

The silent majority starting to speak out

By Janet Albrechtsen, *The Australian*, 13 July 2016

Senator Cory Bernardi in his office at Parliament House in Canberra. Picture: Kym Smith

Good on Cory Bernardi. The move by the South Australian senator to set up a home for those on the Centre-Right of politics in Australia is needed now more than ever. After an election that saw the Turnbull government barely scrape home, and more than a million voters chose an independent or micro-party in the Senate, conservatives have two choices.

Do nothing, remain complacent, trust in the righteousness of their cause, watch the centre-right landscape fracture further and hand the next election to an emboldened Left.

Or they can learn from the Left, unite around values, get clever about language, reclaim morality as their own and understand that left-wing activism can't be defeated by sober words and rational speeches. It will be defeated only by right-wing activism that takes nothing for granted.

Immediately after the election, Bernardi made his disappointment with the Turnbull government's campaign clear. "One of the quotes I read ... was 'the Liberals campaign like it's a lawn bowls gathering whereas the Labor Party campaign like it's a dogfight'."

Enough of playing lawn bowls then. Last week Bernardi set up conservatives.org.au to take on not just Labor and its union paymasters but that other dog in the political fight, GetUp! Bernardi registered the name Australian Conservatives before the election and now he's fighting back with a website to harness conservative activism.

Bernardi's move is recognition that GetUp! has evolved into a major electoral force by manufacturing grievance politics faster and more efficiently than a tech factory in Shenzhen, China, churns out iPhones. Its brand has landed more of a punch than a Qantas ad. And as Pamela Williams revealed in *The Weekend Australian*, under boss Paul Oosting GetUp! has moved from an outpost of generic online grievances into carefully targeted countrywide campaigns.

It put a bullseye on conservative MPs with a voting record that offended GetUp! members. By organising political versions of Tupperware parties to encourage members to become involved in the election against specific MPs, using smart technology to allow members to pick up a phone in their home to ring swinging voters and boxing up beanies, placards, T-shirts and how-to-vote cards for volunteers, GetUp! turned online activism into ballot box results.

Losing his seat in Bass, Andrew Nikolic decried GetUp!'s involvement, the \$500,000 it spent and the 90 activists it "imported" into Tasmania. "This is what dishonesty looks like," the former Liberal MP said last week. Alas, it's not dishonest to harness people to a cause and

encourage them to campaign for their values. Getting angry at GetUp! is akin to getting angry at democracy.

Better to learn how GetUp! has become the political equivalent of dopamine, that chemical in the brain triggered by pleasant things such as eating chocolate, having sex, listening to beautiful music, winning at a game and even getting revenge. It has learned the art of using feel-good language to hijack morality. Hence free speech is replaced with “fair” speech, responsible fiscal policy is supplanted by undefinable “fairness”, political correctness becomes a civility issue rather than a stifling of thought, tax cuts are recast as “gifts”, wars are “illegal”, race-based laws become the answer to racial discrimination, rights for same-sex couples becomes a debate over “marriage equality” and so on. Every word is carefully chosen to kick off political dopamine.

Meanwhile, angry Liberals wonder why they are losing these debates. Bernardi isn't getting angry, he's getting even. He's working to level democracy's playing field to offer conservatives a place in the public square just as GetUp! does on the Left. Bernardi wants to unite Australian conservatives who have turned away from the Liberal Party as their natural home. He points to the 1.7 million voters who chose centre-right independents or micro-parties over the Liberal Party. He's inviting people into an organisation under the rubric of values rather than diminishing party brand.

As he told *The Australian*: “We might not have the youthful, peach glow of GetUp! but we want to make a difference.”

What that difference will be is anyone's guess. It may be the early beginnings of a new party that will break apart the Liberal Party. For the moment, it serves as a timely wake-up call to Malcolm Turnbull that the Liberal Party is at its strongest when it respects both the conservative and small-L liberal strands of its past and present.

As a conservative, John Howard was also a pragmatist who united those two constituent parts to remake a formidable Liberal Party. Howard may not have agreed with many from the small-L liberal “wets” in his party, be it on Iraq or border protection or the culture wars, but he listened, respected their views and, importantly, included them in the government's inner sanctum of decision-making.

Can Turnbull prove that a progressive Liberal can equally unite and strengthen the party? Or will moral arrogance preclude him from doing so? Just as many on the Left cannot simply disagree with their political opponents — they must deride and revile them — the same is true of many on the more progressive side of the Liberal Party. Turnbull's imminent ministerial reshuffle will be an early marker of his approach.

Including party conservatives is only a first step for the PM. Getting to know conservative voters, rather than thinking you know better than them, is his second task. Ignoring the reasons so many voters turned away from the government on July 2 won't help him craft and sell

policies, and it won't secure stable government. It will deliver only more votes to Pauline Hanson and the motley crew of independents and micro-party populists in the Senate.

The forgotten people. The silent majority. These are not passing election pitches; these terms mean something. Bernardi's call to arms is a potential turning point for homeless conservatives who believe in smaller government, greater individual freedom, the importance of Western culture, its traditions and values, lower taxes, and "plain old common sense".

Want to support free speech in our great democracy? Then how about campaigning at the next election for a conservative MP or candidate who is a warrior for that cause? Don't like retrospective superannuation laws that are simply aimed at slugging the rich rather than serious budget repair? Why not campaign for an MP or candidate who will fight against that policy? Believe in the morality of work as a measure of self-worth and respect, not just an economic imperative? Then get out and campaign for a person who can articulate that long-forgotten value. Tired of being called a homophobe for believing that marriage is an institution that for millennia (and as recently as 2004 both Labor and Liberals agreed) meant the union between a man and a woman? Then lend your support to elect a person who has the same values.

If the Liberal Party isn't a broad enough church to include these voices, then it has more to fear than GetUp! Its own conservative base will tell the party of Menzies and Howard to get lost.

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