

Bach hits a bum note on Menzies

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From time to time over the past few decades, the Liberal party of Australia has engaged in a period of soul-searching about its identity and its future. This is one of those times, when competing versions of the party's principles and directions are subject to assertion and argument. It is a process that usually occurs when the party is in opposition. In government, it has a program to implement; and fear of electoral defeat at the hands of disunity mostly tempers differences. This is not always the case, as the debates about marriage, family, gender and religious freedom revealed significant differences while the party was in government recently, but it is generally the position.

The reassessment of the party's purpose and direction while in opposition is no bad thing. As one of the founders of the party, Robert Menzies, once observed, 'opposition must be regarded as a great constructive period in the life of a party, not a period in the wilderness, but a period of preparation for the high responsibilities which you hope will come.'

During the past year or so, there have been various contributions to this discussion, including several articles and books. Any assessment of the arguments proffered should be grounded in reality, not in utopian dreams or wishful thinking.

In a recent article in the *Age*, Melbourne's left-leaning daily, the Victorian Upper House deputy leader, Matthew Bach, urged Liberals to 'forge a new path'. The subject of his critique was Robert Gordon Menzies, a founder of the Liberal party and Australia's longest-serving prime minister. According to Bach, Menzies 'achieved comparably little economic reform', a claim that Georgina Downer refuted in an online article in this publication. 'Who created the Reserve Bank of Australia, negotiated the 1957 Commerce Agreement with Japan opening up trade with Asia, lifted the iron ore export ban, and laid the groundwork for the introduction of the decimal currency in Australia?', she asked. She also outlined Menzies' enormous expansion of education, and major nation-building projects, ranging from the Snowy Mountains scheme to the development of our resource export industry. Then there were the significant social policies – the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and Child Endowment amongst them, and the establishment of the Anzus pact and Asis, the development of Canberra and so on.

Bach endeavours to create a straw-man in Menzies, saying we can revere him while 'acknowledging that not every idea of a man born in the late 19th century withstands modern scrutiny' and suggesting that party members believe 'our broad intellectual heritage as purely based on the wisdom of one man'. Reference to principles embraced by the founders of the

Liberal party, including Menzies, is hardly pinning 80 years of largely successful political activity in differing eras on him alone. In a mish-mash of ideas, the author is inconsistent. Menzies is to be revered, but has nothing to offer the contemporary party!

Apart from the Howard government, the Menzies, Fraser and recent Liberal governments represent a 'sorry list' according to Bach. It is a selective and inaccurate portrayal of the past.

Mr Bach ignores a very significant historical and political fact. Menzies, Fraser, Howard and Abbott have been the only national Liberal leaders to win the Treasury benches from opposition. The first task of a political party is to win government, an assignment that has been unachievable for the Victorian Liberal party for the past nine years – and appears out of reach for the foreseeable future. Perhaps, the Victorian Liberals could learn something from their success. As Tony Abbott wrote recently, 'as someone who brought our party out of opposition in record time, I know something about creating a contest and winning a political argument....'

Mr Bach's solution is for 'a third way'. The idea of a 'third way' was the creation of the British sociologist Anthony Giddens. His book by the same title contained a series of policy proposals aimed at the 'progressive centre-left' in British politics. The ideas were taken up by the Labour government of Tony Blair and the Democratic administration of Barack Obama. Giddens now sits in the House of Lords as a Labour peer!

The 'third way' is the basis of Mr Bach's 'New Liberal agenda'. He promotes members of 'a new generation of liberal thinkers'. These include Jerusalem Demsas, a staff writer for the *Atlantic*, the magazine that endorsed Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. Other new thinkers include Shoshana Weissman, the digital media manager at the R Street Institute, a 'think tank for the modern age' and two economists, one at the Cato Institute.

He espouses housing reform, commending the Canadian Conservatives. Perhaps the Liberal party in Victoria could adopt the Canadian and UK practice of allowing all party members to directly elect the parliamentary leader! But I digress. The original Liberal party principles, adopted in October 1944, strove for a country 'in which every family is enabled to live in a comfortable home at reasonable costs, and with adequate community amenities'. Didn't a former Liberal prime minister do something about housing? Home ownership under Robert Menzies increased from 53 per cent to 71 per cent. Perhaps there is something we could still learn from a man born in the late 19th century.

As Tony Abbott wrote, 'a party that hopes to win an election must be a broad church, but not to the point of being endlessly elastic about its beliefs'. Instead, political parties need 'a purpose to sustain them and a credible program to advance it'.

Attempting to appeal to everyone is a recipe for political irrelevancy. The policies that attract wealthy left-green Teals in inner-city seats will not entice the people who live in the outer suburbs and regional and rural Australia. A political approach that has its genesis in a program for the progressive centre-left is unlikely to appeal to the centre-right, which John Howard – of whom Mr Bach approves – maintained was 'economically liberal and socially conservative'.

Contrast Bach to Angus Taylor's recent appeal to established Liberal principles. 'Our values provide the toolkit for the times through a focus on encouraging enterprise – not big government; fiscal discipline taking pressure off prices and taxes; productivity reforms freeing up households and businesses to make their lives easier; and backing hardworking, aspirational Australians to get ahead.' As Taylor said, Menzies, Fraser, Howard and Abbott understood this: it is in the Liberal party's DNA.

The Liberal party does not need a 'third way'. It requires a 'Liberal way' based on the principles that have informed and sustained it through changing times and different eras for the past eight decades.