
How do we drive forward big ideas in Australia?

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Speech

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26 March 2013

Let me begin by returning to the 1980s and the election of the Hawke Government.

It had become clear that Australia was ill-prepared to deal with the challenges ahead and significant microeconomic reform was needed. Although not accepted or embraced with enthusiasm by many voters this conclusion was supported by a majority of the political class.

Twenty years later we can report that much of the microeconomic reform agenda was achieved. How, then, did it happen?

Implementation wasn't just imposed from above but negotiated with trade unions and business and state and territory governments. The National Competition Council, Industry Plans, the Accord, and the Social Wage all come to mind as does the support given by the then opposition. Just as much effort went into thinking about how such changes were to be implemented as went into debating why they were necessary.

Now let me go forward to my own experience as Labor Leader in Western Australia.

It had become clear that the logging of our old growth forests had to come to an end-biodiversity on the one hand and a conservation ethic on the other were demanding it.

A decade later I can report that it was achieved in my first term as Premier. How, then, did it happen?

Again, it wasn't imposed from above but negotiated, firstly through the Labor Party when in opposition and then through parliament when in government. The trade unions, business, local governments and local communities were all involved in developing the implementation plan.

In this case, however, the then opposition came out against the changes but their numbers weren't enough to stop it getting through the Upper House.

Once again, and like national microeconomic reform, implementation was seen as just as important as advocacy.

In both cases leadership was provided but understood as requiring continuous and unrelenting consensus-building around the objective. In this endeavour there could be no pause or no rethinking of objectives. Why? Because in both cases there were significant vested interests opposed to the changes and looking for signs of doubt or complacency. Both supporters and opponents of change weren't under any illusions about both governments' strength of purpose and commitment to support those adversely affected.

Let's now look at issues that have been unsuccessful or less successful.

From the 1970s on the case for an Australian republic had been gathering steam and became a majority position in the 1990s. However, when the severing of the ties with the British Monarch went to referendum it was defeated.

How could it be that a majority became a minority?

Firstly, we can note that despite the fact that there was support across the parties there were those in the Liberal Party-most notably John Howard-who were implacably opposed.

Secondly, we can note that despite a good deal of public interest in the work of the Constitutional Convention it lacked the authority to convince a range of voters-including some republicans- to support the model it created. It looked like a consensus to those inside the tent but for many outside it looked like the product of an unrepresentative elite.

This takes me to climate politics.

When Kevin Rudd was elected in 2007 there was a clear and unequivocal mandate for change-even the Liberals had endorsed an emissions trading system in the dying days of their regime.

It seemed simple-change would come either from an alliance between the ALP and Liberals or between the ALP and the Greens. Most agreed, however, that as sad as it is to report, getting all three to agree would probably be a bridge too far.

For a brief moment it seemed agreement of the first sort would come with Malcolm Turnbull as Liberal Leader. However, it wasn't to be. And he was deposed. Nor was agreement reached with the Greens and they combined with the Liberals to defeat the legislation to establish an Emissions Trading System. It would seem key players weren't willing to take that one step back in order to take two steps forward (apologies to Lenin!).

Soon after this-and up to and including the 2010 election-Labor threw in the towel only to recover it after the election. On this occasion agreement was reached with the Greens on a price on carbon and associated measures. However, the Liberals were still outside the tent and have made a "pledge of blood" to repeal the legislation. This raises the question-are the changes that have been won in the absence of a wider consensus sustainable?

Finally, I want to address the issue of same-sex marriage.

As was the case with the other issues we have seen support for reform build over the years to the point where there is a clear majority in favour these days. However, when it came to a vote in parliament it was roundly defeated with both Labor and Liberal leaders opposing it. In the House of Representatives, it was 98 to 42 and in the Senate 41 to 26. Compare this to the vote on embryonic stem cell research in 2006-82 to 62 in favour in the House and 34 to 32 in the Senate. Again, both leaders-in this case Howard and Rudd- opposed the legislation but unlike the same-sex debate they were on the losing side.

The same-sex outcome reminds us that even with majority support in the electorate and the party success is not guaranteed, the conscience vote giving vested interests a second bite of the cherry not available in other contexts.

What, then, can we conclude?

Firstly, change can happen-and even be sustained-without widespread support in the community but the major parties would have to hold the line together and work hard on ensuring those affected by change are kept in the loop. Secondly, the reverse of this is also true-change can be defeated even if there is widespread support within the community. In other words majority opinion is never enough. Thirdly, and it follows, consensus building and the construction of alliances within the community, the political parties and parliament can't be avoided if you are serious about changing Australia. Good ideas are never enough and just as you can't have democracy without politics you can't have politics without politicians.