

Liberals must protect values of freedom and choice



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John Joseph Madigan recently staged the greatest political comeback of Australian post-war politics. The Victorian blacksmith entered the Senate on July 1 as a senator for the Democratic Labor Party – the first since all five DLP senators were voted out in 1974. Waiting 37 years for a return to Federal Parliament surely makes the DLP a party of the true believers.

Over that time, most of the DLP membership slipped away. Some went back to the Labor Party – their home before the split which led them to form their own party in the 1950s. Some joined the National Party and many joined the Liberal Party. In his recent memoir, the Coalition finance spokesman and former federal director of the

Liberal Party, Andrew Robb, tells of working for the DLP at elections in the 1960s. Tony Abbott also worked closely with the DLP in his student days.

The DLP split from Labor because it was fiercely anti-communist. It had a high proportion of Catholics among its members. As the threat of communism receded, the party lost a large part of its agenda. By the late 1970s, it lost its parliamentary voice.

The Liberal Party was also fiercely anti-communist. It didn't have a significant Catholic membership and Catholics in senior positions in the parliamentary party were the exception rather than the rule. The fact that many of the old DLP supporters were able to find a home in the Liberal Party indicates how it widened its appeal, at least in terms of religious background. Most senior players in the federal Coalition today were educated in the Catholic school system – the leader, the leader of the house, the shadow treasurer, shadow attorney-general and finance spokesman. This development is a credit to that education system and also, I think, to the leadership of the Catholic Church

which has managed to retain the orthodoxy of its flock as the Protestant churches have drifted into theological liberalism and political trendyism.

The Liberal Party has always had a strong commitment to free enterprise. John Joseph Madigan would be the first to remind people that the outlook of the DLP is quite different. The DLP – like the ALP which sired it –

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believes in collective rights like the rights of unions and trade associations, and in statutory marketing organisations where individuals are bound by collective decisions. The Liberal Party believes in individual rights, individual freedom to trade, and personal liberty.

One Coalition spokesman who seems to have an affinity with the old

regulated order of the Australian economy is Barnaby Joyce. These days he is apparently free to speak on all areas of policy. Writing recently in the *The Canberra Times*, Joyce made much of his Jesuit education as a reason for airing doubts about free trade. According to Joyce, most of the Australian economy is protected in one way or another and “once you start protecting some things then you start to protect others”.

The idea of “protection all round” – that one sector deserves protection and all others are entitled to some kind of corresponding benefit – is certainly a DLP idea. It might be held in some parts of the Nationals, but it is certainly not a Liberal idea. Liberals believe that our economy can be more productive and create more jobs with higher wages if we promote freedom and flexibility all round. During the Hawke and Keating governments, Labor started moving in that direction as well.

Tony Abbott has recently been asked to specify the labour reforms he will introduce to improve flexibility in the workplace. He should avoid

the trap of ruling things in or ruling them out so far away from the next election. We know the incoming government will inherit a bad debt and fiscal position – much worse than that inherited by Labor.

The Coalition will need a range of policy options to address Australia's falling productivity. Playing a game over what is in and what is out is to limit the capacity of a future government to deal with problems. Whether Abbott rules things out, Labor will mount a scare campaign against him, saying he cannot be believed. And Labor does not believe that ruling something out counts for anything, anyway. “There will be no carbon tax under a government I lead,” Julia Gillard said before the election.

The DLP was good on defence and the Cold War but it was not up to much on economic issues. Let Senator Madigan run the case for protection and regulation. That is not the future for the Coalition. Its leaders are there to promote and implement Liberal policies like freedom in the workplace, open trade, lower tax, and careful spending of taxpayers' money.