



Senator Cory Bernardi
Founder of Australian Conservatives

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Cory Bernardi - Coaxing Conservatives out of the Closet

Founder of the Australian Conservatives, Senator Cory Bernardi says Australia is at a crossroads, where the line stands between authoritarianism or freedom. We spent a morning in Canberra discussing the temper of the nation, the rise of Conservatism in Australia and why the Senator believes sound fiscal policy will fuel SMBs and big business under his leadership...

By Joanne Leila Smith | October 2017

Like all Schools of Thought each has its origin in one bright spark, which usually emerges in a chaotic moment in time. If we look, for example, to Sigmund Freud as the father of modern Psychology, or René Descartes, whom is widely considered the first modern western European philosopher, we might cast our eyes post-war; to the 'new world' in North America, when, during another tumultuous period of civil unrest was playing out in the United States during the 1950s.

A young Yale graduate, William Frank Buckley Jr., established The National Review in 1955, which firmly posited Buckley Jr. as the father of Modern Conservatism in western discourse (Classical Conservatism has a few distinctly

different tenets from the Modern which we won't unpack here).

Few modern Conservative voices resonated as widely in western politics as Buckley Jr., and today, his legacy is still highly influential – and identifiable. While Modern Conservatism spawned a few less desirable offshoots, such as extreme radical nationalism, nativism, some shared traits of neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism and aspects of what's currently been dubbed the post-Christian alt-right, the ideals of traditional conservatism is still the most adhered-to ideology in the west today – with views held by most of the body politic; its tenets are based in upholding law and order, tradition, and the moral authority of Judeo-Christian

doctrine (think western leaders such as Washington, Adams, Eisenhower, Churchill, and Truman) all of which pledged to uphold and defend the values of the west and its cultural foundations.

If we move further ahead in time, to the southern hemisphere, we may point to one of Australia's most recent and vocal advocates and defenders of Modern Conservatism, whose policies are very clearly influenced by Buckley Jr., South Australian Senator, Cory Bernardi. While Senator Bernardi is not beloved by mainstream Australian media, his base, since launching the Australian Conservatives in 2017, after a very public defection from the Liberal Party, is growing at such a rate, which indicates it is

indeed, the fastest growing political movement in Australia.

There are some whom may consider Senator Bernardi as a more articulate version of Senator Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, but such a comparison may be considered intellectually lazy. Senator Hanson's firebrand style is deeply populist with radical nativist overtures – there is no question the Senator has been remarkable in building a fiercely loyal base to both her party and its figurehead. Indeed, it is widely reported that Senator Hanson's most loyal followers dub her 'their queen'. However, Senator Bernardi firmly rejects any comparison to Hansonism, and explains why the time is right for Modern Conservatism to flourish in Australia.

"Conservatism has always been here. There is an element of it in the Liberal Party but they relied on too few to carry it. The left of the Liberal Party carries favour with the press gallery, they peddle their poison up there and the press gallery regurgitates it. People like me, who were sticking up for the values of the Liberal Party, like lower taxes and protecting traditional families, were demonized and mocked. We were the rebels and recalcitrant... I got tired of it. I thought, why are we doing all this heavy lifting so these clowns reap the spoils, and claim they are the architects of any success? It was manifest too, that Abbott was very disappointing as PM. I don't say that personally, but he abandoned a lot of principles that he should have upheld. He listened to the wrong people and what he is talking about today, is completely contrary to what

has been said privately, and this is very frustrating. I ask, why do we have to go through all this pain to simply do that which is morally right? So if there is a safe space for conservatism, it is with the Australian Conservatives. We are unashamedly conservative, and there is something about the lived experience of western civilization that is worth listening to. The pendulum is swinging. When I started AC, I said to a journalist – the time will eventually suit me. I think people now recognise the falseness and hollowness of what's happening in civil society. We are seeing a lot of young people going to church and faith based activities which are more doctrinaire than the 'free love church'. We are a reminder about being your best self. The orthodox churches are growing, evangelical churches are growing, and there is a need for people to have a higher purpose in their lives beyond immediate gratification," says Senator Bernardi.

According to Senator Bernardi, conservatives are the new revolutionaries, trying to overthrow the existing 'liberal' order and what he sees as failures of social and fiscal policies since the 1960s. After establishing the Conservative Leadership Foundation (CLF) in 2009, Senator Bernardi says he was inspired to do so after a short-term stay in the US, where he witnessed a great investment in helping conservative youths find their voice in public life.

"To be a Conservative in Australia, you're seen to be part of a counter-culture. We have a catch cry for our youth, if you want to rebel, tell your parents

you're a conservative...We are coming to a reset point after the failure of social experimentation for the past sixty years. I really do think that there is a counter culture movement, because leftist ideologies have failed us. We see this disenchantment with Millennials now considering socialism and communism as 'viable' alternatives – which is just extraordinary given the suffering and oppression these ideologies have caused people throughout history," says Senator Bernardi.

The CLF aims to help young people develop their intellectual capacity and understanding of conservatism and its ideals and helps them to advocate its tenets in adult life. The CLF raises funds, provides training and sponsors campus-based activities in South Australia.

"Frankly, the CLF was about resurrecting the word conservatism. In 2009 it was a slur. I am very proud of conservatism and its contribution to the West. The CLF is still very much a labour of love for me," says Senator Bernardi.

Since joining the Liberal Party nearly thirty years ago, Senator Bernardi claims the Liberal Party is virtually unrecognisable today.

"The Liberal Party has changed immensely since I first joined. It's a modern political party that is unconcerned about principle anymore. There are some members that are concerned about it, but they are no longer the advocates for issues that made them politically unpopular, even though it might have been the right thing to do.



The Australian people realise that total self-indulgence is a disaster; socially, politically, morally, spiritually and economically. I am fighting for what I think is right, not for what I think is in it for me," says Senator Bernardi.

The fact is, a lot of people don't really know what they stand for; the party just became a vehicle to deliver personal ambition. Not to diminish some, there are a few that are very committed on delivering what they stand for, and sometimes these pursuits differ to mine, and I respect that. However, if you don't come into politics knowing what your values are or what you stand for, you'll fall for anything. What I see, is a lot of young graduates that get a job as a staffer, because the goal is to become an MP, climb through the ranks, network and then get a corporate job. This does not serve the public well and the body politic is worse off as a result," says Senator Bernardi.

For Senator Bernardi, his decision leading up to breaking away from the Liberal Party in 2017 was one of gradual disenfranchisement.

"It wasn't an immediate thing. There were some enormous battles about policy and principle. I mean you can have different personalities at work, and we don't have to like each other, that's life, but it never got in the way of the policy that I wanted to focus on. I realised how many people didn't really care. They wanted others to make decisions for them. The strongest case was in 2009 with the emissions trading scheme. Turnbull was leader at the time, and he wanted to join with Rudd and pass the emissions trading scheme to 'save the planet' - a grand narrative - which they abandoned only this week after ten years. Clearly, someone did a lot of research and conceded that their narrative was simply not accurate and didn't pass the logic test. For a long time, I was

a pariah. Senior liberals would go to the press gallery and tell them how they told me to pull my head in, without ever actually speaking to me. The hate that was levelled at some of us, and my despair was not about me, but that we have lost this for our country... During the emissions debate, one of my former colleagues stood up and did a magnificent speech, about national interest, and another stood up and replied, 'I don't give a stuff about national interest I just want it to go away and get re-elected cause there is nothing else on the other side...' That shocked me and strengthened my resolve to not tread lightly. Culturally, it is hard to avoid cynicism in politics and the more disenchanted you get, you realise it is an insiders game. But you have two choices. You can either go with the game and benefit yourself, or have a crack at standing for something. The past traumas I had in my life [tuberculosis], gave me a great sense of perspective that if you're given the chance to do something, you should go as hard as you can. I'm not here to be someone, I'm here to do something. What's the point if you don't have courage to follow through with conviction? I will stand my ground because I love my country. Looking back, I think a lot of what I was criticised for have ultimately been proven to be prescient. When the Liberal Party changed from Abbott, and had a disastrous election campaign, this compounded my disenfranchisement. While my colleagues were celebrating what geniuses they were, I realised that these folks still think Elvis is in the building... they were completely detached from reality... it was a

moment of clarity for me. If forty percent of people aren't voting for major parties anymore because they don't trust them, and the cross bench is filling up with a bunch of galahs - aren't we better off trying to provide a credible alternative to that crossbench that says, this is what we stand for, this is our values, we will not deviate from it. If you share it, give us your vote. It's a big leap of faith, but I'm not prepared to give up our country to be governed by a cross bench that has cost Australia billions of dollars for very little outcomes," says Senator Bernardi.

According to Senator Bernardi, the Australian Conservatives is not about identifying social or economic problems, but delivering outcomes. He says this is the defining characteristic between his party and Hanson, Xenophon and Palmer's parties - whereas Senator Bernardi claims they are populists, he says his party offers a credible alternative.

"There are judgements in all of this. Conservatives say decisions must be made with values attached to sound fiscal policy. We try to strike a balance between practical and realistic outcomes. It's not a theoretical or ideological exercise for us. Something is either proven to work over centuries or not. The biggest threat to the Australian way of life is cultural Marxism".

When asked why it is so difficult for politicians in Australia to be vocal about having a faith-based morality, the Senator was candid.



"It's interesting in Australia, what was taken for granted twenty years ago is now perceived to be extremist ideology. It is often said in the US, you can't get elected without mentioning God, and in Australia, you can't get elected if you do mention God... I believe this is part of the deliberate attempt to dismantle one of the pillars of the west. Antonio Gramsci once said, 'communism can't succeed until you remove religion from society'. We are seeing this march today, through the institutions and the one still standing is the church, and extreme leftists are doing all they can to destroy it, and unfortunately, some churches are helping them through their actions. I was not from a religious family but I've always known that there is something bigger than me in the world and it has given me great comfort and there are things that played out in my life, where prayer and my faith in God sustained me. However, I never argue policy through religious doctrine; history can teach us. I uphold Judeo-Christian

values because I believe they are the building blocks of western civilization and unless we recognise it, it will be abandoned to the great unknown. I'm interested in the value proposition of Christianity, and I will defend it come hell or high water, because of the positive role it has played in our society. My son says don't be a bible-basher Dad! And I tell him, I'm not. I'm defending eternal values... When these values are not shared, instead of engaging through critical enquiry, we are demeaned by labels; racist, bigot, homophobe, sexist...this tactic simply diminishes the message and it is textbook Saul D. Alinsky's Rule for Radicals; call someone a name, make them defend it, diminish and mock in public to stop the message getting through. Well guess what? I'm not going anywhere and I will never deviate from my message nor will I apologise or fall at the altar of personal abuse. At the end of the day, I'm not about being invited to dinner parties, I've chosen to break bread at a different table," says Senator Bernardi.

Party politics aside, according to Senator Bernardi, the push to remodel society in a Marxist image, has not resulted in better outcomes, rather, it's proven to create less social cohesion, poorer educational standards, contributed to higher national debt and loss of industry. His objection to it ideologically, is underpinned by what he says is a total economic failure for Australia – and it will be take a devastated economy that will see the project of Marxism fail.

"Cultural Marxism does not make people feel happier or give them greater personal agency. Australia is about to arrive at a painful confrontation in an economic sense. The Australian people realise that total self-indulgence and immediate gratification is a disaster; socially, politically, morally, spiritually and economically. I am fighting for what I think is right, not for what I think is in it for me. I have enough of everything of what I need in my life. I'm fighting for children.

I'm fighting for the next generation because that's the hallmark of a civil society," says Senator Bernardi.

According to Senator Bernardi, the Government has failed in its collective and personal responsibilities, particularly towards the next generations. He says that inter-generational debt is the 'moral crisis of our time' and argues that the only people who will be damaged by this are the kids who will be burdened by debt that was never theirs to carry.

"The past ten years we have gone from zero debt to AUD500 Billion debt and every year since 2010, every treasurer promised a surplus. Our kids and grandchildren will be paying back this enormous growing debt and what do we have to show for it? A few windmills that can't even keep the power on in SA," says Senator Bernardi.

On the question of resolving Australia's current reliability of energy supply crisis, we asked Senator Bernardi if legislators 'let the market decide' how may the Government arrive at an outcome that is not ideologically based, but truly driven by commercial consideration – given the current crisis was brought about by two decades of consistent lobbying by the private renewables sector and heavy Government subsidisation of the renewables market.

"Once again, industry has declined – if we look at the energy market, it has been hurtling towards a catastrophe, and those of us who have called it have been cried

heretics and climate deniers, yet the reality is that it has disadvantaged every Australian, has hindered businesses from being competitive domestically and internationally, and it is all a product of ideology, not facts. Only today, did the Government finally admit it got it so wrong. They finally agreed that there must be a baseload of coal or hydro source for every unit of intermittent power. They are going to freeze the renewal energy target and subsidies from 2020. But ultimately, they got it catastrophically wrong because they have been subsidising renewables from an ideological basis, which means the things that should have provided us with what we needed are now uncompetitive and no longer viable. Now the Government celebrates blowing this up, by saying we don't need it anymore. It's a disaster. The only way we can get around it is for Government to get out of the energy business. We must give private enterprise the conditions they need to operate the lifespan of the asset and give people contractual certainty. Nuclear reactors, coal-power, hydro, these things should be subject to individual assessment. Over a twenty-year period, we have forked out AUD 60 billion to subsidise unreliable renewables. If we spent that money building twenty-five 800MwH new-generation HELO coal fired power stations, not only would we meet the Paris Accord target - we would have affordable reliability of baseload supply," says Senator Bernardi.

According to Bernardi, investors have no certainty, which has had massive knock on effects for

industries across all sectors and has hindered foreign direct investment opportunities.

"The Australian Conservatives would give absolute certainty to individuals who wanted to build any form of power stations, subject to meeting said requirements. Our steel makers would be much more competitive if they had access to cheaper and reliable electricity. It would kick start and have tremendous flow on effects for industry. We would have mines open across the country so we can value add to surrounding regions, and complementary industries like steel fabrication etc. we could make a case for justifying reviving the motor vehicle industry, attracting global data centres... even SMBs, energy is a massive overhead and the relief for small businesses will be felt immediately... How can we afford to not have cheap energy when we have it in abundance? It is purely political. If we want to revive industry and make it strong again, more competitive, energy is a key component – because historically it underpinned our past commercial successes," says Senator Bernardi.

Limited Government, being one of the cornerstones of Conservatism, and of which Senator Bernardi is a strident advocate, says Government should never be in the business of creating jobs, but facilitating opportunities for private enterprise and incentivizing risk.

"The best way is to let people be free to start a business. Great things don't come from big Government. It comes from some smart guy tinkering in his garage. Our immediate focus is to drive SMB growth in SA because 1 in

10 SMBs will fly and become a giant. We must ask why are the giants of industry not in Australia? We need to encourage investment either in flow through taxation in some areas, through FDIs as long as there is equal reciprocity between countries, just getting big Government out of the way and not penalise people under draconian IR laws," says Bernardi.

Defence and the education system in Australia have not escaped Senator Bernardi's scrutiny either. He argues that education has lost sight of the practicalities of vocational training, and argues that dropping standards in universities and the focus on quotas in both Defence and Education has also impacted greater industry, the economy and our smarts as a nation.

"If you look at our literacy standards, our education system is failing because they have ditched what was working in favour of unsubstantiated experiments. We are re-writing history, changing definitions, and ignoring basic biology for fiction. A good example is our Defence which been hijacked by PC.

People in Defence are not there to do a nice job. They are there to defend our country. We need to stop just accepting anybody to fill quotas. We need to attract people who are equipped and ready to serve at a moment's notice. It is immoral to send someone to war, when they may not be mentally or physically equipped to withstand it. It puts their lives in danger, and it puts our country in danger...

Political correctness is a craziness that has infected our institutions at every level. Meantime, families are disintegrating, crime is rampant, infrastructure is poorly managed and ageing. There is a moral case for capitalism but it must have prudence attached to it. Capitalism that consumes everything in the name of profit without contributing anything to civil society or the next generation is doing enormous damage, and we are going to get to a point in a few years where we are going to have to decide on whether our country needs more Government – which I think is dangerous – or, get Government out of people's lives, and I think that this is the battle line

on which the war will be fought – authoritarianism versus freedom. I stand for freedom," says Senator Bernardi.

We asked Bernardi what the Australian public could expect if the Australian Conservatives ever came to power.

"I'm not here to be anyone's therapist and we would see an end to identity politics immediately. My tribe is the Australian tribe. I know if we lose what makes this country so good, we won't be able to retrieve it once lost. We may repair a balance sheet, but not a cultural one... I could be outraged every single day, but I pick my fights. I have a great deal of fun and I am motivated by the desire for change and to preserve freedom for the next generation – that's what I stand for," says Senator Bernardi.

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