

Cut Through, April 2, 2026: **Left-Right politics in Australia is dead**

All timestamps are approximate

Crystal Andrews (00:00)

Hello and welcome to Cut Through, Crikey spin-free analysis of Australian news, politics and power. I'm your host, Crystal Andrews, and I would love it if you could subscribe to the podcast, give us a star rating or leave a review, all very small actions that you can do to help us grow. Today, we will be discussing a topic that's been bubbling away in the background for a while. Does the left right political spectrum still represent Australian politics?

Crystal Andrews (00:26)

To thrash it out, have Crikey Politics editor, Keane. BK, welcome back to the pod.

Bernard Keane (00:32)

G'day.

Crystal Andrews (00:33)

And also cutting through with us today is Alex Fine, Senior Insights Advisor at political research and polling company RedBridge. Alex, thanks for joining us today. How are you?

Alex Fein (00:44)

I'm good, thanks so much for having me.

Crystal Andrews (00:45)

It's a real pleasure to have you here. I'm very excited to get into this discussion. guess to set the scene a little bit for about a year now, I think I've noticed the general muddying of left-wing and right-wing as political labels for people's beliefs. And that has also become quite a consistent point of discussion, I would say, amongst some of the long time crikey subscribers and people we have commenting on the site. BK, I know that this is something you've been thinking about a lot.

Last month, you wrote a piece that argued left and right are no longer useful ways to describe politics in this country. So I think we'll start by temporarily just giving you the floor. Why do you think that is?

Bernard Keane (01:24)

A couple of substantial reasons, some historic, some maybe a little bit more topical. Just putting aside the derivation of left and right from the French Revolution, mean, it's, there are terms that come with a lot of historical baggage. If we just confine it to the post-war period, i.e. after fascism, as it turns out, was temporarily defeated, left and right's kind of

generally been seen through an economic lens. And it's been really around the trade-offs between market economics and government interventionism. And throughout most of that period, left and right have broadly been around to the extent to which you are sort of

economically interventionist and pro-regulatory and generally see the point of the economy is to sort of serve the community.

versus a more conservative and right-wing approach, which is sort of about deregulation, ~ freer markets, ~ generally elevating the market to a kind of a sacred status on the basis that would somehow guarantee maximum prosperity. I think that dynamic really doesn't serve us particularly well anymore. ~

one of the consequences of the rise of Marga and Trump has really been to shift that whole debate right out of the right left framework because clearly Trump advocates a level of economic interventionism that is ~ really quite extraordinary for, particularly for the Republican party, but certainly for politics over the last.

40 odd years and in many ways divorced from the movements that gave birth to Margaret. I mean, if you look at the tea party movement, that was really strongly focused on freedom and freedom from government and reducing government. And it was a real reaction against George W Bush and his, ~ his budget policies and the extent to which the American foreign policy ended up loading all these.

additional cost onto the US budget deficit. ~ But Trump and Margaret as it now exists is a very sort of economically interventionist sort of form. ~ And to kind of labor that sort of idea a little bit, if you look at what's what's happened in Australia, it's been labor that has been the kind of most attentive handmaiden to ~ free market economics. ~ Hawking Keating pursued that agenda back in the 80s and the 90s. ~

Howard government kind of continued a lot of that ~ and took it in some other directions such as industrial relations. But more recently it was the liberals that really sort of departed the free market orthodoxy first. ~ I'm thinking in particular of Tony Abbott when he drove the liberals away from using a market-based solution to the issue of the climate crisis. ~ But since then a lot of the kind of activism in terms of what's the role of government

in the economy has actually been on the right rather than the left. And particularly under the Albanese government, there's obviously a bit more interventionism in terms of industry policy. But really by and large, the government seems to have seen its role as how to enable the market to work better. Whereas it's, know, for example, the nationals who've been pushing for greater competition policy reforms, know, like, like, like divestment of assets, breaking up large firms. ~ And it was Peter Dutton that wanted to be

the huge government ~ idea of a whole new nuclear power industry costing hundreds of billions of dollars. So, you know, if you just came into this whole, if you came into Australian politics right now, or even global politics and said, well, right, left believes in economic interventionism, rights, free markets and untrammelled ~ economic policies, you'd be very confused about the labels that people are wearing ~ in that particular debate.

The other point to just briefly mention is that ~ I was struck by a point that Matt Canavan made, purely, I'm not saying this point is a valid one, but ~ in Matt Canavan's initial press conference when he was elected leader of nationals, of first things he said was ~ that identity politics crept over from the left to the right. Now, just there's a whole podcast on that issue, but

Nonetheless, again, it's, it's tapping into this idea that, which has been around for a while, that a lot of things on the left are actually being mirrored on the right or vice versa. Depends on which side of the fence you sit on to see, you know, who was the blame first. But nonetheless, again, we're back to this idea that, well, there's actually things in common between the left and the right that, that, that prevent us from clearly delineating what's going on. So

Yeah, the shorthand terms left and right, ~ probably not so much the problem. It's what they describe that is now the problem because what they describe is radically shifted ~ and is no longer particularly fit for purpose. So that's why I thought it was useful just to explore some options about what's some shorthand that might actually sum things up better for someone who might have arrived from Mars in the last five years and said, ~ what are these people debating about both?

politics, both economy and society.

Crystal Andrews (07:22)

Yeah, Alex, let's, let's bring you in. I'm keen to know where you stand on this language of left and right and how it applies to, as BK is kind of alluding to our current landscape and the current voter in Australia. How is this all feeling to you?

Alex Fein (07:23)

Yeah.

Yeah, it's such an interesting question. So just following from what Bernard was saying, that if we look at kind of the trajectory of neoliberalism and what it's meant for ordinary people, there's been really this accelerating wealth concentration and a hollowing out of the middle class. And we joke at work that

know, when we're looking for economic populist ~ kind of segments to test things on, well, it's a problem because everyone's an economic populist now. Because wealth is concentrating so much and because so many people are just falling out of what middle class life used to look like, left and right

now becomes almost an aesthetic question and it's a social kind of delineator like do you tolerate woke stuff? Do you ~ long for some imagined pristine conservative past kind of thing? And I think on the left and the right as we kind of use it currently as a shorthand in politics in

Crystal Andrews (08:38)

Mm.

Alex Fein (09:03)

among people who have power, there is an interest on both sides in keeping the argument social and not having it go to economics because once it does then, and forgive me for using the term, the elites really have to start wondering whether their elite position is going to be compromised economically. You know, there's a reason that ~

I think centre-left governments around the world are trying to maintain this neoliberal equilibrium and focus on kind of elevating the social issues because they're benefiting from the current system and for obvious reasons ~ people on the right want to narrow focus on the social issues. And if we look at kind of that whole Epstein

network ~ that is not just a US phenomenon, it's a global phenomenon. What was at its core other than horrific exploitation and abuse? It was often about tax minimisation. People would come to him first to look at how to protect their wealth from being redistributed as

it should be, how to pay their fair share of tax. This is all about distribution. And so our shorthand at work now, I like to distinguish between people who have an abundance mindset, we just need more stuff and then we'll be fine, versus the people who instinctively know that actually we've got plenty of stuff. It's a problem of distribution.

So the abundance versus distribution. And the funny thing is because so many people are tending towards economic populism now, it does not take much to shift people from that kind of individualistic abundance mindset into that more communitarian distribution systemic mindset.

Crystal Andrews (11:15)

it sounds like you're both saying that there's been a divorcing of those labels of left and right from their original economic intention to represent something that is, I mean, Alex, as you said, like it is a social label now more than it is about that sort of economic.

ideology or even necessarily progressive versus conservative ideology. There was a piece Alex that you'd written ~ for the Red Bridge substack that I really enjoyed. I'll link to it in the episode description. ~ But it was talking about the aesthetic dimension of Australian politics and the fact that everybody wants to call themselves a centrist, wants to self label as being in the center, even if they're the policies that they support and the ideas that they support are

you know, firmly, I think I've got the quote here, you said, even sometimes they are economically extremely progressive, they would still prefer to call themselves a centrist. Does that change in how people self label make it difficult to do the work that you guys are doing in terms of, you know, research and insights and polling? I know a lot of studies they will categorize the demographics is asking people, how do you

identify how do you politically self-label.

Alex Fein (12:27)

we ask the questions that we specifically want answered. if we're after looking at people who have a vote history or a vote intention, we'll ask specifically around that. And if we want to know how people self-label, well, that's fine, then we'll ask.

But if we really want to know kind of whether they're inclined towards economic populism or ~ social progressivism, then we'll ask questions that really go to the heart of that rather than asking them to self-label.

Crystal Andrews (12:58)

BK, do you think people understand that ~ they are preferring the label centrist rather than, you know, quote unquote centrist ideas or is that just like part of this whole getting lost in the mess here?

Bernard Keane (13:11)

I think it's hard to tell because the great majority of Australians are not particularly politically

ourselves and everyone listening to this podcast probably is. ~ And I think it's always, it's ~ an eternal risk for particularly if someone like me who's always offering an opinion ~ to just be aware that in fact, not everyone is like me. In fact, the great majority of people aren't actually focused on these sorts of issues or at least to be fair and more accurate.

their interest in these issues is through a very precise filter of what does it mean for them? Not because they're selfish, but because, you know, that's a very rational way of understanding things. And that's why the state of the economy is, know, people say that's the biggest driver of how they vote. That's a bit of a stated preference versus revealed preference sort of issue there. But nonetheless, that's what they say.

is what shapes how they decide to vote. clearly they see these issues through the prism of their own ~ interests. ~ it might be a bit more of a sort of academic sort of game to be as far as most people are concerned as to how they might self label. But ~ the other dimension is that

We've long since moved past the era of mass political participation in the sense that, you know, the number of people who were members of political parties is now almost vanishingly small compared to particularly compared to last, you know, to the middle of last century when, you know, the chance that you were a trade unionist or a labor voter or a liberal voter in the sense that you understand yourself ~ was very strong. ~

and that kind of identification was an important part of people's identity. political, having a sense of your own political brand is probably ~ less important now than a broader self-conception of who you are and what your kind of people are and the kind of things that are.

important to you. So people don't see themselves as a Labour voter so much anymore or a Liberal voter. They might see themselves as a person who believes in X and Y and Z and who

values particular things. I think part of the shift away from the major parties has been a diminishing kind of sense of association between the once mass political movements, but which are now kind of very skeletal structures that don't have much to do with

with ordinary voters and that kind of shift is ~ really important to people's kind of sense of who they are if they think of themselves ~ as a political being. mean, the big challenge that we've got in all this is Australia has just changed so fundamentally as a society. It's not just the decline of major political parties. ~ We have a very, different economy now than we did back in the 1980s. We have a very different kind of

population in the sense that we are far more educated now than we used to be. mean about half of all young women now have degrees, which is like I think it's about 42 % of men, it's about 50 % of young women, which makes for a radically different economy and a radically different kind of, that really does shape the way people.

see themselves, it gives them the skills to participate in a 21st century economy in a way that people who don't have, people who didn't finish year 12 or only got to year 12 ~ face. And it tends to shift people in a progressive direction on key sort of social issues.

And the Australian economy has undergone some pretty fundamental changes that I think if you try and look at it from an historical perspective, you know, it's really a work in progress in trying to understand just how we are being shaped right now at a population level. And this idea about who we are as political beings, I think is very much affected by that because, you know, we are a society in flux and we're going to, know, technology is going to make sure that we continue to be a society in flux now for, you know.

for decades to come. So, you know, good luck to people wanting to try and pin down just, you know, just what's happening at any particular point in time. I think it's only ever going to be a snapshot as part of a, you know, a broader film of change and transition.

Crystal Andrews (18:12)

I still want to tease out this idea of the left and right economic spectrum and identification because if those labels have been divorced from that initial meaning, ~

Alex Fein (18:13)

just want to chase outside here.

Crystal Andrews (18:28)

My question immediately is who is doing the divorcing? Who is separating how we understand those labels from that, you know, material economic context to being something social? Bernard, what you were just saying kind of made me think of, you know, in the changing economy that we have now, part of what I think is or what I'm seeing is happening is

recategorization by some people of who is a worker and what like work is what working class means, ~ you know, to be a bit more specific about it, I think from some on the right, again, how useful is that term? I don't know. ~ But would reject the idea that, people who work in offices, whether it's women who work in marketing, or someone who works in a university, that they are not working class, because those are not ~ the

manual, physical labor jobs that have been traditionally associated with a union movement. ~ I kind of see that as playing a big role in this as well, but who is driving that wedge and who's interested is it of divorcing our labels from the actual reality of who works and who, benefits from the output of that work.

Bernard Keane (19:38)

that tendency to kind of say, well, this is a worker and this isn't, or this is a more authentic kind of work and this isn't, is common across both left and the right. So ~ there is also a tendency on the left to sort of see only manual labor jobs or construction or manufacturing jobs as being real jobs and worthy of government assistance versus service jobs

which are much more likely to be feminized and require different kinds of skills and tend not to get as much government support. And that's informed the whole productivity debate. A lot of the productivity debate is about, it's terrible that we have all these care economy jobs because it's a drag on our productivity and they're not real jobs anyway. And we need to find a solution to that as though the growth of the care economy, which has been fundamental to both having an aging population and

having an economy that basically requires both partners in any family to work, how are you gonna support that without a large care economy? So that kind of thinking that it's only a job if you're hammering something or you're fiddling with a lever or you're on an assembly line, it dies pretty hard on both the left and the right. Who's driving this? I think voters have driven it. I mean, particularly after the pandemic.

I mean, first it was Trump in the US as a reaction against neoliberalism, but then the pandemic really, really set it in and politicians have reacted to it. So the Biden administration came in, said, you know, bloody hell, we better try and address these things that drove Trump getting elected. So they launched a massive program of government interventionism, same thing with Labour here with Albanese. And then on the weekend, Andrew Hasty says, well, you know, we're not

No one's going to reward us for doing a last stand in defense of neoliberalism. So politicians have finally worked, major party politicians finally worked out that, you know, what voters want is a much more active government, you know, delivering effective services rather than this, you know, the old rhetoric of small and efficient governments got to get out of the way and let the markets rip. That's, I don't think anyone really pedals that anymore, except, you know, Angus Taylor, I think would love to.

because that's who he is as a Howard-era liberal. But even the Howard government was never really about that. yeah, look, voters have led this and politicians have followed in their wake, desperately trying to work out what's gonna keep them politically relevant.

Crystal Andrews (22:00)

At his core.

Alex, do you have thoughts on this?

Alex Fein (22:18)

Yeah, we're in an economic environment in which jobs that had been considered middle class, like teaching and nursing, now require a side gig. They have to do delivery driving in order to make ends meet. And if you can't sustain yourself from

like a full-time teaching or nursing position. I mean, what does working class actually mean? Like we've got, I think they don't necessarily have the language for it, the participants that I speak to, but they certainly get it that there's like a capital class and then there's a labor class. So there are the people who are very, very lucky and own assets and then there's everybody else. And

Part of the asset owning class is also the big corporations. it was the strangest thing ~ last week. I was just, I was annoyed about having to spend a lot of money on something. And I was thinking, it feels like the big corporations just tip me upside down and shake me until my pockets are completely empty. And then I got on with my day, had a group and in the group there was a woman who said that,

almost verbatim. And I thought, wow, that's unusual. ~ But that pervasive feeling of the gap between those who are okay and those who are petrified because they are really not far from destitution and they're exhausted.

They don't have the bandwidth to be thinking about left and right. Even they're thinking about survival. There we have people in the groups who are sleeping in cars like it is dire and there is no I can't see any sense of urgency from anyone in the political class around this. You've got some people in parliament who are saying

good things about needing to increase JobSeeker and other payments and that sort of thing. And that's great. But in terms of the sense of urgency that ordinary people feel, that's not being met in a way that speaks to people that feels believable or realistic or like that matches the enormity of the task in front of us.

Crystal Andrews (25:11)

in these groups, is there much unification is the wrong word, but like a coming together of people who think very differently about ~ the policy settings and solutions to what these

problems might be around those ideas? finding that common ground in the group, or is it still quite divided in terms of what people think is the solution to that problem?

Alex Fein (25:36)

There's, I don't see any division in terms of policy settings whatsoever. Where I see the division is between people who have the bandwidth to be thinking about it versus the people who are just trying to survive. So an important example is you'll often find Gen X people who have memories of what life was like before kind of wholesale privatization.

Crystal Andrews (25:40)

Yeah, right.

Alex Fein (26:07)

and they will rant about how we need to put ~ public goods back into public hands. And then other people who had not had the wherewithal to be thinking about it at all will go, God, what would happen if we took profit out of care or profit out of energy or whatever it is that's been privatized? So I wrote that.

piece about polarization being a myth because it's this almost non-existent minority that thinks the market can be trusted to do anything for the greater good.

Bernard Keane (26:46)

think that the issue of age is really important because one of the recurring features of looking at the polling breakdowns is that one nation voters tend to be very strongly Gen X. ~ Baby boomers are much more rusted onto the major parties for whatever reason. ~ But Gen X in particular is most likely to kind of break free of that major party dynamic and back one nation. I think a lot of that's to do with

with education, but I also think literally memory plays a big role. These are people, and I'm one of them, you know, I'm 58, who are old enough to remember. I grew up in the seventies and early eighties. I can distinctly remember Australia before the Hawke-Keding era. And, you know, all its positives and negatives, and believe me, there were a lot of ~ negatives, but I can still remember the feel and...

you know, because I was such a, you know, incredible nerd when I was a child, I can still remember some of the political debates and public policy debates. ~ And they were, you know, the tenor of them was so different. And, you know, it doesn't surprise me the people of my age and older can think back to that time and think, ~ you know, things were different and better then and we all do that. We all have rose tinted glasses about the past, but

I think if you are being screwed over by the existing system and you haven't got the skills to prosper, and maybe you don't even have the skills to grasp and understand the systemic issues that you're dealing with. Nonetheless, you it doesn't need any skills to remember ~ that things

seem to work better and differently, or at least, you your dad or your granddad had things, ~ you know, things worked better for them.

than they do for you now. ~ know, it's a company and I call it nostalgia and I've referred to the nostalgia, right? That's probably a little bit unfair because it's not just nostalgia, it is informed by something I think that is real. You know, it's not entirely an invented past, some of it's invented. But I think there is also a sense that a more precarious market oriented profit driven ~ economy

~ in doing so we've kind of, it's the old cliché. It's, know, it's a cliché about knowing, you know, the price of everything and the value of nothing. That's that something's been lost and that sense of something's been lost. And maybe people can't quite articulate what that something is in a way that would satisfy, you know, your rational economic mind of people like me, but nonetheless, that sense of something's been lost is I think a really powerful feeling. And if you're, yeah, if you're below 40,

Alex Fein (29:30)

100%.

Bernard Keane (29:34)

your kind of understanding, think of what's been lost might be a bit different than if you can remember. ~ Back when Malcolm Fraser was prime minister and, know.

Alex Fein (29:44)

But there's still

a shared sense. Even if the younger people don't have that memory, people still across cohorts talk about the loss of community connection. There is this, again, pervasive sense of loss. people still, even if they're young, will have older people in their lives telling them about

like how it used to be possible for someone working in a factory to own a house and then go on a couple of holidays every year. And these things are unthinkable now. Like who's working in factories to begin with? like, right? Like, yeah. And so the sense that we've lost something is everywhere because

Bernard Keane (30:28)

or own a weekender, you know?

Alex Fein (30:40)

You know, the promise of neoliberalism is that we could all have a lot of stuff very, very cheaply. And we can have like all the little things off Tmoo, ~ ridiculously cheap prices, but then the big things that determine whether we live or die like health care, like whether we have a roof over our heads or whether we can, you know, get our kids a decent education so that they can make a life for themselves. The big things that cost proper money that need

something a bit socialized around them. Like they're increasingly unaffordable or inaccessible.

Bernard Keane (31:19)

You can't buy security off Amazon. It's something that's forged, you know, one day after another and costs a lot and needs the input of, it needs a public good dimension that's no longer there and deliberately no longer there because the point is greater precarity and competition ~ and therefore greater rewards. And if you're not getting those rewards, then...

Alex Fein (31:22)

Right?

That's it.

Bernard Keane (31:48)

Yeah, you're one step away. You're one bad medical event away from living in your car.

Alex Fein (31:57)

Exactly.

Crystal Andrews (31:59)

It's funny, I think one of the first pieces I wrote for Crikey, possibly actually before I started working for Crikey, ~ was about the Nemesis series on ABC about sort of the events that led up to Scott Morrison's prime ministership and just generally how millennials and people younger than that.

Alex Fein (32:01)

Peace.

Crystal Andrews (32:20)

~ are less optimistic about politics and about Australia in general, because I think as you are both saying, ~ we don't...

have the experience of, a better, more secure, more comfortable life. there's a much more nihilistic view than perhaps of older generations who have a sense of, of what was possible and what was real and, you know, the, the material difference in a life that was once lived. That's also, I think, something that came up a little bit in the feedback to the crikey series around this BK from, from readers.

that part of the difficulty in like the collapse of these left right labels and just how we conceive of politics in Australia has sort of come from the shifting of the Overton window overall to the right, particularly the movement of labor and the policies that labor champions to the right, driven in no small part by Australia's, know, major media outlets having quite a uniformly, I would say, conservative editorial outlook.

~ But nonetheless, they feel that some of the confusion is coming from the fact that we've traditionally spoken of Labour as a party of the centre-left if we could just accept that they now occupy the centre-right and that these labels are of

labels of relativity as opposed to being absolute labels of position that that would like fix the problems that we're trying that you know that we have in these conversations. Wanted to put that both to you and see how that feedback sort of felt. Do you think there's some truth to that perspective?

Bernard Keane (33:50)

Yeah, I think calling Labour centre-left or centre-right is pretty meaningless now. It's a managerialist party under Anthony Albanese. ~ And, you know, without being a dewy-eyed Keatingite, I'd contrast that with ~ the Keating government in particular, not in terms of ideology, because if anything, the Keating ideological programme was in some ways to the right of this government, in many ways to the right of this government.

But in terms of it being not managerialist, that was about change. was about driving change as quickly as possible. Keating once said to me, know, his approach to to government was you get elected for three years, you've got three years to drive as much change as possible. Then you worry about getting reelected. But for him, the change was the key thing. This is about this is a government that's about, hey, let's make sure we get reelected in three years time. So let's manage things.

as effectively as possible, rather than undertake the kinds of systemic reform that might actually ~ lead to some sort of economic restructuring. ~ And just to shift away from the economy for a second, mean, that's most obvious in relation to foreign policy, ~ where, you I don't know what more evidence you need that Australia's traditional reliance on the United States is now a deeply risky strategy. ~ And

Alex Fein (35:14)

Hmm.

Bernard Keane (35:17)

The risks already manifesting themselves. It's not just a question of risk anymore. And yet the government seems wedded to the idea of just sticking to business as usual. I like to use the phrase business as usual about Anthony Albanese because that's what he is. In normal times, he might be a perfectly good prime minister. He's not a prime minister, I think, if you can lead when there are systemic challenges occurring, which there are domestically, politically, economically, and in terms of...

of foreign policy. the labels about center left and center right are kind of, ~ they don't add to our capacity to really understand or meaningfully discuss and analyze this government. ~ And they don't really work for talking about, they work for talking about some people in the opposition. They don't work for talking about Andrew Hastie. They don't work for talking about Barnaby

Joyce. They might have certain very, know, quite right-wing positions, particularly on social issues.

Alex Fein (36:08)

Yeah.

Bernard Keane (36:14)

But economically, you know, they are located somewhere quite different and ~ in some cases to the left of labor. So, you know, again, we come back to that this as a, if you're to use a shorthand, does it, question is, does it actually help and analyze and does it help us discuss what's going on? And I think decreasingly left and right is a useful kind of ~ shorthand, you know,

and not just because of what's going on on one side, it's what's going on on the other side and in the middle as well.

Alex Fein (36:47)

I reckon the Overton window is really important here because there's been a shift. The Overton window of the ruling class, if you kind of put the political class, the media class and the administrative class all in one bucket, the Overton window has shifted right there. And then you've got everybody else in the country and the Overton window has shifted.

Crystal Andrews (37:06)

Mm-hmm.

Alex Fein (37:16)

far, far left there. ~ Young people generally will be also progressive socially, but taking the social stuff out of it economically, far left. And this gap, like the two overton windows that are so far apart, what that's resulted in is this, people talk about, you know, the...

Crystal Andrews (37:36)

Hmm.

Alex Fein (37:43)

decreasing trust in institutions. I'm not saying decreasing trust in institutions. I'm saying collapse, complete collapse in faith that our democracy can deliver anything that is going to benefit ordinary people. It is a terrifying thing to watch every night. ~ This is abject hopelessness. It's not cynicism. It's not anything. This is qualitatively different from what I've seen in previous years. ~

something really big needs to happen if people's faith in democracy is going to be restored. And if there's any one message that I could kind of deliver to people in positions of power who actually do care about the greater good, about people's faith in democracy, about any of this stuff, it's that if you do not do something really big,

that speaks to people in the language that they speak because there's also a completely different language being spoken by the ruling class versus everybody else. The things that the ruling class are interested in are not the things that ordinary people are interested in. So until you speak their language about the things that really matter to them, these big life and death issues, then I see quite dark things, but also

You can see how things could get really, really good really, really quickly if this stuff were harnessed properly by people on the progressive side of politics. That's why I said at the end of that piece that whoever harnesses this properly on the progressive side is going to be unstoppable. They're going to be cemented in there.

Crystal Andrews (39:25)

And to clarify, you mean sort of the economic populist ~ framing of the policies or of the ideas, I should say.

Alex Fein (39:34)

Yeah,

and I almost don't like the term economic populist because, you know, very serious people go, well, that's not very serious. Talking about like really rigorous evidence based stuff that works in other parts of the world to make people stand of living good. And the funniest thing in the groups is like.

when people go, oh, no, don't think that could be possible. You know, it'd be lovely, but that couldn't be possible. And then someone pipes up and says, yeah, but they do it in Norway. And the second someone says no, it's like the magic where, oh, everything's possible. then, you know, the possibility that

people don't have to live in this state of constant desperation and increasing desperation. ~ People get that confidence knowing that it's been done somewhere else before, that there's evidence-based policy that can be implemented. There is rigorous work that's been done that shows how we can do this without problematic, unintended consequences. And so when we talk about economic populism,

It feels like we're diminishing the seriousness and also the scale of what needs to be done.

Bernard Keane (40:51)

Yeah, I think the word populist comes with so much baggage that it's not, ~ unless you're actually applying it to, I like to apply it to someone like Trump who is literally, but the avatar of and portrays himself as the avatar of white male resentment. That's when the leader is kind of just this organic kind of.

projection or at least that's the argument, projection of a massive people. I'm very happy to use the term then. But when we start talking about, well, what's an economic populist policy, ~ you get into difficult territory very, very quickly because you're very rapidly talking about stuff that ~ a lot of governments around the world are doing right now that don't fit that particular label.

Just on the Overton window, mean, ~ one of the things that fascinates me about what's been going on in the US is that, ~ clearly we saw this sort of dramatic reversal on abortion rights in the US. So, you know, basically back to pre-Roe and Wade. ~ But if you look at another issue, ~ marriage equality, ~

something weird happened with the overdue window on that in America, which is now that it's literally off the agenda. ~ think Clarence Thomas in the decision reversing realm way left open the way to reverse marriage equality and all the other justices, including the ones Trump appointed kind of all rushed to say, no, no, we're not going to reinterpret the constitution to take that away. And even Trump said,

Alex Fein (42:20)
Yeah.

Bernard Keane (42:48)
You know, it's done and dusted. Now, why did that happen with marriage equality? But we've seen such dramatic reversals elsewhere. That's got a lot to do, I think, with, you know, questions around power it's like club ability. mean, who's club-able, who's not, ~ you know, who, who fits in our conception of, you know, who's, who's appropriate and who is not.

Alex Fein (43:02)
That's it.

Bernard Keane (43:08)
But it also demonstrates that things can actually shift, you know, really rapidly. So even in Australia, 10 years ago, marriage equality was a heavily contested issue. now it's vanished. it might be, might be an obsession with a tiny handful of people, but it's kind of just disappeared off the agenda. So, yeah, I raised that to kind of make the point that over the windows can kind of shift.

much more rapidly than we think. And they're not as cemented in place to labor the window metaphor as they seem to be because, know, the old thing about, you know, things happen gradually then suddenly. I mean, I think there is an element of that to ~ some of the issues that we're talking about where ~ something that was way off the agenda a few years ago is suddenly possible and all of a sudden it's policy. ~

Alex Fein (43:36)
Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Bernard Kean (44:01)

I

mean, I remember saying we saw a really concertina version of that during the pandemic when you first think, know, Morrison government goes from saying, Hey, we've got a budget. We got a budget backing imbalance to, we might provide a bit of help to, you know, job keeper and a hundred plus billion dollar deficit from a conservative government. So, you know, these, these windows can shift sometimes very, very quickly. And

know, things can actually get done that were seen improbable at the very least before then.

Alex Fein (44:36)

I remember reading at the time someone, some very witty person, I can't remember who said, you know, everyone's a Keynesian in a foxhole. Like, they're in the foxhole.

Bernard Keane (44:45)

Yes, yes, who

said that? that came into the financial crisis.

Alex Fein (44:50)

Yeah. Yeah.

Crystal Andrews (44:53)

I'll

find the reference and I'll put it in the show notes. So we're all, so we're very, very well referenced. Look, as much as I am loathe to cut off this discussion here, run flat out of time. I think to end it, I'd still like to ask each of you what you think the takeaway from, you know, from this episode and the discussion that we've just had for the average person listening, who yeah, is probably

following politics a little bit more closely than, you know, maybe their peers or their neighbors. But if there is a takeaway from this discussion about how they should be viewing the political landscape we have before us, would you like for that to be? Alex, let's start with you.

Alex Fein (45:37)

that I think because of that gap that I was talking about between people with power and everybody else, that we're going to need to start thinking again about how to organize. We've organized in the past. ~ We've kind of lost a lot of that muscle memory and we've got sort of all sorts of structural things that militate against organizing now ~ in terms of

time and money, poverty, bandwidth, but also the attentional poverty that we've got because of this horrendous information ecosystem that we're all trying to survive in. But even with those obstacles, we have so much in common, us ordinary people, and we need to start making what we want because

you know, almost all of us want the same stuff, visible to people in positions of power to counter the sectional interests that have been writing the rules up till now.

Crystal Andrews (46:45)

Bernard?

Bernard Keane (46:46)

~ just to kind of stick with the overarching of labels. my suggestion would be we, we focus on using labels when they help us understand things. ~ but oftentimes labels, detract from our capacity to understand. And that's pretty manifest in the extent to which, you know, people

people these days and I'm not looking at you crikey readers, but ~ like cheerleading rather than analysis. Good idea, good policy ideas can come from anywhere. And ~ if you're prepared to dismiss ideas just because of the label that's hanging off them, then you're not doing any, you're not thinking, you're just cheering or booing. And...

the extent to which as a polity, we can amass good ideas and action them, ~ you know, is really important and is undermined when we just use labels as a way of blocking people out. just noticed I got quite a bit of grief for saying,

positive things, not positive things, but saying Andrew Hastie was a really interesting politician. I'm sure that I would disagree. Yeah, I'm sure I disagree with 90 % of the things that Andrew Hastie believes on public policy, but that's not to say he's not an interesting political figure. And that's not to say that he's incapable of injecting interesting ideas into the political debate. And if your view is well, ~ you know,

Crystal Andrews (48:04)

You did indeed.

Bernard Keane (48:29)

he is X and Y and Z and therefore is automatically not worth considering. That's not how a democratic party does business. And that's certainly not how an effective party does business. That's just a way to guarantee that we all just are stuck inside our own little, we all circle the wagons around ourselves and yell abuse at everyone outside that. So ~ yeah, let's...

Let's use labels when they help us, not when they hinder us. And maybe that can be, that's one tiny part of the process of having a better public policy process in Australia.

Crystal Andrews (49:04)

really good food for thought from everything that both of you have shared today. Thank you so much for your time. has been, like I said, a fantastic conversation.

Bernard Keane (49:14)

No worries.

Alex Fein (49:15)

Thanks so much.