About Being Liberal, Conservative, Progressive or Pragmatic
by Dr W B Vosloo*, Wollongong, October 2015

Few words in the lexicon of political debates are as readily used – and misused – as being “liberal”, “conservative”, “progressive” or “pragmatic”. Depending on one’s political orientation all four terms convey a sense of approval. Teachers of introductory courses in political theory would confirm that few topics arouse as much lively participation as an open debate on the true meaning of these terms.

In the experience of this author, a good point of departure is to tell the students that a “conservative” is “a person attached to all the existing evils”. Young students immediately latch on to such categorisation because it immediately reminds them of their arguments at home with their parents or anyone else they consider to be “stuck in the past”. But they immediately object if you suggest that a “liberal” is “someone who wants to replace existing evils with other evils”. Needless to say, most people like to think of themselves as “progressive” in the sense of wanting to move ahead by leaving old evils and deficiencies behind.

In competition with true liberals, conservatives and progressives, the pragmatist is likely to flourish in the world of practical politics. The pragmatist seeks something that works, something useful and businesslike. Pragmatists don’t let perceptions of perfect solutions stand in the way of something that could work well enough to avoid a stalemate. Therefore, pragmatists seek a way to reconcile opposing forces to find compromise solutions to get things done.

The Ideological Contest Spectrum

When you add the ideological dimension of “ism”, the definition of terms like “liberalism”, conservatism”, “progressivism” and “pragmatism” become truly slippery. There is no standard understanding of meaning everyone readily agrees to. To make matters more complicated, attachment to these ideological positions is often a matter of degree: you can be more or less liberal, or conservative, or progressive.

Some liberals or conservatives are described as “reflexive liberals” or “reflexive conservatives” as if these positions describe a person’s natural equilibrium on the continuum of possibilities. They consistently balance out possibilities in a specific way to the “left” or to the “right” of the centre. Some “liberals” or “conservatives” are more pragmatic than others in the sense that they are more amenable to compromise. Some “liberals” or “conservatives” prefer to be classified as being “progressive” liberals or “progressive” conservatives in contrast to people they consider to be more “reactionary”.

Conservatism

As a human attitude conservatism is as old as societal life: it reflects individual and social attachment to the status quo – to existing arrangements, practices, traditions, ways of doing things. It is probably the commonest of human attitudes and has only come to be turned into a political doctrine in recent Western history by Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France, published in 1791.

Burke argued that social and political institutions emerged from a long and decisive heritage of the past. As fragments of a divine order, the present is inescapably determined by the laws of Nature or Providence. Burke rejected what he considered as the foolish fantasies about government’s power to
remake society according to some abstract vision. Social reformers run the risk of merely clearing the ground for more evil forces just as the French replaced Louis XVI with a Napoleon.

Generally speaking, conservative philosophy insists that each society is the outcome of powerful forces including the religious and aesthetic impulses of human beings that cannot be wished away. These realities cannot simply be eradicated by any root-and-branch meddling with society. Therefore, in the name of stability, conservatism appeals to the fixity of the existing rules and customs, to the orthodoxy of the social order, to civic respect to duty, deference and obedience to laws. Conservatives prize a harmonious, orderly society and oppose self-seeking disaffection and discord. Society is at root harmonious and unified. Divisions represent a loss of past unity. Conservatives also believe in progress but that it should be based on the repair or improvement of past practices and less on a heedless interference with past practices. To conservatives untested innovation threatens custom and tradition.

Peter Murphy in “The Birth of a New Conservative Age” (Quadrant, November 2015, p.13) maintains that across the Anglosphere there is no single conservatism, “Rather there is a spectrum of conservatives. There are free-market, classical liberal, libertarian, national security, anti-totalitarian, Christian, evangelical, reform, futurist and traditionalist conservatives”. The sprouting of the contemporary conservative imagination has been pushed along by “fusionism” – a thread that runs through much of contemporary conservative thinking. Murphy maintains that “If politics is the art of compromise then political imagination is the virtuosity of fusion”. He cites as examples the “effective liberal-conservative party alliance forged by John Howard in Australia during four terms in office. He says that David Cameron has done the same in Britain. But no fusion lasts forever. Each political synthesis has a limited shelf-life.

Peter Murphy argues that there is no “true” conservatism. There are just conservatives, each one offering a more or less successful fusion which works for a period as long as it maintains fluidity. But fusion is a difficult art. It requires the mixing, merging and melding of a range of contrary “Centre-Right” ideas and high-quality meditations on public policy issues in the tradition of Churchill and Reagan.

The conservative intellectual flowering in the United States was pushed along by Russell Kirk and William Buckley in the 1950s. As conservatives were largely marginalised and shut out of American campus life since the 1950s, conservatives decamped to policy bodies like the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation and other Centre-Right foundations. Several funds assisted the appointment of endowed professorships such as Ludwig von Mises at New York University, Milton Friedman at the Chicago School of Economics and James Buchanan’s public choice school of economics at the University of Virginia.

Conservative intellectuals in America made up a broad spectrum of types. Some, like Hayek, insisted that they were not conservatives at all, but “classical liberals”. But nonetheless they all stood outside the “Left-liberal consensus” of big-government liberalism.

Liberalism

Because of the etymological link between “liberal” and “liberty”, liberal persons find comfort in their attachment to liberty or freedom. It implies approval because it confers value and the absence of control, limitations, constraints and burdens which are considered to be undesirable or bad. But champions of freedom do not all wish to achieve the same benefits.
In the Anglo-Saxon tradition the notion of political freedom is understood as something to be defended against the state – not to be arbitrarily commanded by the government. This kind of liberalism was expounded by John Locke and J.S. Mill and is sometimes characterised as “Whig Liberalism”: freedom from state interference in the actions of an individual. Lockean liberalism leans to laissez faire, toleration, natural rights, limited sovereignty, republican democracy, participation in government by individuals.

In contrast to the Anglo Saxon tradition of “negative” freedom stands the “positive” notion of freedom where the state is seen to embody the people’s will so that its actions express the people’s freedom. J.S. Mill called this form of liberalism “continental liberalism” – a form of “etatiste liberalism” which took its inspiration from Rousseau. In Germany a vigorous school of etatiste liberals proclaimed that the rights of man should be expressed as the rights of the “Volk”.

In England, the Lockean liberal tradition was itself challenged by a movement called “social liberalism”. Oxford philosopher, T.H. Green, argued that when freedom is understood positively, government measures to promote social welfare, education and temperance could be seen as measures to enlarge, and not diminish, freedom.

In the USA the word “liberal” has a long history of loose usage. “Liberal” Republicans distinguish themselves from “Conservative” Republicans. But the most general use of the “liberal” side of politics refers to the “left” which largely encompasses the “left flank” of the Democratic Party. For this segment “liberalism” means the embrace of an activist, interventionist government, expanding its involvement and responsibility in the economy.

How was the meaning of the word “liberalism” altered so dramatically in the USA? This metamorphosis is explained by Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw in *The Commanding Heights* (Simon & Schuster, 1998, p.15) as follows:

“During the First World War, some leading Progressive writers began to use the word liberalism as a substitute for progressivism, which had become tarnished by its association with their fallen hero, Theodore Roosevelt, who had run and lost on a Progressive third-party ticket. Traditional liberals were not happy to see their label transformed. In the 1920s, The New York Times criticized ‘the expropriation of the time-honoured word ‘liberal’” and argued that “the Radical-Red school of thought ... hand back the world ‘liberal’ to its original owners.” During the early 1930s, Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt duked it out as to who was the true liberal. Roosevelt won, adopting the term to ward off accusations of being left-wing. He could declare that liberalism was “plain English for a changed concept of the duty and responsibility of government toward economic life.” And since the New Deal, liberalism in the United States has been identified with an expansion of government’s role in the economy.”

Contemporary American and Canadian liberals are big-government liberals. They dominate North American campuses with an intense “illiberal” intolerance, routinely excommunicating those who step outside of their consensus. Apart from universities they dominate other institutions such as courts, research establishments, foundations and international bodies. Their political advocacy is focused on feminism, affirmative action, race justice, gay marriage, environmentalism and disarmament. Public sector bureaucracies are the preferred mediums of action in contrast to market based structures. The bureaucratic regime has gradually pushed government spending into a systemic imbalance with the
revenue potential. Since the New Deal, government took chief responsibility for social security, education and health. The entire American system of government is today saddled with unsustainable levels of government debt. At the same time the economic system is not productive enough to service the accumulated debt burden, while the cost of health, education and regulatory services has been pushed to intolerably expensive levels. As a result the standard of living of the American middle class is in structural decline.

The nature of the disease brought about by the current North American version of liberalism is well described by Peter Murphy (op.cit. p.17), "Liberalism’s outworn mix of institutional capitalism, public sector unions, big bureaucracies and insider lobbies culminated, in the Obama years, in a lethargic blend of unretired public debt, low productivity, wilting national strength, declining personal assets, increased numbers in poverty, and unaffordable public goods."

**Progress and Progressives**

Although “progress” is a well-worn term, it is essential to distinguish “progress” from mere “change”. It is a special kind of change that leads to an increase in value – in betterment. But anything that is better logically presupposes a standard of good. Thus any serious theory of progress suggests advancement of realising more and more of something of value. There are many possible things of value: freedom, justice, equality, morality, altruism, knowledge, technology, happiness, harmony, peace, abundance, order and many more. Thus finding out how to become “progressive” can take a circular path.

Some theories of progress assume a unilinear or straight-line pattern of progress with a consistent increase of values involved. But history abounds with examples of theories or blueprints of future utopias that have no convincing relationship with the real world or even with human nature. Utopian visions of the world visualise the disappearance of crime, poverty, suffering, pollution, conflict, ignorance or whatever human frailty. In its place they visualise a hedonistic paradise without frustrated human needs – utopias of abundance where all corrupt systems of values are eliminated. Utopias are generally associated with ideologies of the left, such as Karl Marx’s classless society or Piketty’s “wealth tax”-based equality. But some utopias may be compatible with right-wing ideas of authoritarianism, elitism or order.

**Pragmatism**

Adding the adjective “pragmatic” to “liberal” or “conservative” or “progressive” adds an additional element of complexity to the taxonomy of political policy variation. Pragmatism is associated with the view that whatever works is the test of truthfulness. The pragmatic person seeks useful results, practical consequences, businesslike proceedings as guiding principle of operations. Thus truth itself becomes a process. It is a non-speculative philosophy considering usefulness in terms of practical consequences as the test of what is to be desired or sought after. Hence the pragmatic person is focused on deal making with opponents – in finding bases for compromise instead of striving to reach specific objectives. That means the pragmatic liberal, the pragmatic conservative and the pragmatic progressive is open for compromise in order to get things done.
Political Applications

For the past two centuries the Western world has been living through what has been called the “Age of Ideologies”. Ideas, ideals or sets of beliefs about political arrangements in society have become the driving force of politics; about the proper scope of individual freedoms and rights; about the proper role of government as a provider of social and economic services and national security; about the ways and means of promoting the general welfare; about the role of the government in the economy as owner of productive resources and as regulator. Differences of opinion have given rise to a myriad of ideologies: socialism, communism, capitalism, nationalism, fascism, nazism and combinations and variations of these.

In the British style of the Parliamentary Government, the lay-out of seating arrangements traditionally takes the form of a rectangular pattern with government and opposition members facing each other with “independents” sitting in the crossbenches. The British House of Commons and the American House of Representatives both employ the common version of the “majority” system which is the single-member constituency plurality system. Each constituency elects only one member of the legislative assembly at each election. In the European parliaments, based on proportional electoral systems, the representatives are normally seated in a semi-circle ranging from left to right according to their position on the political spectrum from “left” to “right”. There are many variations of proportional and semi-proportional systems – all intended to ensure that each point of view held by some members of the community will have a spokesperson in the assembly in proportion to its relative strength in the electorate.

It must be noted that electoral systems have significant political effects. Proportional systems tend to give rise to multiple-party systems, deepening ideological fissures and lowering consensus on the immediate and practical political issues of the day. As a general rule, political parties are formed to influence the content and conduct of public policy in favour of some set of ideological principles and/or interests through direct exercise of governmental power or by participation in electoral and parliamentary politics. Some parties lean more towards ideology and others towards interests of supporters.

Most political parties are made up of factions: the inner circle of top elites who are the key office holders; the activists who are the key missionaries showing strong commitment and who are motivated by a variety of incentive patterns such as patronage and preferments; the ordinary members or supporters who are motivated by ideological conviction to attend meetings and to act as opinion leaders in the general voting public; the rank-and-file sympathisers who prefer and defend the party. The outer circle of party affiliation is made up of the general voting public. They are less moved by the ideology of the party and are moderately orientated towards the middle of the road. Their interest in the political issues of the day is sporadic and intermittent. Their interest is aroused by special events.

A faction within a political party may be left, right or centre in the party’s ideological landscape. As a group of politicians they may be held together by a stable set of attitudes in respect of a range of policy issues or strategic or tactical priorities. In other cases they may be bound together by ethnic identity, religious association or economic interests such as trade unions or farmers’ associations. Leader-orientated factions are held together by loyalty to a particular leader, but may also involve ideological or personal style or image considerations. Devotees may also be motivated by rewards of office, patronage and preferments. Factions tend to arise when the structure of opportunities makes it a
rewarding option. Factions are formed when party members have something to gain by standing together. The tendency towards factionalism is a universal phenomenon of political party life. Hence virtually all political parties have to contend with the cohabitation of several ideological strains within its ranks. Often, the factionalism spills over into the ranks of journalists scattered amongst the media channels.

In Australia, spokespersons of the Labour Party like to refer to Liberal Party members as the “conservative side of politics” and tend to think of themselves as “progressives” who are keen to redistribute benefits and opportunities at the expense of the “top end”. The Liberal Party is usually described as a “broad church” party with supporters ranging from “conservative” (right wing) groups who support conservative social values and low tax “limited government” at one end of the spectrum to a “liberal” (small) wing that supports same-sex marriage and a “progressive” inner-city lifestyle. This dichotomy was reflected in the contest between the “Abbot camp” and the “Turnbull camp” – the latter being more agnostic in their religious orientation and less connected to the interests and aspirations of the rural communities or senior citizens. The National Party is the natural home of small town and farming communities who are, generally speaking, more “conservatively” orientated and closely connected to traditional cultural values, norms and lifestyles.

In the UK the ruling “Conservative Party” is an archetypical example of an ideologically conservative movement based on limited government, a strong attachment to a constitutional monarchy and traditional cultural values. Thus conservative Britons tend to embrace continuity preferring stability and moderation over the alternatives. They tend to hug the moderate centre-ground looking for leaders who can serve as “beacons in an uncertain world”, just as Churchill told them to “keep calm and carry on”.

The Labour Party of the UK is deeply rooted in trade union attachment, socialist “big government”, interventionist ideological policies and “working class” support. They always tend to veer to the left following leaders who want to create a “classless society” by “soaking the rich”.

Concluding Remarks

So who are the true and genuine bearers of the labels (or banners) of being “liberal”, “conservative” or “progressive”? While this contest rages on, it is probably up to the pragmatists to get things done. In 1884, Dutch author Frederik van Eeden, recounted a fable in his publication entitled *De Kleine Johannes*, relating to the history of the “Peace Ants”. This colony was attacked by several other colonies of warrior ants who denied them their status as Peace Ants. Eventually the “Peace Ants” wiped out all the deniers to confirm their status as the true “Peace Ants”.

Coming to terms with slippery pragmatism is perhaps an inescapable part of life in a majoritarian democracy. It involves trade-offs and compromises – albeit sometimes like a reed in the wind. As a pragmatic politician famously said in concluding his electoral campaign: “These are my principles. But if you don’t like some of them, just let me know so that I can replace them with others.”

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