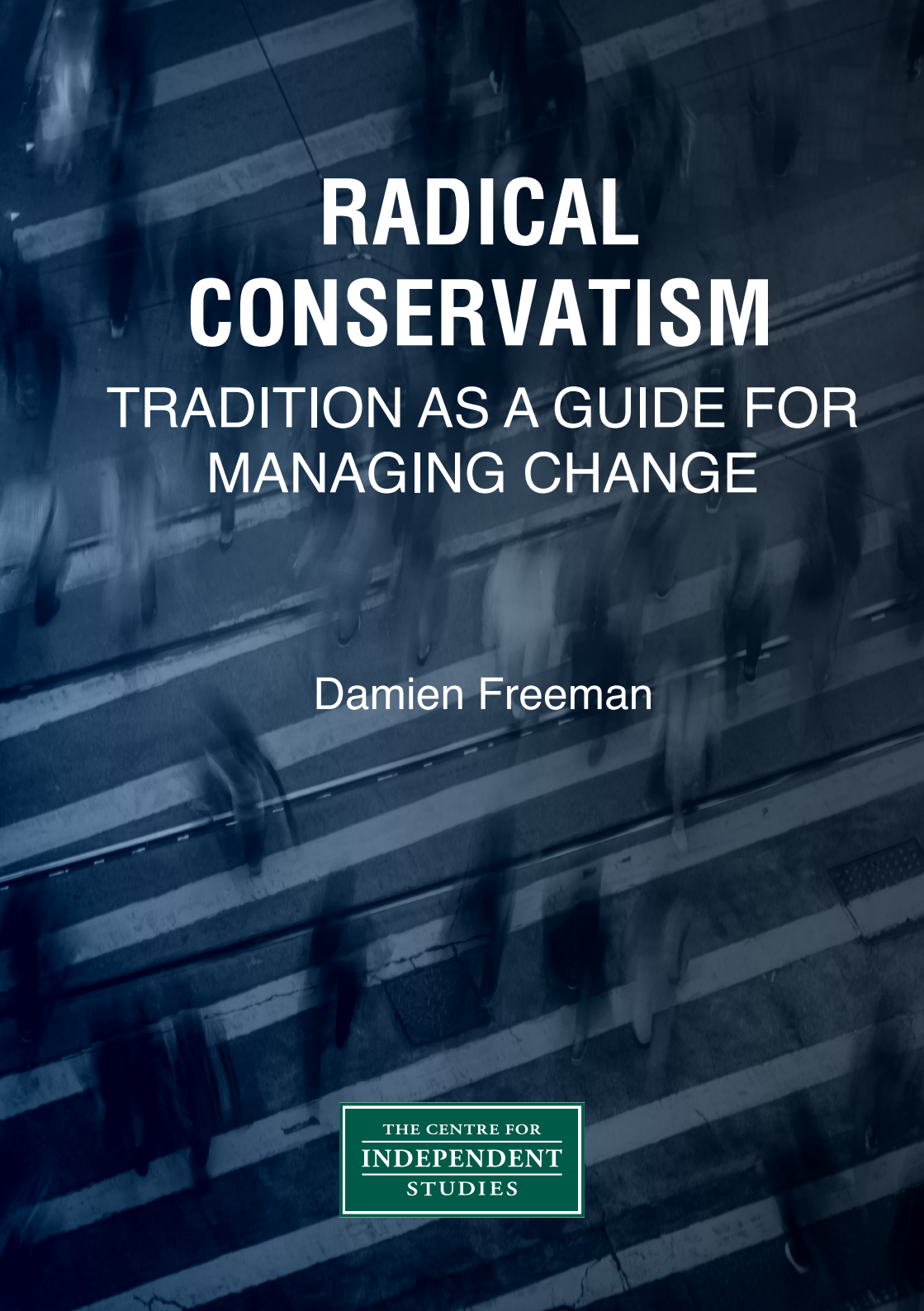

RADICAL CONSERVATISM

TRADITION AS A GUIDE FOR MANAGING CHANGE

Damien Freeman

THE CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT STUDIES

Radical Conservatism: Tradition as a guide for managing change

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Radical Conservatism: Tradition as a guide for managing change

There's a reason that cars have rear vision mirrors.

Drivers need to look back. Obviously, that doesn't mean they don't need to look forward. They need to have one eye on what lies behind them, even while they have the other fixed firmly on what lies ahead. From time to time, you need to check what's happening on the left and the right. But what really matters is what's ahead and what's behind.

The art of politics is concerned with what one does when in the driver's seat and how to look after the passengers who are in your care. Understanding the way things have been done in the past allows the aspiring politician to adopt a cast of mind that provides the best guidance for addressing the challenges that lie ahead.

How are the drivers of Australian politics doing at the moment?

There are two measures of success for political leaders:

- Are they managing the politics of the society in which they operate?
- Are they managing the policy challenges faced by the society?

A successful leader needs a cast of mind that grasps how policy challenges can be addressed effectively, but also in keeping with the prevailing political dynamics.

Do our political leaders have such a cast of mind at the moment? If not, is there one they could adopt?

When he retired from parliament in 2018, Senator George Brandis was not impressed by the state of play. "The parties of the Left have become even more authoritarian, particularly in their hostility to intellectual freedom and freedom of speech. Historically, parties of the Centre Right have opposed the Left's authoritarian mindset," he said. However, he observed that "increasingly, in recent years, powerful elements of right-wing politics have abandoned" their traditional commitments "in favour of a belligerent, intolerant populism which shows no respect for either the rights of individual citizens or the traditional institutions which protect them."[1]

Four years later, the teal wave of independents and the increased success of the Greens at the 2022 federal election introduced a further dimension. Voters have lost confidence in the political parties they traditionally supported, but there is also a risk that they are losing confidence in the two-party system as a whole. While the left becomes more authoritarian and the right becomes more intolerantly populist, the electorate turns away from the dominant centre-right and centre-left parties.

Australia is not an outlier in terms of political disengagement. In the United Kingdom, there has been a steady increase in political

1 Senator George Brandis, *Hansard*, Wednesday, 7 February 2018, p. 492.

disengagement when measured in terms of voter turnout (which is not compulsory) and trust in government.[2] Adrian Pabst argues that Brexit demonstrates how voters have lost confidence in liberal democracy,[3] which they find to be illiberal and undemocratic. Be that as it may, in another sense this is no recent development: since the 1950s, the UK Labour and Conservative parties have struggled with decreasing membership and primary votes. This is notable because party politics as we know it in Australia developed in eighteenth-century England, where Edmund Burke published his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* in 1770. In that work, Burke sketched out the idea of a political party as distinct from a political faction. He explained that members of a party are "united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some political principle in which they are all agreed." Members of a faction are united by self-interest. When evicted from office, Burke argues, factions tend to fall apart because it is no longer in their self-interest to unite, whereas parties tend to endure because the principles, shared values, mutual commitments and so on, endure even while they await the opportunity to take power again.

Burke's analysis of what parties are and why they are valuable is insightful at a moment when a third of the Australian electorate chose not to vote for one of the two major parties.[4] However, what's also interesting is the political situation that prompted Burke's thoughts in 1770.[5] It was a time when the old Whig and Tory parties were no longer the dominant political forces they had been in the aftermath of the English civil war. In the face of discontent with the politics of the day, Burke is ambivalent about the relationship between those who

2 https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf.

3 Adrian Pabst, *The Demons of Liberal Democracy* (Polity, 2019).

4 According to the ABC, 35.7% of the population voted for the Liberal/National Coalition, 32.6% voted for the Labor Party, and 31.7% voted for the Greens, One Nation, United Australia Party, or others: https://www.abc.net.au/news/elections/federal/2022/results/party-totals.

5 Reflecting on the situation at the time, Burke writes, "This state of things is the more extraordinary, because the great parties which formerly divided and agitated the kingdom are known to be in a manner entirely dissolved.": Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* in Jesse Norman (ed.), *Reflections on the Revolution in France and other writings* (Everyman, 2015), p. 114.

govern and those who are governed.[6]

Burke writes at a time when, he can see, there is a misalignment between those who govern and those they govern. For all of that, Burke is not given to side with the people against the ruling elites in the way a populist might.[7] Nor is he dismissive of ordinary people who do not appreciate the virtues of their politicians. What he emphasises is the proper relationship between politicians and the electorate.

According to Burke, government is in the business of "conciliating" the affection of the people even when there is "some temporary uneasiness." The voice of the people, he writes, "can never be considered as a thing of little consequence," because it is this, rather than military power or legal regulation, that is the ultimate basis for peaceful government in a democratic state. What is instructive is Burke's advice to politicians. He maintains a person is able to govern his equals or even his superiors through acquiring "a knowledge of their temper, and by a judicious management of it."[8] He believes this is the key to managing public affairs, and for this reason, he provides the following advice to the aspiring politician:

> The temper of the people amongst whom he presides ought therefore to be the first study of a statesman. And the knowledge of this temper it is by no means impossible for him to attain, if he has not an interest in being ignorant of what it is his duty to learn.[9]

This counsel might be 250 years old, but it is still good advice. It is at the core of what it takes to be a successful politician. Politicians must be capable of understanding how people *feel*, and they must be

6 He is adamant that he is not inclined to accept the maxim, "That we have a very good ministry, but that we are a very bad people" (*Thoughts*, p. 114). On the other hand, he writes, "I am not one of those who think that the people are never in the wrong ... But I do say ... the presumption is at least upon a par in favour of the people." (*Thoughts*, pp. 115-16).

7 "I have nothing here to do with the abstract value of the voice of the people." (*Thoughts*, p. 112).

8 *Thoughts*, p. 113.

9 *Thoughts*, p. 113.

able to conciliate or soothe their feelings — ideally before the feelings become too strong and overwhelming. The teal wave that caused the Liberal Party to lose a slew of hitherto safe inner-city seats occurred either because the politicians failed to understand how the people felt, or because they failed to communicate policy solutions that demonstrated they understood how the people felt, and so failed to conciliate their feelings.

Although the starting point for politics is an understanding of how people feel, Burke also explains in no uncertain terms that the voters are not supposed to dictate policy to the politicians they elect to represent them in parliament. In his 1774 address to the electors of Bristol, Burke is very clear that they have elected him to exercise his own judgement, and that, in doing so, he is not exercising his judgement as to what is in the electors' particular interests, but what is in the interest of the nation as a whole.[10]

Thus, Burke tells us the politician's first task is to understand how the people feel, and his second task is to exercise his own judgement about what policies and laws the government and parliament should make, having regard not to the opinions of the people the politician represents, but to the interests of the nation as a whole. This was, perhaps, always a somewhat romantic view of what a politician actually does. As countries have become larger, more democratic, and less homogeneous, it is increasingly difficult to reconcile how one part of the country feels with how another part feels. It is also increasingly difficult to determine what is in the national interest as the range of sectional interests increases in such a complicated country. Yet that is the task of politicians. If they are worth their salt, they will rise to this challenge.

In grappling with the interests of the nation as a whole, we cannot simply take a snapshot of all the people at any particular moment.

10 "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion ... Parliament is not a *congress* of ambassadors from different and hostile interests ... Parliament is a *deliberative* assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole." : Edmund Burke, Speech at the Conclusion of the Poll at Bristol, 3 November 1774 in Jesse Norman (ed.) *Reflections on the Revolution in France and other writings* (Everyman, 2015), pp. 151-152.

One of Burke's most abiding insights is that a society consists of more than just the people who happen to be alive at the moment.[11] We, the living, must understand ourselves as trustees of the patrimony that the dead bequeathed us — often through their sacrifices — and which they have charged us with managing for the benefit of those generations who come after us. So there are two political relationships that are crucial to the nation: democratic politicians must understand the temper of the nation as it changes throughout time, and this understanding must be applied when determining what laws and policies promote the interest of the nation; which is understood in terms of the trustee relationship between the living, the dead, and those who are to be born.

Burke's political thought

In his 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke offers us an account of how politicians should make laws and policies through his critique of the French Revolution. He not only analyses what went wrong in France, but how things should be done when it comes to managing change in any society. First, he accepts that there needs to be change and it was a mistake for the *ancien régime* not to see this need before the revolution occurred. However, what matters for Burke is how change is managed. He argues that we need a form of gradual or incremental change. The failure to allow for such change in feudal France meant that, when change came, it took a different and more radical form.

The French revolutionaries not only made sudden and abrupt change, but ideologically-driven change. When deciding what changes are required, Burke argues that political leaders should not defer to

11 "Society is indeed a contract ... but the state ought not ... to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence ... It is a partnership in all science; in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." : Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in Jesse Norman (ed.) *Reflections on the Revolution in France and other writings* (Everyman, 2015), pp. 508-09.

abstract ideas. Rather, they should look to the concrete particulars of how the people actually live. That should be the ultimate indicator of how change is made. *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* might make for a good slogan, but Burke believes these abstract ideas are not a good basis for change. So, for instance, what matters is not the revolutionaries' abstract idea of 'liberty', but the socially sanctioned freedom that Englishmen actually enjoyed for centuries.[12] This is Burke's distinction between 'liberty' and 'licence'.[13]

Burke's commitment to liberty is anchored in the concrete rather than the abstract. He draws a distinction between liberty and licence. Licence is the freedom to do whatever you like. It is, perhaps, the hallmark of the modern permissive society. Liberty, for Burke, is something different: freedom within socially sanctioned constraints. At least since 1215, English society had recognised certain domains within which (some) people were free.[14] Gradually, over time, these domains expand, and society comes to permit its members greater and greater scope to make their own decisions about their religious, domestic and economic affairs. So Burkean liberty is more like the right to make your own decisions in affairs that your society has

12 In 2015, the British Library staged an exhibition to commemorate the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta. One feature of the exhibition that struck me was not just the significance of Magna Carta for the American Revolution, but how much at odds the Americans were with their counterparts in France. The exhibition suggested that, whereas it was deeply important for the American revolutionaries that they could show that their cause was anchored in history, the French revolutionaries had no such interest. In France, the revolution was all about the weight of abstract ideas. The exhibits (and perhaps more so the commentary about them) suggested that whereas the French revolutionaries asserted an ideological commitment to the abstract idea of liberty that had been suppressed in France, the American revolutionaries asserted an historical commitment to the English idea of liberty that dated from Magna Carta, but which had been suppressed in the American colonies. Whether or not the exhibition's approach is historically accurate, it is entirely of a piece with Burke's analysis of the two revolutions.

13 See Damien Freeman, "Liberty and Licence" in William Dawes (ed.), *Liberal Shock: The Conservative Comeback* (Connor Court, 2019), pp. 158-169.

14 As the English philosopher, Michael Oakeshott explains in "Political Education" (p. 54): "Freedom, like a recipe for game pie, is not a bright idea; it is not a 'human right' to be deduced from some speculative concept of human nature. The freedom which we enjoy is nothing other than arrangements, procedures of a certain kind: the freedom of the Englishman is not something exemplified in the procedure of *habeas corpus*, it *is*, at that point, the availability of that procedure. And the freedom which we wish to enjoy is not an 'ideal' which we premeditate independently of our political experience, it is what is already intimated in that experience."

come to recognise are important areas in which disagreement among a society's members is legitimate, and in which its members should defer to their conscience and judgement. That is a very different idea from Burkean licence, which is more like the right to do whatever you feel like doing in any context.

When we look to how people live, we are not looking at individuals, but rather what Burke famously called the 'little platoons'. People naturally live together and they form all sorts of institutions in which they live: families, religious congregations, sports teams, community legal centres, and so on. These institutions manifest the shared values at the core of the lives of people living within the society. People who belong to institutions *feel* attached to them, and this feeling is *loyalty*.[15] They don't simply make arguments about why the values that underpin these institutions are good; they express how they feel about them. They act out their feelings of loyalty through the way they live their lives in and through their small platoons. And if society is functioning properly, but there are no suitable institutions that give expression to how they feel, they band together to form new ones. However, it is a long and difficult task to develop an institution, and if society has gone awry, people become cast adrift rather than forming new institutions to which they might feel a sense of belonging.

Societies are not designed according to Burke. This is why we should value the institutions that endure within a society: they are the repositories of the shared values of the people living within that society. The institutions attract the loyalty of those who belong because they are manifestations of shared values, and the sense of attachment to the values is reinforced through participation in the institutions. Of course, institutions are no different from anything else when it comes to experiencing change. But the changes need to conform with the values that find expression in the institutions — the small platoons. So it is change in conformity with a society's particular tradition.

For Burke, peaceful societies are sustained by constant gradual change consistent with the values that have stood the test of time

15 *Belonging* is not necessarily the same as *identifying*, and the latter might give rise to different feelings.

within a particular society. Politicians need to understand how the people are feeling — constantly taking their pulse as it were — and reflect on what small changes are necessary to keep an alignment between the shared values and the way society is developing.

Burke does not give us an ideology in the narrow sense of the word. He outright rejects the thought that you can identify some abstract idea — such as liberty, equality, prosperity, or security — that is fundamental to being human and then apply it to resolve the specific problems politicians confront in the cut-and-thrust of politics. Rather, what he gives us is a pragmatic cast of mind that approaches problems of public policy by asking what kind of change is most consistent with the way we live.[16]

Change and continuity; reform and tradition

What we find emerging in Burke's writing is a disposition or a cast of mind; a way of thinking about political decision-making that acknowledges the need for change but also the need for continuity; the need to reform, but also the need to preserve tradition. In a sense, this might seem like no great insight at all — you need a bit of everything but not too much of anything. However, Burke's insight is even deeper, as he grasps the different reasons why these ingredients are all necessary — and necessary in the right quantities.

In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke writes that "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation."[17] To conserve the inheritance bequeathed by the dead for the yet to be born, the living need to be vigilant about the need to make changes. Almost a century later, Benjamin Disraeli said in relation to the Great Reform Act of 1867:

16 For a more extended discussion of this pragmatic cast of mind, and a case study of how it has been applied in contemporary Australia, see Damien Freeman, *Abbott's Right: the conservative tradition from Menzies to Abbott* (MUP, 2017).

17 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 441-42.

> In a progressive country, change is constant and the real question is not whether you should resist change which is inevitable but whether change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws and the traditions of a people or whether it should be carried out in deference to abstract principles and arbitrary and general doctrines…[18]

More than a century after that, when reflecting on the sense in which "change — its breadth and accelerating pace" had defined the age in which she had reigned, Queen Elizabeth II said on the occasion of her golden jubilee in 2002, "Change has become a constant; managing it has become an expanding discipline. The way we embrace it defines our future."[19] Burke, Disraeli, and Elizabeth II demonstrate the way this distinctive cast of mind influenced public affairs over three centuries in England. Social change is a fact of life in modern society. It is neither good nor bad that features of a society constantly change. What matters is how the change is managed. Change may be constant, but it should also be gradual. And it should be in keeping with the spirit of the people.

Burke is critical of a social order that resists change, such as the *ancien régime* in France; but also critical of attempts at making radical change to the social order, as the revolutionaries did. Again, it might seem easy to criticise too much and too little change as the Goldilocks approach to politics. However, Burke is entitled to offer this critique because he believes that the experience in England is different. The English approach to change is exemplified by the common law of England, which develops incrementally to resolve disputes in a consistent fashion despite changing circumstances by applying the enduring principles of the common law tradition.[20]

18 P. Thane, "Government and society in England and Wales, 1750-1914" in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), vol. 3, p. 41.

19 Elizabeth II, Address to the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Hall, Palace of Westminster, 30 April 2002.

20 Thus, Alfred Lord Tennyson lauds England as

A land of settled government
A land of just and old renown
Where freedom slowly broadens down
From precedent to precedent.

Why does Burke's cast of mind offer politicians the best approach to managing change? There are two answers to this question. The first is that, as with Churchill's case for democracy, it is the worst form of government "except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." In a sense that is a very Burkean justification, in that it does not claim any theoretical basis for working; it is only that it is tried and tested. The second is that Burke's cast of mind is peculiarly suited to the circumstances in which we find ourselves at the moment.

Reaffirming institutions despite loss of confidence in underpinning ideas

If Burke's approach to policymaking is anchored in forming policy responses that reflect our attachment to institutions, what good is this when we are currently experiencing a widescale loss of confidence in our institutions? In the last decade, Commonwealth governments have initiated a slew of royal commissions. Each has revealed wrongdoing within institutions: sexual abuse of children by churches and other institutions responsible for their care; corruption in trade unions; mistreatment of children in Northern Territory detention centres; misconduct by banks and other financial institutions; failure to provide proper care in aged care facilities; neglect and abuse of people with disabilities. Each report has its own findings and recommendations. Collectively, it is impossible to deny they erode public confidence in our institutions. Churches, banks, nursing homes, the criminal justice system and the government itself ... it is inevitable that people should feel they have been mistaken in trusting institutions of every kind.

The rot goes even deeper. Loss of confidence in institutions often precipitates a loss of confidence in the fundamental ideas underpinning those institutions. So, for instance, people are confronted with parliamentarians' misconduct, a bonk ban and other measures are introduced, but people lose confidence in democracy. How do you restore confidence in the institutions of parliamentary democracy if people lose confidence in the very idea of democracy? Likewise, if

people lose confidence in liberalism, capitalism or Christianity, how do you restore confidence in liberal, capitalist and Christian institutions? Is it possible to restore confidence in these institutions in the face of a loss of confidence in the ideas that underpin them?

CIS's executive director, Tom Switzer, is not alone when he expresses concern that millennials have lost confidence in the free market and are increasingly drawn towards socialism as a cure for all that is wrong with Western societies.[21] But how do you restore confidence in the free market when people no longer seem to value capitalism as an idea?

The answer cannot lie in using a discredited abstract idea to restore confidence in an institution anchored in that abstract idea. Unless we are going to abandon the institution along with the idea, we have to find some other way of restoring confidence in the institution, in the hope of restoring confidence in the idea. This requires a cast of mind that values the existing institution not as the instantiation of some abstract idea, but because it exists and it is ours.

Samuel P. Huntington is best known for his celebrated book, *The Clash of Civilisations*. In a lesser-known article published in the *American Political Science Review* four decades earlier, he draws our attention to the value of Burke's defence of institutions.[22] He claims liberal institutions develop when people have a commitment to liberalism. Although politicians need to make arguments for the importance of liberal ideas in order to argue for the establishment of liberal institutions, once the institutions are established, what matters to the liberal politician is the preservation of these institutions.[23] Now, the liberal might want to preserve the institutions because they are liberal. But what happens when there is a loss of confidence in liberalism? What matters at that point is that someone who values the institution can make the case for why the institution is worth preserving. If the people you are talking to have lost confidence in

21 Tom Switzer, "Moral renewal amidst political chaos" in Damien Freeman (ed.), *The Market's Morals: responding to Jesse Norman* (Kapunda Press, 2019), p. 124.

22 Samuel P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology", *American Political Science Review*, 1957, Vol. 51(2), pp. 454-473.

23 This was the way in which Malcolm Fraser, for instance, reconciled his commitments to liberalism and conservatism: see *Abbott's Right*, pp. 33-36.

liberalism, then the important thing is to get them to see that the institutions have served us well and that they offer us the best hope for the future, so they should be protected rather than destroyed. Of course, protecting them might entail reforming them. But there is the world of difference between reforming a tried and tested institution, and abandoning it in favour of some untested alternative that sounds good in theory but hasn't actually been road tested.

We live in a world in which increasing numbers of people have lost faith in capitalism, liberalism, democracy, and Christianity. Now is not the time to ask why this has happened. The point is that if we want to preserve the free market, the common law, parliamentary democracy, and other liberal democratic institutions, there's no point trying to persuade people that these institutions are important because they are capitalist, liberal, or democratic. You have to make the case that they are worth preserving precisely because they are *ours* and they have served us as a society well — albeit imperfectly.

The radical conservative cast of mind

Sir Garfield Barwick served as Attorney-General and Minister for External Affairs in the 8th-10th Menzies governments, and subsequently as Chief Justice of the High Court. When he published his memoirs in 1995, he chose to do so under the title, *A Radical Tory.* In this way, he was appropriating the idea of a radical Tory or radical conservative that can be traced back to historian Sir Keith Hancock, whom the literary scholar Dame Leonie Kramer looked to when trying to articulate her own approach to public life. Although she was often labelled a 'traditionalist', she eschewed this because it failed to articulate the way in which she reconciled tradition and reform. In an interview with Richard Coleman, she explained, "One thing I find hard to explain is my sense of a necessary connection between a regard for traditional values and change. Because you can't preserve interest in the past simply by trying to hold on to it."[24]

24 Damien Freeman, *Killer Kramer: Dame Leonie – a woman for all seasons* (Connor Court, 2022), p. 106.

On first blush, a radical conservative is an oxymoron. To be radical is to pursue far-reaching or thorough change. Such change is often characterised by the revolutionary's commitment to changing or replacing entire political structures, rather than identifying aspects of those structures that are in need of change. To be conservative is to conserve the good things we have, often enough by resisting change that would undermine them. The desire to conserve can easily enough lurch into a reactionary stance that opposes change. So how could a politician be both radical and conservative?

Burke's cast of mind shows us there is a sense in which it is possible to be conservative but not reactionary, – and radical but not revolutionary — at the same time. The radical conservative combines the revolutionary's understanding that there is a need for constant change that goes to the root of things with the reactionary's understanding that tradition is valuable and should be conserved. This is possible because tradition is something that is constantly changing and as such provides a means of reform that builds on the accrued wisdom of the past rather than squandering it.

What does the radical-conservative cast of mind have to say about the policy challenges of the moment? There are no simple answers here. Radical conservatives might legitimately disagree about what they find in the past and, therefore, what they suggest to do about the present and the future. Burke does not mandate what we must or must not do in relation to change — that we must preserve free speech or must eliminate hate speech; must maintain a ban on assisted suicide or must make provision for voluntary assisted dying; must have a carbon emissions trading scheme or not. What Burke offers us is the cast of mind that we should bring to these challenges.

Some people will see it as a cop-out that he does not tell us what policy we need to adopt in relation to any of these issues. They seek out abstract ideals that can and should be applied to real world political situations. But Burke deliberately offers an alternative to this way of thinking. I am sorry to disappoint those people, but Burke doesn't give us easy answers to difficult questions that abstract ideals might

seem to offer. What he gives us is an approach that ensures that our political leaders retain the confidence of those they govern and don't become out of touch with their temper. At the same time, it ensures political leaders address the need for change before it gets to the point at which extreme measures are required.

Writing in the aftermath of the fall of the Howard government, Tony Abbott offered his reflections on John Howard as a political leader. The assessment is unsurprisingly complimentary, although he does acknowledge a failure when it came to industrial relations: "The government's biggest political problem, the WorkChoices legislation, was the result of an error of judgment … Howard's determination not to 'wimp out' trumped his normal care about how far the public was prepared for change."[25] What Abbott acknowledges is that a fervour for ideological purity overcame a statesman who was usually able to understand the temper of the nation and the kind of change that was in keeping with it. This was a departure from radical conservative politics in favour of policy in keeping with strict libertarian ideology, and it came at a great cost to the government.

Fifteen years after the end of the Howard government, and twenty years after the 1999 referendum failed to make Australia into a republic, discussion has once again begun about whether Australia should become a republic, with an assistant minister for 'the' republic having been appointed to the Albanese administration. To offer a defence of the constitutional monarchy is to provide a quintessentially radical conservative argument. Constitutional monarchy was never designed. Rather, it developed over time. It is the gradual adaptation of monarchy to responsible government and parliamentary democracy. The monarchy, the royal family and the vice-regal offices of state governors and the governor-general have continued to develop over the past twenty years in response to the demands of twenty-first century society.

No one working from first principles would design a constitutional monarchy for Australia today, nor would we necessarily choose one if

25 Tony Abbott, "Captain John: Inside the Howard Cabinet", *Quadrant*, September 2008, pp. 20-25, p. 25.

we were asked what we would like today — but that is not the point. It is an institution as old as our constitution and has always been with us. It has gradually and imperceptibly adapted to changing circumstances in Australia and Australia's place in the world. As Anthony Albanese said at the public commemoration of the Queen's platinum jubilee, just over a fortnight after becoming prime minister, "The Queen has been a rare constant, an enduring, inspiring, growing presence of calm, decency and strength." He noted that when she first came to Canberra, "Our capital city was a young city, and a young queen stood here, full of promise and full of purpose … As we mark this Jubilee, we can say that she fulfilled that purpose."[26] Her Majesty's reign is a reminder that the institution she embodies has not only stood the test of time and adapted effectively to changing circumstances, but that she and it are still capable of inspiring virtue in all of us. No republican could design an institution that achieves this.

The party of Burke or the country of Burke?

How does Burke's approach fit with contemporary Australian politics? His influence today is at once ubiquitous and scant. One can find the claim made for Burke in each of the major political parties, and yet it is hard to see anyone taking the radical conservative approach seriously.

John Howard most famously claimed that the Liberal Party was the true custodian of both Burke and Mill. Howard believed the party took its reverence for tradition from Burke, and its reverence for liberty from Mill.[27] This formula served Howard well because it explained why the party was a broad church that encompassed people who felt more comfortable in one or other wings. What the formulation does

26 https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/celebrity-life/royals/we-stand-as-equals-albo-pays-tribute-to-the-queen-for-her-platinum-jubilee/news-story/85cf44cfe5056e052da60a70b4428fd1.

27 *Abbott's Right*, pp. 36-40.

less to explain is why people value freedom. Is it because they value the abstract idea of freedom, or is it because they value the institutions of the tradition that has given it a central place? And when it comes to tradition, do they see this as a resource for developing a reforming attitude to change, or as something that should be defended in the face of change?

Gregory Melleuish observes that the Liberal Party has been affected by the general tendencies impacting on Australian politics since the 1960s; resulting in two regrettable developments.[28] On the one hand, "it has become a far more rationalist party" which gives preference to abstract ideas over empirical experience in policymaking. On the other, there has been a shift towards "a politics of nostalgia" that seeks "a return to the good old days, represented by the prime ministership of either Sir Robert Menzies or John Howard, or perhaps an amalgamation of the two of them", rather than a Burkean "politics of constructive reform". This desire "to restore Australia and its way of life" is subtler than developments in the United States, where Donald Trump promised to Make America Great Again in just the way that Bolingbroke "wished to make Britain great again by restoring the constitution corrupted by the Walpole Whigs."[29] As Melleuish concludes, such a development can only stifle the kind of reform offered by radical conservative politicians. There is no future in hoping to restore sacred principles or ancient institutions that have become corrupt. The only way forward is to see the potential for reforming our enduring institutions so they remain responsive to the temper of the nation.

If members of the Australian Labor Party have any time for Mill, they certainly don't often seem to have much time for Burke. However, it is the thesis of Michael Easson that Labor is in fact the true custodian of Burke's philosophy in Australian politics.[30] This thesis is developed by Adrian Pabst, who argues that not only is there this Burkean strand

28 Gregory Melleuish, "Burke and Australian Britishness" in D. Freeman, *The Market's Morals: responding to Jesse Norman* (Kapunda Press, 2020), see especially pp. 54-55.
29 Melleuish, p. 56.
30 Michael Easson, "Burke and Australian Labor" in Damien Freeman (ed.) *The Market's Morals: responding to Jesse Norman* (Kapunda Press, 2019).

in the Labor Party, but that this is what distinguishes it from centre-left parties in comparable countries.[31] And yet, as the Greens present an increasing threat to Labor, does the party strive to preserve what Pabst calls the small-c conservative streak of this once working-class party, or does progressivist zeal charge at full throttle towards an ideological — and increasingly authoritarian — approach?

It should not come as a surprise that the legacy of Burke is found in parts of both major political parties. Burke's radical conservatism offers us a way out of the artificial political categories we inherited from the post-war period, when the main battlelines were between free-marketeers and socialists; categories that are not adequate in today's political world. Burke's is a practical and pragmatic approach to policymaking that seeks to conciliate the feelings of the people through gradual change in conformity with tradition. Change in conformity with tradition brings everyone with us. By understanding and being responsive to the temper of the nation, the accusation of elitism is rebuffed and populism can be defeated. Burke's commitment to gradual and timely change means challenges must be addressed before they become pressing, so the radicals' agenda can be defeated through gradual change.

When radical movements are in the ascent, radical conservatism cannot afford to be on the back foot. Likewise, when populist movements are in the ascent, it cannot afford to be on the back foot. And yet it seems that few people in either of the major parties are taking seriously the resource that Burke's radical conservative politics offers us.

Radical conservatism speaks to the radical movements' concern for change, but it does so by offering a different kind of change. It offers the possibility for thorough or far-reaching change that is not ideological or abrupt, but is incremental, gradual, and in keeping with the way we live. However, for this to be effective, it needs to be timely.

Radical conservatism speaks to the populist movements' concern that the 'many' should not be left behind by the 'elites'. It does so by

31 Adrian Pabst, *Story of Our Country: Labor's vision for Australia* (Kapunda Press, 2019).

offering change without upheaval; change that people can see need not threaten their established and valued way of life. For this to be effective, it needs to show that it offers policy solutions that affirm the widely-valued shared institutions; that policies are not promoting elite adventures into the unknown.

With one eye fixed on what is behind us, radical conservative politicians are well placed to navigate the policy challenges that lie ahead. Currently, there is a dearth of such politicians. Should a new generation of radical conservative politicians rise up, the rest of us who go along for the journey can relax in the knowledge that we're in for a smooth ride.

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RADICAL CONSERVATISM

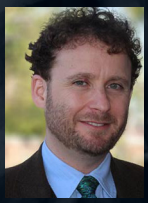
TRADITION AS A GUIDE FOR MANAGING CHANGE

Sir Garfield Barwick titled his memoirs *Radical Tory*, and Dame Leonie Kramer liked to call herself a radical conservative. John Howard used to have it both ways and say that he was a liberal and a conservative. But can you have it both ways?

On first blush, radical conservatism is an oxymoron. To be radical is to pursue far-reaching or revolutionary change. To be conservative is to conserve the good things we have, often by resisting change that would undermine them. So how could a politician be both radical and conservative?

In this paper, Damien Freeman revisits the seminal writings of 18th-century conservative philosopher, Edmund Burke, to distil a disposition or "cast of mind" — a way of thinking about political decision-making that acknowledges the need for change but also the need for continuity; the need to reform but also the need to preserve tradition — that is peculiarly suited to our contemporary challenges.

Burke shows us that it is possible to be conservative, but not reactionary, and radical but not revolutionary at a time when there is a loss of confidence in our institutions – churches, banks, trade unions, nursing homes, and government – and an even deeper loss of confidence in the ideas that underpin them, such as capitalism and democracy. To restore this confidence requires a cast of mind that values institutions not because of an abstract idea but because they have stood the test of time. As such, they provide a means of reform that builds on the accrued wisdom of the past rather than squandering it.



Damien Freeman is the principal policy adviser at the PM Glynn Institute, Australian Catholic University. His publications include *Abbott's Right: the conservative tradition from Menzies to Abbott* (MUP, 2017) and most recently *Killer Kramer: Dame Leonie – a woman for all seasons* (Connor Court, 2022).

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