

Radical centre can create highest compromise on recognition

- NOEL PEARSON
- The Australian
- January 28, 2016

To paraphrase the Great One, “every galah in every pet shop is talking innovation”. The Prime Minister’s conversation is largely focused on business and product innovation and venture capital mobilisation, rather than social and policy innovation: how government can be an enabler of innovation, understanding that by itself it can never be an innovator.

I want to reference an example of innovation in relation to indigenous affairs: the challenge of recognition in the country’s Constitution. Our Constitution is notoriously difficult to change. This onerous hurdle was last overcome 40 years ago: only eight out of 44 referendums have succeeded.

The window of constitutional opportunity is extremely narrow between Left and Right, between over-ambition and desultory minimalism. The challenge is to produce a model and prosecute politics capable of steering the reform through that window. Too much Left won’t work, too much Right won’t work, too much overreach won’t work and too much miserable under-reach will not either — a minimalist, purely symbolic proposal would not be supported by indigenous people.

I hunt for the radical centre. I am neither Left nor Right. I have an appreciation for conservative, liberal and social democratic philosophies. I dismayed my land rights supporters when I sought welfare reform. I dismay some of my economic development supporters when I point out the importance of cultural retention. I believe that these positions are not contradictory. But the way in which our policy and politics are conducted in this country, these are often taken as polar opposites rather than complementary priorities in indigenous policy.

If politics is the art of the possible, then the radical centre is about maximum possibility. If politics is necessarily about tension and struggle, then the radical centre is the highest compromise. The radical centre is the policy and political source of innovation.

If you want innovation, then keep innovatively exploring the tensions between Left and Right; keep hunting the radical centre. Creativity and imagination are the means to creating the radical centre.

The glaring omission in Australia's political landscape is the absence of political representation that hunts for that centre. We need new Democrats, with philosophy — with a higher purpose than simply keeping the bastards honest. We need a great connector between the red and the blue, the north pole and the south, the positive and the negative, the AC and the DC — this centre politic should not seek to be government or opposition, but a connector seizing opportunities to bring together the best of the Left and the Right.

The radical Left and the radical Right pursuing their own agendas help insofar as they provide the necessary tension and intensity for a higher compromise to emerge, but they can never by themselves locate the right solutions, because they are perpetually at war. The real solutions lie in the elusive radical centre and it is in the parliamentary political process that this centre is most needed. More innovation will come from connecting the Left and the Right in the parliamentary process than any number of politicians trying to be a latter-day Steve Jobs.

Policy is the main business of our parliament and better policy design through a politics that aims to locate that higher centre is the real challenge of innovation. The radical centre is not a new philosophy, but rather an intense amalgam of liberal, conservative and social democratic thinking — pulling these three great traditions into a new balance to achieve higher ends.

The senator for South Australia, Nick Xenophon, is the closest we have to a radical centrist. His ethic and instinct is always to aim for the centre. Putting aside his penchant for leading cows and media by the nose, Xenophon is closest to what I mean. If you add philosophy and innovation to Xenophon, you have the exemplar of radical centre politics.

There are many radical centrists lurking on the fringes of politics within Australia, leaders like Tim Costello and Natasha Stott Despoja: these are people whose natural inclination is towards the brilliant centre. Being the connector means representation; it means a voice in the Senate. It would be about asking the Australian people to give two out of their six-pack of Senate votes to a centrist party.

Whether you prefer the blue of Pepsi or the red of Coca-Cola or the green of 7Up — the choice is yours to make — a centrist party would ask for only two of plain but rejuvenating effervescent water. It would say to Australians, give

four votes according to your traditional inclinations, but give a pair from your six-pack to the nation.

Noel Pearson is a founder of the Cape York Partnership. This is an edited extract of a speech Mr Pearson gave yesterday at the National Press Club.

