

Are Australians ready to embrace libertarianism?

Written by Chris Berg, Postdoctoral fellow, RMIT University

This article is the third in a five-part series on the battle for conservative hearts and minds in Australian politics. Read part one [here](#) and part two [here](#).

How much influence does libertarianism have on Australian politics? The first thing to know is that the Australian political system has very few libertarians in it.

The only federal member of parliament to self-describe as a libertarian is Senator David Leyonhjelm of the Liberal Democratic Party. Other candidates – like my former colleagues at the [Institute of Public Affairs](#) (IPA), Senator James Paterson and Tim Wilson – describe themselves as classical liberals.

Ideological classifications can get very tedious very quickly, but generally libertarianism is a variety of classical liberalism. Both philosophies believe that public policy should be designed to maximise free markets and civil liberties. That is, governments should get out of both the wallet and the bedroom. Libertarianism is generally seen as inhabiting the more radical end of the classical liberal spectrum.

A 2007 study published by the [Centre for Independent Studies](#) (CIS) [estimated](#) that 3–6% of the Australian electorate were classical liberals. So it is unsurprising they have little electoral influence on Australian politics.

The reason libertarians and classical liberals exercise some degree of influence is that they make up a disproportionate share of Australia's policy wonks, think tank staff (especially at the IPA and CIS), and political commentators.

An extremely big tent

Australia's right-of-centre political community is not so large as to have exclusively libertarian or conservative think tanks, as exist in the United States. Everyone works together. This co-mingling hasn't generally been an issue because Australian political debate has tended to

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pivot around economic issues (taxation, regulation, privatisation) or basic shared liberty issues (like freedom of speech) rather than the thorny moral debates that might divide the two camps.

Occasionally there have been polarising issues. Same-sex marriage is one. Conservatives were generally opposed, while libertarians tended to be in favour. But there was also broad agreement that any change to marriage laws should also protect religious freedom.

Immigration – particularly asylum seeker policy – is another. Libertarians are inclined towards freer immigration, whereas conservatives want more control over the borders. Here the tiny number of libertarians have been completely ineffective against the policy stalemate.

For the most part, there is much agreement between conservatives and libertarians about the current state of Australian politics. Both think the Turnbull government is a disappointment, for much the same reasons. It failed on the campaign to repeal section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, which has become an iconic restriction on free speech. It has also repeatedly raised taxes, and been unable to drive any serious economic reform.

Read more: [*Can the Liberal Party hold its 'broad church' of liberals and conservatives together?*](#)

This may sound excessively Pollyanna-ish, as if everything is just swell between Australian conservatives and libertarians. Much has been said (almost all by commentators on the left) about a political split between libertarians and classical liberals on the one side and conservatives on the other. But I don't really see it.

In the US, the [fusion movement](#) of the 1950s and 1960s was a deliberate project to build an alliance between these two distinct systems of political thought. The presidency of George W. Bush pushed that alliance to breaking point, and it seems the Trump administration has broken it.

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By contrast, Australian politics has never been large enough to maintain such divergent streams. Every Liberal prime minister has for the most part maintained a sort of centre-right middle ground that kept everyone equally disappointed and dissatisfied. People are leaving the Liberal Party under the Turnbull government, not because it is too conservative or libertarian, but because it is too, well, nothing.

Liberal achievements and libertarian growth

The last quarter of the 20th century saw Australian public policy take major strides in a classical liberal direction. The economic reform movement that substantially liberalised the economy was matched with social reforms such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the repeal of obscenity laws.

I've [argued in the past](#) that Australian economic thought has had a distinct – even occasionally dominant – classical liberal tradition. There is no question that this tradition has driven policy debate and reform at a few key historical moments.

Though classical liberal efforts were often focused on economics rather than social policy, it's worth pointing out that the IPA was one of the key voices against state overreaches such as the Hawke government's ill-fated [Australia Card](#), and more recently, [mandatory internet data retention](#).

Read more: [***Tony Abbott and the revenge of the 'delcons'***](#)

In recent years, there has been some notable growth of libertarianism as a self-aware and distinct group. A large part of that has been the [Friedman Conference](#) – named after [Milton Friedman](#), David Friedman and Patri Friedman, who represent nearly the entire spectrum of classical liberal/libertarian thought in one family – which attracts hundreds of libertarians and fellow travellers to Sydney every year.

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The Friedman Conference is in its sixth year, thanks to the organisational efforts of Tim Andrews (of the [Australian Taxpayers' Alliance](#)) and John Humphreys (of the [Australian Libertarian Society](#)). The political success of the Liberal Democrats with David Leyonhjelm in the Senate is another factor in libertarianism's modest gains.

My hope is that this sort of organisational effort fosters the idea in Australia of libertarianism as a distinct political philosophy, not just a quirky sub-category of the Australian right.

There is a need for this. The challenges we face now are not the same as they were in the over-mythologised 1980s. The combination of growth of the regulatory state, radical technological change, and the crisis of democratic trust require new ideas and new policy solutions. Libertarianism offers a framework to understand how these economic and social questions interact.

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