

Daniel Wild:

Hello, and welcome to Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. I'm Daniel Wild from the Institute of Public Affairs. Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott is your voice. Each week Tony and I discuss mainstream Australian values, the future of the Australian way of life, family, community, and Australian culture. More importantly, we want to hear from you. That is why we have the Tell Tony Abbott segment at the end of each show where you can ask Tony your questions on whatever topic you want. Phone in to the Australian Heartland hotline on 039 946 4307 to leave your question. You can also go to the website, australia.ipa.org.au, where you can join the Australian Heartland Community and sign up to receive this podcast sent to you each week, along with special analysis from the Institute of Public Affairs. Thank you for supporting the Australian way of life. And now to this week's episode.

Daniel Wild:

Hello Tony, and g'day to all of our listeners. It's wonderful to be back with you for the second episode of Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. We've had fantastic feedback and response to the first episode, and we received dozens and dozens of your questions for the Tell Tony Abbott segment, which we will get to at the end of this podcast. As always, Tony, it is wonderful to be back with you.

Tony Abbott:

Well, Daniel, thanks for having me. It's nice to be with you, and it's nice to be with the IPA's members and supporters.

Daniel Wild:

Thank you, Tony. There's a lot to talk about as always, we've got a great list of topics, the split on the right, lockdowns, Afghanistan, and a number of questions. Let's get started. We've got a developing situation on the right of politics, which is the emerging split that is taking place. This is not necessarily a new phenomenon, but it is again receiving renewed attention with the defection of Campbell Newman from the Liberal National Party to the Liberal Democrats. Tony, you've had a lot of experience in this area as Prime Minister and in your extensive career in parliament, help me understand some of the causes behind this most recent split.

Tony Abbott:

Daniel, I've got a lot of time for Campbell Newman. He was an outstanding Lord Mayor of Brisbane, he was an effective opposition leader, and I think he was a good Premier. Arguably, he tried to do quite a lot quite quickly, and obviously that cost him at the polls. But as I said, I have a lot of time for Campbell Newman as a politician and as a human being. I am nevertheless very disappointed that he's chosen to leave the Liberal Party the way he has. I very much wish that he'd gone into the LNP State Council and said all of those things to the Libs in the hope of generating a different response from within the party, rather than simply going away in this ugly public breach. Look, the difficulty, Daniel, is that when people split from the center-right to go further to the right, the consequence is not normally a better center-right, the consequence is normally a Labor-Green government.

Tony Abbott:

Look at the impact of one nation in the 1998 Queensland election, it was to produce a Labor government. Look at the impact of One Nation in the 2001 West Australian election, it was to produce a Labor government. Now, I can absolutely understand that some conservative people are disappointed that center-right governments aren't conservative enough for their taste, but you've got to be sensible

about the response. And when you split away from the mainstream center-right political party, invariably, you fracture the vote, and in so doing, you make it much easier for Labor-Green governments to come in. And trust me, the next Labor-Green government in this country will be the worst government we've ever had. So my advice to people who are feeling frustrated with the state of center-right politics right now is not to give up in disgust on the Liberal Party or the National Party, but to stay in and fight. To use that great frites from the DLP split or the 1950s, "Stay in and fight" to make the mainstream political party that best represents your values and aspirations a better party than it is now.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, you wrote a very important and astute analysis on this matter in December of 2016, the context for that was then Cory Bernardi leaving the Liberal Party to start his own Conservative Party. You wrote at the time, and I quote, "My guess is that a new entity called the Conservative Party could win up to 10% of the total vote here in Australia, but almost all of it would be at the expense of the Liberal-National Coalition," end quote. Tony, 10% is about the same as the Greens are able to command at every election. And they've had a very significant influence on the direction of our country. Why wouldn't it be the case that a countervailing force on the right could have a similar impact?

Tony Abbott:

Look, that's again, a fair enough question, Daniel. But Green's voters seem to be much more disciplined than voters on the right. Green preferences invariably go back to the Labor Party at the right of about 80 to 85%. Whereas conservative splinter groups preferences tend to come back to the Coalition at the rate of more like 60%. So if you look at the field evidence, if you like, and in the end you've got look at the field evidence. The field evidence is that right-wing splinters eliminate center-right governments in favour of left governments. And surely no one who thinks that the current state of the Liberal Party is not to their taste, really wants a Green-Left government, which I think is the invariable result of these splits on the right, understandable though people's frustration sometimes is.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, I want to just quote to you another part of your article that you wrote in your analysis, which I think was very important. So remember this is 2016. We've had the phenomenon of Trump. We've had Brexit. We're getting very excited about the prospects of potentially similar change in Australia. But you caution against that in Australia. And I quote, "Our quite different political system makes it almost impossible for an individual outsider to take over the government. Even in these uncertain times, the best a new political party could realistically hope for is not government, but a few senators," end quote. Tony, can you help me understand what is it about Australia's political system that makes it so difficult for an outside force to be able to achieve the kind of change that we saw in the United States and in the United Kingdom?

Tony Abbott:

Okay. Well, the United States is a presidential system and that just makes it easier for the proverbial man on the white horse to emerge from nowhere and ride into the White House. The United Kingdom has a first past the post system, which again, makes it easier for parties to emerge from nowhere, get roughly 30% of the vote, and suddenly command a following in the parliament or in this case, the European parliament if you're talking about UKIP or the Brexit Party. Our system of preferential voting basically means that it's not the most liked candidate, it's the least disliked candidate that gets elected. And it means that you really do have to harvest votes from everywhere to emerge victorious. And it

builds inertia, if you like, into the system. That can be a frustrating thing if you want change. It can be a comforting thing if you like stability. But a preferential voting system with well-established large parties with a long history is very hard to shake.

Daniel Wild:

Well, Tony, in addition to being Leader of the House, Prime Minister, you were also a health minister for four years during the Howard government. And you were intimately involved with Australia's being prepared for pandemics and other potential health challenges. I just want to talk with you about your experience as health minister in preparing for pandemics. What kind of factors did you take into account in assessing how Australia ought to respond to a pandemic?

Tony Abbott:

What did I do? Well, I built up the National Medicine Stockpile masks, gowns, antivirals. We basically cornered the world supply of antivirals for a year or so. We bought extra ventilators, which were distributed to the state public hospital system. We had a flat pack quarantine facility ready to erect. We devised the National Pandemic Plan, which then went through numerous iterations. But essentially, what was going to happen in the event of a pandemic, as soon as we in Australia thought that a new strain was readily transmissible from human to human, we would put our borders on alert, if necessary, we would for a time close them, certainly impose strict quarantine on incoming arrivals. The aim being to slow down the arrival of the disease, delay the arrival of the disease in Australia, slow down the spread of the disease in Australia while we ramped up our hospital system, developed mobile testing and treating facilities and so on. That was the aim of the pandemic plan back then.

Tony Abbott:

And I must say, in the middle of last year I did have a flick through the August 2019 iteration of the Pandemic Plan. And it seems that the Plan did not long survive the circumstance that we saw in northern Italy in late February, early March of last year. The Plan did appear to largely go out the window. And one of the things that I think any future Royal Commission should look at, is what were the deficiencies that we now think might've been present in the former Pandemic Plan, and why didn't we stick more closely to it when this pandemic hit us. Certainly, the pandemic plan in those days, in my day and in more recent days, right up until March of last year, did not envisage long-term border closures. It certainly did not envisage mass shut downs of business, mass stay at home orders. It didn't envisage the kind of restrictions on freedom that have been everyday occurrences over the last 18 months.

Daniel Wild:

Well, Tony, you mentioned that the original Plan that was there prior to the pandemic hitting Australia didn't envisage mass shutdowns of the like that we've had. And I want to put to you a quote and a statement from Nick Coatsworth, who was the former Deputy Federal Chief Medical Officer. And Coatsworth is talking here in the context of those epidemiologists who were promoting the pursuit of elimination of COVID, rather than managing the risk of COVID. "We always took the view in government, myself included, that this, as in those promoting zero COVID, was a small group of people who didn't have that much influence, and we would create more problems for ourselves if we started questioning academic freedom or asking people to stay in their swim lane." Nick goes on, "I actually think that this was the wrong position to take."

Tony Abbott:

Look, I really only know Nick Coatsworth through a couple of private conversations that I had with him early on, and through what he subsequently said publicly. But I've got to say, he seems like a pretty shrewd doctor and a pretty shrewd policy advisor. There's absolutely no doubt that COVID is here to stay. We cannot eliminate it. It's particularly, I think, fantastical to think that we can eliminate it now that we've got this more infectious Delta variant amongst us. So I think we just have to live with it. Gladys Berejiklian is absolutely right. And good on Gladys who's been the best of the Premiers. She's absolutely right, we just have to learn to live with this disease. And how we start to learn to live with the disease is by not spreading fear and panic.

Now, yes, COVID is serious. It was always considerably worse than the standard seasonal flu. We do have to take reasonable precautions against it, but in the end, we've got to get the balance between freedom and safety right. And while I suppose, in a democracy such as ours, you do have to broadly follow a safety first approach. It's really shouldn't be safety only. And I sometimes think that the balance, the dial has been shifted far too much towards safety and not nearly enough towards freedom.

Daniel Wild:

I want to put to you a quote from Ita Buttrose, who is the chair of the ABC. And she was speaking at the Australian HR Institute's Public Secture earlier this week. And Ita Buttrose said, "In Sydney, we are told the current lockdown might continue until December. That would be utterly unbearable. I think I would have to protest." Tony, there is only so much that people can take isn't there?

Tony Abbott:

I think that's a pretty fair observation, Daniel. Look, I'm not saying that you should never lockdown, but I am saying that lockdowns can't be your only response, and they can't go on forever, and we can't continue indefinitely in this stop start life.

Daniel Wild:

Could you help me understand what are the factors at play as to why many opposition leaders, in particular, have been reluctant to provide an alternative course of action?

Tony Abbott:

Look, oppositions have to oppose. And they don't have to oppose on everything all the time, but they've got to oppose on something all the time if they are going to be politically effective. And I'm not saying that lockdowns are never necessary, but the Victorian Premier seems to be addicted to them. And his readiness to keep the state locked down more or less indefinitely with a mere handful of new daily COVID cases, suggests to me that he has no confidence in his tracing systems and he has no confidence in his public hospital systems, which is a little odd, particularly coming from a Premier who's a former health minister. Politics is a contest, Daniel. You can't succeed in politics unless you're prepared to have the fight. Now, as I said, you don't have to fight over everything all the time, but you do have to be prepared to fight over something most of the time.

Daniel Wild:

Tony. I did now want to turn to our favorite segment and our favorite part of the podcast discussion, which is the Tell Tony Abbott segment, which is your chance, our listeners, to ask Tony questions that are on your mind, which you can do by dialing into the Australian Heartland hotline on 03 9946 4307. We've got a stack of great, interesting questions. Tony, our first question is from Simon from Western Australia. And Simon has a question about Afghanistan.

Simon:

Hi, this is Simon from Western Australia. My question is, the war in Afghanistan is costing Australian government close to \$10 billion, cost the lives of 41 Australian defense personnel with a further 261 injured. My question is, do you think the Australian government needs to rethink its strategic commitment to our allies? Whether it's a strong risk that the incursion won't bring lasting change to a region like Afghanistan?

Tony Abbott:

The world is an incredibly messy place and it's often enough a dangerous place. And the regrettable reality is that sometimes there are no easy ways forward. Had we stayed in Afghanistan, there would have been continued expense, there would have been continued toll on our military personnel. On the other hand, now that we've left Afghanistan, the place has gone back to the Taliban. Now I absolutely accept that we can't fight harder for someone else than they're prepared to fight for themselves. I absolutely accept that. And it's been astonishing to watch the way the Afghan armed forces have dissolved in the face of the Taliban advance. But nevertheless, we have to face the fact that in a difficult and dangerous world, we do have to make hard choices, and those hard choices will come sometimes at a high cost to us, to our allies, to our friends. But my inclination always is to pick a course and to do your best to stay the course.

Daniel Wild:

Well, thank you for that assessment, Tony. I'd now like to take a question from Mick from Alice Springs. Mick, what is your question?

Mick:

Hi, Tony, it's Mick from Alice Springs. I just wanted to know why the noisy minority seem to be living off the taxpayer? And the world of academia and climate alarmists and so forth, what are their main sources of income? And I probably know the answer. It's probably the Australian mainstream taxpayer. I just want to know your thoughts on that please.

Tony Abbott:

I can I understand the frustration of the questioner. We would routinely wonder in expenditure review committee meetings back in 2014, why it was that so much government money was routinely going to bodies whose main existence and raison d'etre was to campaign for more government money for themselves and for their pet causes. Look, I guess the easiest thing in the world when you're in government and there's an issue is to say, "Well, let's give some money to an entity that will monitor and manage the issue." Especially if the issue is intractable. Provide some money to an entity that will give us advice on how to deal with it. It's a way of demonstrating concern at a lower price than attempting the impossible. Look, to some extent we just have to live with this unfortunate reality, but given the fiscal pressures that I fear are going to come on us soon as we struggle to repay the debt that we've accumulated over the last couple of years, let's hope we can reign back some of that funding of groups which often look a bit parasitic.

Daniel Wild:

Well said, Tony, thank you for that assessment. And I just want to go to our final question today, if I may, from RayWeene from Tamworth, what is your question?

RayWeene :

My question for Tony is when is he coming back to help put things back into the way Australian's way of life should be? We're all missing him very much. Not all, but a lot of us are. And I'd love to see him back in the top job.

Tony Abbott:

Well, I'm very flattered that she might be feeling nostalgic for the times of the Abbott government. But look, as I said earlier, it's wonderful when doors open, but you've got to accept that just as doors open, sometimes they close. And those doors closed. And it's hard to imagine any circumstances when they might suddenly spring open again.

Daniel Wild:

Are there any circumstances at all, Tony, you might imagine?

Tony Abbott:

Look, I noticed my friend John Anderson put his hand up to go back into the federal parliament in the Senate. I can't imagine why the New South Wales National Party didn't welcome him back with open arms because not only was John Anderson an extremely effective member of the Howard government, but he's a person of enormous strength of character, very, very, very capable person who would have been a tremendous addition to the National party room and to the joint party room. But even the New South Wales National Party thought his time was passed. Now, I thought it was a mistake, but nevertheless, I guess that's a bit of an object lesson to anyone who wants to go back. Don't think just because you've got the talent to make a contribution that you're going to get welcomed.

Daniel Wild:

Can I just draw you out on that just a little bit, Tony? Because I think it raises a very interesting issue, which is about leadership. And as you mentioned, John Anderson, someone of great stature, great intellect and great integrity couldn't find his way back into parliament. Is there anything to read into that about what that says about the state of Australian parliament today? Or is that really just a case by case situation?

Tony Abbott:

Look, I think it's case by case. Although I do remember a comment by the U.S thinker, George Will. I think he wrote this at the time of the Carter administration. He said, "The cry goes up for leadership from millions of people who wouldn't recognise it if they saw it and would reject it if they did."

Daniel Wild:

Well, I think that very nicely sums up just about where we are at the moment. So on that, Tony, I will say thank you very much for what's been a very enjoyable and interesting conversation. I'm looking forward to continuing these conversations with you. So thank you very much again for joining us.

Tony Abbott:

Good on you, mate.

Daniel Wild:

Thank you for listening to Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott, and thank you for your support of the Australian way of life. This has been a production of the Institute of Public Affairs. To find out more or to become a member, head to ipa.org.au.