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# 'Freedom' on the road to ruin. An Australian apology to America's freedom-loving hard right

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# 'Freedom' on the road to ruin. An Australian apology to America's freedom-loving hard right

***L. A. Duhs***

**Abstract:** Contemporary America faces dep-seated problems – not least because so many Americans have lost respect for their own electoral system and democratic institutions. America suffers too from unrelenting right-wing hyperbole in respect of significant social issues, including their conviction that only they understand, and value, freedom. Because of Australia's restrictive responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis – a potential Presidential candidate - denigrates Australia as 'not a free country; not a free country at all'.

Australians may dismiss Governor DeSantis's comments as laughable, but a chorus of hard right comments in support of his view invites a comparison of the different ways in which 'freedom' is understood in Republican America and in Australia. One consequence of DeSantis's conception of 'freedom' is the extraordinary American death rate from the Covid-19 pandemic, which in the case of Florida – which DeSantis celebrates as the 'free-est State' – stood at about 48 times the Australian rate when he scorned Australia as indistinguishable from communist China.

The roots of America's present malaise are to be found in the evolving (mis)understandings of a set of keywords including 'freedom', 'democracy', 'tyranny', 'individualism', and 'society'. The understanding of these keywords has now been impoverished by the radical right, and the Australian pandemic response was in fact designed to give freedom *from* the 'freedom' that the Republican right now eulogises. This paper therefore aspires to show that economic philosophy needs to be apprehended not only in terms of theoretical discourse, but also in terms of the ways in which its practical consequences are currently being manifested.

**Keywords:** freedom, democracy, pandemic responses, tyranny, radical right, radical philosophical re-interpretations.

## Introduction

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis recently distinguished himself by denying that there was any clear difference anymore between Australia and communist China. DeSantis bemoaned the 2020-21 pandemic lockdowns and mandatory mask wearing that then typified the Australian response to Covid-19, concluding that it is a 'fact' that you can no longer call Australia a free country. Conservative Senator Ted Cruz followed up by expressing his sadness that things could have been allowed to go so badly off the rails in Australia. For them, and evidently for millions of other Republicans, Australia had sacrificed its status as a freedom-loving country (just) to fight a pandemic.

What they expose, however, is not how badly things have slipped off the rails in Australia, but how badly things have slipped off the rails in the USA. Understandings of such keywords as freedom, democracy, tyranny, individualism, and equality have been allowed to become ever narrower in the USA, to the point where Republicans, including DeSantis, now condemn a well-functioning democracy as a tyranny, while simultaneously failing to condemn dangerously tyrannical attacks on democratic institutions in their own country. They have now gone close to presenting democracy as tyranny, and tyranny as democracy. Concerned Republicans should be praying for America, not Australia.

In a September 2021 speech in Tampa – as reported in *The New Daily* (Daniel 2021; DeSantis 2021b) – Governor DeSantis directed attention to what was then happening in Australia. His outrage drove him not only to lampoon Australia's health-conscious response to the pandemic, but also to claim

> '…that the [American and Australian] approaches are so polarised that a continued relationship between the US and Australia should be questioned. That's not a free country. It's not a free country at all,' he told a crowd at an event in Tampa.
>
> 'In fact, I wonder why we would still have the same diplomatic relations when they're doing that.'
>
> 'Is Australia freer than communist China right now? I don't know. The fact that that's even a question tells you something has gone dramatically off the rails with some of this stuff.'

These are demonstrable absurdities. In congratulating himself for his 'live and let live' – or in fact 'let die' – approach to the pandemic, DeSantis made clear his anti-Fauci, anti-lockdown stance, and asked in a rhetorical, self-congratulatory, way, 'hasn't Florida done better because of it?' He declared Florida to be the free-est State, and boasted that 'we kept the State open, and that was great'. He neglected to add that the pandemic death rate in Florida was then running at about 48 times the Australian rate, which, in itself, wasn't 'great' at all. His approach certainly didn't expand the freedoms of the tens of thousands who died prematurely.

In apparent seriousness, Governor DeSantis wondered out loud whether the successful Australian response to the pandemic rendered Australian policy so tyrannical, and so close to communist Chinese authoritarianism, that America should perhaps break off diplomatic relations with Australia. Such extremism apparently gets him celebrated as a rising star of the Republican Party, and a possible contender for the Presidency at a future election. From an Australian perspective, however, and even from the perspective of the intellectual foundations of *conservative* thought, the DeSantis understanding of freedom is simply more right wing, than right.

With increasing willingness, the descent down the slippery slope to such extremism has been embraced by the American hard right. One right wing commentator (Candace Owens) outdoes even DeSantis by asking 'when do we invade Australia and free an oppressed people who are suffering under a totalitarian regime?' (Armitage 2021) However ludicrous it may seem, her view encourages the US to put boots on the ground in Australia, because Australians chose to accept that the defence of individual freedom required the defence of 'the other guy's freedom' too.

## 'Freedom' in pandemics

On the whole, Australians were staggered by the incompetent and erratic approach of the Trump administration, whereby it was variously declared that the pandemic was 'fake news', that covid was just like a dose of the flu, and that anointed quack cures were both magical and sufficient.

Australian governments, on the other hand, pursued an approach of 'go hard, go early', to keep people alive. *Well after restrictive safety measures were introduced* following the advent of the pandemic, 'go hard, go early' governments in both Western Australia and Queensland were rewarded in subsequent elections with *increased* voter support, when both were comfortably re-elected. In the WA election (13 March 2021), the incumbent Labor Party (Democrat) government secured a huge swing in its favour, and achieved a crushing victory, winning 53 of 59 seats. A No Mandatory Vaccine Party did contest that election but was shunned by voters and polled only 1.3% of the vote. Governor DeSantis apparently manages to interpret this lack of support for the No Mandatory Vaccine Party as evidence of 'tyranny' in Australia, rather than as evidence of a well-functioning democracy making clear what its electors demanded from government. New Zealand did essentially the same. The Ardern Government (Labor/Democrat) was also easily re-elected in October 2020, in popular appreciation of its efforts to contain the Covid-19 virus in order to keep the community safe. In Queensland too, the incumbent Labor Party was comfortably returned with 52 of 93 seats, at the election on 31 October, 2020. Though DeSantis purports to find signs of tyranny here, those who look will find signs only of democracy at work. As for Victoria, where Australian lockdowns have been most severe, the Andrews Labor government does not contest re-election until November, 2022. In November 2021, however, a vocal minority there became increasingly hostile to further lockdowns – having experienced many – but contemporary opinion polls nonetheless had the Andrews Government tracking well for support at the next election (Roy Morgan 2022).

Individual 'freedom' is clearly understood in Australia in a way which differs from that of Governor DeSantis and America's radical right. Notwithstanding their extraordinary perorations, it is the Australian understanding, rather than the American Radical Right's understanding, which conforms better to the foundations of orthodox conservative theory, as to when individual freedom may legitimately be constrained. At the roots of classical liberalism and conservative philosophy, individual freedom was celebrated as the notion of leaving individuals free to do whatever they like, *so long as they don't impede the freedom of others to do what they like*. Where more freedom for Person A meant less freedom for Person B, individual freedom was accordingly constrained by

that trade-off. Recognition of this limitation on individual freedom is associated with nineteenth century philosopher John Stuart Mill, and latter-day icons of conservatism, including Milton Friedman, have readily conceded this J.S. Mill limitation on individual rights. Alongside Adam Smith, Friedman willingly endorsed J.S. Mill as a second father of capitalism and free enterprise, and in applauding both Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and *The Declaration of Independence*, both of which were published in 1776, Friedman (1980, p. 20, quoting from Mill's *On Liberty*) approvingly added J.S. Mill's dictum that 'The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.' He further noted (1980, p. 9) that his earlier 1962 *Capitalism and Freedom* 'offered no hard and fast line how far it is appropriate to use government to accomplish jointly what it is difficult or impossible for us to accomplish separately through strictly voluntary exchange.' For Friedman, advantages and disadvantages must be weighed, and it is plainly arguable that he would neither have joined DeSantis in his self-congratulation, nor condemned as 'unfree' the popularly supported restrictions introduced in Australia. A person infected with Covid-19 is an obvious threat to the life and well-being of others, thereby bringing a pandemic within the ambit of circumstances in which power can rightfully be exercised 'to prevent harm to others'. Yet the contemporary DeSantis/Cruz/radical right understanding of 'freedom' blithely denudes itself of any recognition of the limits placed on individual freedom by this need to preserve the freedoms of others, and by doing so in the pandemic context it has thereby imposed literally deadly implications on the broader community. To DeSantis this is 'freedom', but even to more traditional conservatives it is something more akin to culpable negligence causing death. At the least, it is a circumstance in which 'harm to others' needs to be carefully weighed in the balance, in order to conserve the conservative principles at the root of capitalist economics.

In the pandemic context, Australians self-restricted their daily freedoms, but they entered into this in acceptance that individual freedom never means unconditional freedom to do whatever an individual likes, being always constrained by the extent to which it impedes the freedom of others. Even in Florida this remains demonstrable, insofar as there is universal acceptance of

the need for road safety laws pertaining to speed limits, driver licensing, and drink driving. Individual drivers are *not* free to do as they like on the roads and may indeed be jailed for breaching road safety laws, which are obviously designed to keep everyone else safe. Likewise, in the context of free speech laws, defamation laws and sedition laws limit free speech (see Wermiel 2017). Despite this acceptance of the need for these mandated limitations on individual freedoms, America's radical right affects to be outraged when others raise the precisely analogous situation regarding a pandemic. Australians – if not America's enraged Trump supporters – accept that individuals should *not* simply be free to infect others with a deadly disease. That is not a 'civil liberty' worthy of respect (Stiglitz 2021, section 3.1). Disagreement must be expected as to exactly where to draw the line, but Friedman's view, like J.S. Mill's, is that to ban mask mandates, vaccine mandates, lockdowns and the like – in order 'to keep the state free, DeSantis-style' – plainly fails to recognise the need to apply one of the founding principles of conservatism. Bluntly put, limiting individual rights in defence of the freedoms of others *is* acceptable – and indeed normal – even for traditional conservatives.

When individual freedoms are *interdependent,* just saying 'we want people to be free to make their own choices' simply doesn't suffice. Afterall, if *you* choose to smoke in a crowded restaurant, *I simply can't choose* to breathe clean air. Trade-offs cannot be avoided. In Thomas Jefferson's words (1819), anticipating Mill, liberty properly understood is not just unobstructed action according to our will: 'but rightful liberty is unobstructed action according to our will, within the limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others.'

Moreover, not only do the voices of the hard right refuse to legitimise the use of legislative power to provide health protections in a pandemic – despite their legitimacy in foundational conservative thought – they hypocritically fail to legitimise their own electoral system, even when no court has been able to find fault with it, and they refuse to endorse/certify the democratic election of President Joe Biden. In neither context do they seek to conserve what conservatives have traditionally sought to conserve. They are unwilling themselves to see their own institutions of democracy as the guardians of American freedoms – yet *they* profess to be worried about freedom and democracy in Australia, where restrictions on individual liberty were self-

imposed through democratic process. That isn't merely astonishing, it is alarming, and reflects a fundamental loss of philosophical understanding. In *not* speaking out in condemnation of abuses of the American electoral system, American conservatives have become confused as to what principle it is they want to conserve, other than partisan advantage. Milton Friedman is probably the twentieth century's most celebrated defender of individual freedom, but for just such reasons he would be highly unlikely to be an unabashed supporter of DeSantis, or Cruz, or Trump, or of the contemporary radical right. He is most unlikely to have agreed with The Republican Party National Committee's proclamation that the January 6 insurrection at The Capitol was nothing more than 'legitimate political discourse'. In February 2022, even Republican leader Mitch McConnell condemned that notion, deeming the events of January 6 instead to be 'violent insurrection' (Kapur 2022).

In the USA, the federal government responded to the pandemic not with a 'go hard, go early' policy, but with a 'don't go at all' policy, since the Trump Administration wanted to portray the pandemic as 'fake news' (apparently in fear of what might happen to stock market indexes prior to the 2020 presidential election). Moreover, to the American radical right, inability to present any credible evidence of voter fraud is no barrier to maintaining the pretence that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump. Yet it is Australia, not America, that they claim now displays the inclination to tyranny. Simply because Australian voters supported a lockdown approach which gave priority to preserving lives, DeSantis and the hard right condemn Australia as 'not free', and even tyrannical, and effectively indistinguishable from communist China. In Australia, if not in DeSantis's Florida, individuals voted to preserve the (interdependent) freedoms of others (especially the freedom to stay alive), despite the consequent need to suffer personal inconveniences. To claim that Florida retained greater freedoms than Australia is not even a moot point, and according to the most ardent Australian lockdown supporters – and the most determined supporters of 'freedom' as defined at the foundations of conservative thought – that notion is self-evidently wrong.

The Covid pandemic result which DeSantis celebrated as a self-evident Florida success 'in America's free-est state', in fact had taken the lives of 58,143 Floridians by 19 October 2021. The equivalent figure for Australia was 1,148 (on

11 October) (New York Times 2021). At about the time of DeSantis's Tampa speech, this resulted in a death rate in Florida over 48 times the Australian rate, after allowance for population differences. Since Florida's death rate was about 23% higher than the USA national average, the death rate in the USA as a whole was then some 39 times the Australian rate (New York Times 2021). DeSantis exercised his freedom not to mention these comparisons to his target audience. Nor did he mention that in Brazil, where the pandemic death rate was about 27% higher than the US rate – and close to Florida's rate – a Brazilian congressional panel recommended that far right President Jair Bolsonaro should face charges for 'crimes against humanity', because of his reckless handling of the pandemic response (Williams 2021). If DeSantis did follow Friedman's procedure of weighing the advantages and disadvantages of a laissez-faire approach relative to an interventionist one, he forgot to put anything in the disadvantages column, despite the incontrovertible evidence of tens of thousands of avoidable deaths.

In an extraordinary reversal of a well-established conservative principle – readily endorsed by such founders of traditional conservative philosophy as Jefferson, Mill, and Friedman – DeSantis now wilfully identifies a demonstrated allegiance to the traditional J.S. Mill understanding of freedom which stands at the base of capitalist economics, as a sign of autocracy indistinguishable from communist China. That is nothing less than a *perversion* of traditional conservative thought and is quite absurd. It is also costly to Republicans, insofar as one consequence of this newly dominant Republican re-definition of 'freedom' is that vaccine resistance is highest in Republican States and counties, and that is where Covid-19 death rates are highest (Leonhardt 2021). Indeed, as noted by Glenza in March 2022, 'By another metric, Florida would have the worst death rate in the world if it were a country'.

It seems that the radical right now finds a need for such extremism in what might be viewed as a re-imagining of the Hotelling location model in economics. Economic theory once held that two ice cream sellers on a beach would end up locating quite close to each other in the middle, in order for neither to alienate themselves from the middle-ground buyer. Likewise, political states run on two-party lines were assumed to be similarly given to a need to converge towards the median voter. Under Presidents Clinton and Obama, for example, the

Democratic Party moved right, as it showed increasing deference to wealth and power, and to free trade theory – without accommodations for blue collar workers whose jobs were lost to globalisation. It thereby lost the allegiance of a large part of its traditional working-class base, and then compounded that in the global financial crisis of 2008-10, as it rescued Wall St, but not homeowners. As Reich (2021) quite reasonably adds, the present malaise is not all about the culture wars, but reflects the way the Democrats themselves paved the way for resentment of their own economic policies: 'What happens when you combine freer trade, shrinking unions, Wall Street bailouts, growing corporate power and the abandonment of campaign finance reform? You shift political and economic power to the wealthy and you shaft the working class'.

Trumpian 'tribalism', however, then reversed this centrist approach. By moving *away from* the middle ground and by promoting extremism at the far-right end of the voter distribution (e.g., via ever narrower celebrations of 'freedom') the Trump approach is to reveal elections to be still winnable even with minority support, provided two other things happen. First, impassioned supporters can then be further enraged by claims of 'election theft', so that they disproportionately flock to the polls. Secondly, if election rules are 'rigged' – for example in sympathetic Republican States (as critics object is now happening in the USA) – it can be made more difficult for likely non-sympathisers to actually cast their votes for the 'other' (non-Republican) candidate (Levine 2022a). These three elements can be manipulated into an election winning majority, even when the 'other' candidate is preferred by more people.

The price of this is that political tribalism becomes ever more deeply entrenched, and in Kuhnian terms the two contending tribes simply come to 'talk past' one another as tribal loyalty displaces national cohesion. Common support for *national democratic institutions* dissipates, and national unity unwinds, leaving America on a slippery slope, as Freedom House (2021c) suggests it now is (also Reich 2022).

## Measured Freedom Indices

DeSantis and Cruz should be embarrassed by the extravagance of their remarks, given that various measured Freedom Indexes invariably rank Australia as a

freer country than the USA. The Heritage Foundation *2021 Index of Economic Freedom* ranked Australia the 3rd freest economy in the world, as of March 2021, comfortably ahead of the USA which it ranked 20th. China was ranked far behind both, at 107th of 160 countries. In the 2022 Heritage Index, both Australia and the USA slipped in the rankings, respectively to 12th and 25th, with China at 158/177. DeSantis's hyperbole can find no support here.

Moreover, the Cato Institute *Human Freedom Index 2020* ranked Australia 5th, again outranking the USA (17th), with China ranked 129th. This index reflected 76 specific indicators, which saw Australia's score rise marginally from 2019 to 2020, while the US score retreated a little. In 2022, Cato's HFI ranked Australia and the USA respectively as 8th and 15th, with China at 150th. DeSantis didn't refer to facts like these, but when toying with comparisons of Australia to communist China he did invent his own facts by adding '*the fact* that that's even a question [as to whether Australia is freer than communist China]….' (DeSantis 2021b) (italics added) tells us much. DeSantis's 'fact' was never a fact, however, except for him and for any radical right supporters who prefer 'ideological facts' to empirical ones. Further data reflective of health responses during the pandemic years will become available in 2023.

A third freedom index is provided by Freedom House's (2021a; 2021c) *Freedom in the World 2020* index. It scored Australia at 97/100 (8th), again well ahead of the USA at 83/100 (58th). This US score of 83/100 was a new low for US ranking amongst the world's democracies, and the margin favouring Australia steadily rose after 2009 when Australia outscored the US 96-94. The US score fell 11 points 2009-2020, in reflection of unequal treatment of minorities, increased polarisation, and the damaging influence of money in politics. DeSantis and Cruz exercised their freedom to disregard these facts too. In 2022, Freedom House left this US score unchanged at 83/100, while Australia's score slipped to 95/100. While Freedom House (2021b) expresses concern that authoritarianism is on the rise globally, it cautions humility in the context of the USA itself (2020) since 'The United States itself is under significant pressure, having recorded declines in major indices tracking democracy over successive years.' Indeed, Freedom House (2021c) describes American democracy as being in a 'parlous state', given that 'Attacks on long-standing democratic norms, including former president Trump's effort to overturn the last election with unfounded claims of widespread

electoral fraud, which fomented the mob attack on the Capitol, have damaged America's standing around the globe' (2021b, p. 9). US democracy is further challenged by issues of racial tension, justice equality, and space for critical dissent, alongside growing inequalities and the political and economic crises exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Freedom House 2021b, pp. 8-11).

Australians are simply disbelieving that a sitting President could seek to undermine the integrity of his own country's electoral system and democratic institutions and do so without penalty. They are equally disbelieving that in 2019-20 a sitting US President could scornfully dismiss a major pandemic as 'fake news', while promoting quack cures. Much of the world remains incredulous that after Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential election, a selection of Republican States, including Florida, could proceed to introduce 'corrective' electoral reforms to solve a problem they did not have. For their part, many Australians are as enraged by Trump, DeSantis, Cruz and the antics of the radical right, as the latter purport to be by the functionings of Australian democracy.

While the Australian State governments that swiftly followed a pandemic response policy of 'go hard, go early', were duly re-elected, there were of course dissidents. It is nonetheless a palpable absurdity for DeSantis and Republican extremists to pretend that this is 'tyranny', or 'unfreedom'. Regrettably, the hard right's understanding of democracy is that Australian voters should have known that they had the freedom to endorse the policies favoured by the radical right, but their supposed freedom to endorse some *other* policy remained subject to 'correction' by Republican extremists. Both in this context, and elsewhere, de Tocqueville (1835) would have found cause to worry about 'the tyranny of the majority', and its potential threat to American democracy.

## Other domains in which approaches in Florida and Australia conspicuously differ

Again, using contemporary Florida as representative of the broader Republican Party perspective, three other significant domains with implications for individual freedom are noteworthy. They relate to designing the rules for conducting democratic elections; to gun laws; and to matters related to the death

penalty. In all three areas Australian policies have long differed from those in Florida, and in much of America.

In respect of the matter of organising elections and determining voter eligibility, Australian procedure is to use an Electoral Commission independent of the government of the day to draw up electoral boundaries. Even *after* some recent reforms in Florida, re-districting there remains in the hands of the legislature (as in some other US states too). Indeed, an Arizona bill went further and 'reformed' the law such that the legislature may 'revoke the secretary of state's issuance or certification of a presidential elector's certificate of election' by a simple majority vote (Kagan 2021). Kagan adds that in at least 16 States, Republican legislatures are giving themselves greater control over the election certification process.

As seen by the rest of the world, Republican governments in various American States have 'reformed' their voting procedures in partisan ways since Trump's defeat in 2020. Rules for the next Presidential election in 2024 will not be as they were in 2020, and critics are dismayed at what they see as calculated attempts in Republican States to disenfranchise minority voters in order to secure a partisan advantage for Republicans. In May 2021, Florida Governor DeSantis signed into law new voting restrictions, which critics object *reduce* voting access (especially for less advantaged voters less likely to vote Republican), in what is a critical battleground State. They object that voters of colour will be disproportionately disadvantaged by limiting the use of drop boxes where absentee ballots can be dropped (Hassan 2021), as it is commonly more difficult for them to cast votes during normal workday hours. Supporters of the law claim this was necessary to guard against voter fraud – of which there was no credible evidence in the 2020 election – while critics see it as partisan meddling in what should be democratic procedures designed to give *all* eligible voters equal access to the freedom to record their political preferences. Contemporary advocates of the rights of minorities warn that the courts need to protect those rights by reversing efforts by majority voters to terminate the rights of an unpopular minority. Just as the radical right has now narrowed – or inverted – the meaning of 'freedom', the meaning of 'democracy' too is now strained (Freedom House 2022, pp. 3-9).

Australians could be expected to contend that their electoral and democratic freedoms are better protected than those in Florida or Arizona. Nonetheless, Australia's Morrison Government (2019-22) also countenanced moves to introduce Republican-style restrictive voter ID laws, despite the fact that the Australian Electoral Commission reported only 'vanishingly small' evidence of any voter fraud at the 2019 federal election (Blake 2022). As recently as 2015, however, the Florida Supreme Court found that Florida's Senate and Congressional district maps were intentionally drawn to favour Republicans. In consequence, redistricting in 2021 was supposed to happen under new rules meant to prevent partisan gerrymandering, but given Republican control of both houses of congress and the Governor's office, doubters still worried that Republicans were positioned to benefit themselves. When the legislature is in control of redistricting, the party with the numbers in the House can simply adjust electoral boundaries to its own advantage. And in the wake of Florida's April 2022 re-districting maps, critics concluded that 'Democracy in Florida is not functioning' (Levine 2022b). Indeed, in May 2022, a Florida judge ruled the boundaries recently drawn by Governor DeSantis to be unconstitutional (Levine 2022a).

California, on the other hand, has introduced distinctly different redistricting rules, closer to Australian arrangements. Its redistricting decisions have been removed from the hands of the legislature and returned to its citizens. California found no cause to introduce restrictions on voter access, and its Citizens Redistricting Commission (2021) has accepted greater obligation to put electoral integrity first and minimize partisan 'games'. Iowa too – which, unlike California, is Republican governed – has significant input from a non-partisan advisory body (*Tallahassee Democrat* 2021).

Well may we ask whether Florida/America is freer, or Australia. Freedom House (2021a; 2022) answers that question by noting 'an unsteady beacon of freedom in the United States'. It cites pressures on electoral integrity and judicial independence in America, adding that savage rhetorical attacks on the press and on the rule of law further undermine America's standing. It ruefully adds that the Trump impeachment process did little beyond 'reinforcing the impression on both sides that elected representatives were placing partisan loyalty above the national interest and the constitution'.

In respect of the second matter listed above, regarding gun laws, the Gun Violence Archive says that a total of some 700 people were killed in the USA in 2021 in mass shootings (defined as involving at least four victims). The counterpart figure for Australia is zero (see also *Wikipedia* 2021). America and Australia have very different gun laws and respond very differently to mass shootings. In 1996, an almost unique event occurred in Port Arthur, Tasmania, when 35 were killed, following which the Australian government engaged in a gun buy-back program, to make access to weapons that much harder (National Museum Australia 2022). This plainly would not happen in America, but the fact is that mass shootings are very rare in Australia, and effectively ceased after strict new gun laws (banning semi-automatic weapons etc) were introduced after 1996. In the 25 years since the Port Arthur massacre there have been just three mass shooting incidents in Australia, two of which were domestic violence incidents on individual properties. In the USA in 2021, the Gun Violence Archive adds that a total of 44,926 lives were lost to gun violence, up from something over 40,000 (including suicides) in 2020.

A particularly sensitive aspect of debates over gun control laws relates to school shootings, again highlighted in May 2022 by the Uvalde, Texas case, in which 21 were fatally shot. Over 1,369 school shootings have occurred in the USA since 1970. As of 2019, California (158) and Texas (133) headed the list of states with most school shootings, with Florida listed third (90). In Australia, in the three decades since 1991, the total number of deaths involved in school shootings (including universities) appears to be 3 (resulting from 6 events) (World Population Review 2022).

The third area of difference nominated above relates to use of the death penalty, which is a dead letter in Australia, but certainly not in America. Although about half the US States still maintain provision for the death penalty, most executions in fact emanate from just four States, including Texas and Florida (Death Penalty Information Centre, DPIC 2013, p. 4). In fact, since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976, a majority of state executions have sprung from 'just 15% of the counties in the U.S'. DPIC (2013, p. 2) notes that 85% of US counties had not had a single execution in over 45 years, and that even in Florida a 2016 poll found that a 'strong majority' of Florida voters supported life without parole over

the death penalty, albeit the Florida Government has declined to follow other states in abolishing capital punishment.

Florida currently has 343 inmates on death row and has executed 99 prisoners since 1976 (DPIC 2021a; 2021b). It holds the unenviable record of having exonerated more wrongfully convicted prisoners from death row (30) than any other state, and in December 2016, a retiring (African American) Florida Supreme Court Justice objected to 'the still discriminatory nature of capital justice in Florida' (Amnesty International 2017). Justice James Perry objected to the 'bitter reality that the death penalty is applied in a biased and discriminatory fashion, even today' (Amnesty International 2017, p16). Since 85% of US counties had not had a single execution in over 45 years, DPIC (2013, p. 3) is pained to note that death sentences in America depend more on the location of the county line than on the severity of the crime. In fact, just 2% of the counties in the US (of which four are in Florida) have accounted for the majority of executions since 1976, leaving DPIC (2013, p. 2) to protest further that since capital punishment cases are exceptionally expensive, especially when appellate costs are considered, these high costs 'are mainly triggered by the small set of counties that impose most death sentences and are largely subsidized by state and federal taxpayers ...' In short, the few counties that aggressively use the death penalty are high-cost counties that 'do not shoulder their own burdens, but instead shift the costs to every taxpayer, many of whom are unaware of the exorbitant costs or the unfavourable record of reversals and unfairness.' In some measure, voters in even those states that have abolished the death penalty are thereby deprived of the freedom to completely wash their hands of a connection to it. Moreover, application of the death penalty in some jurisdictions has not even required a unanimous jury vote. Until 2016, only a 7-5 vote was required in Pinellas County, Florida (where DPIC also adds that defence lawyer work was often deemed poor), until a Florida Supreme Court decision mandated a unanimous jury recommendation in 2016. That decision was itself overturned in 2020, however, in what a dissenting judge described as 'a giant step backwards' (Mahoney 2020).

No executions have been conducted in Australia since 1967.

To speak of the rule of law is one thing, but the institutional details of just how the law is applied matter greatly, especially to the mentally challenged in Pinellas County, for example. Execution of the mentally vulnerable hardly makes Florida 'freer' than Australia. Beyond that, there is too the contentious issue of felony disenfranchisement. Overall, as of 2020, 5.2 million Americans were deprived of voting rights because of State felony disenfranchisement policies. Nationally, the rate of disenfranchisement was 6.3% for African Americans, 2% for Latinx, and 1.6% for whites (The Sentencing Project 2021), but in Florida's case some 15.42% of the voting age Black population is estimated to be disenfranchised on felony conviction grounds (Britannica ProCon.org 2021). In 2020, Florida's state-wide felony disenfranchisement rate was estimated to be 7.69% of the total voting age population (1.32 million voters), which placed it behind only Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee (Britannica ProCon.org 2021). Wikipedia (2022) estimates a still higher figure, including 774,000 disenfranchised only because of outstanding financial obligations: 'Many of these disenfranchised felons are African Americans and presumed, if they were to vote, to be Democratic voters.' The Sentencing Project (2020) finds that Florida is one of seven States in which more than one in seven African-Americans is disenfranchised, at a rate exceeding twice the national average. It concludes that 'Florida…remains the nation's disenfranchisement leader in absolute numbers, with over 1.1 million people currently banned from voting – often because they cannot afford to pay court-ordered monetary sanctions or because the state is not obligated to tell them the amount of their sanction'.

## Definitions of individual freedom

Two points are obvious. The first is that the definition of 'freedom' accepted in Australia is different from the one currently dominant in Republican America. The second is that the definition of 'freedom' now so forcefully advocated by the American radical right departs significantly from their own conservative philosophical underpinnings of accepting that allowance should be made for the fact that the freedom choices made by one person have significant implications for the freedom choices left available for others. Respect for J.S. Mill's dictum that 'individual freedom [should be respected] until it impedes the freedom of others' has been obliterated, and acceptance of even that limitation is now

perversely projected by the right as something akin to communist autocracy, rather than as a foundation stone of capitalist economics. Bluntly put, the word 'freedom' has been weaponised, and – contrary to the foundational influences of Jefferson (1819), Lincoln (1838), Mill (1859) and Friedman (1980) – the acceptability of *any* limitation on it has been forcibly expunged from consciousness, as if the acceptance of any restriction constitutes treason.

It is against the background of this contemporary re-definition of the word 'freedom' that Governor DeSantis can apparently allow himself to say publicly that he really believes that the distinction between Australia and Communist China has become blurred. He says Australian governments impose lockdowns, social distancing and mandatory mask wearing, and, accordingly, he says you can't call Australia a free country. He says this without embarrassment, and without displaying awareness of the (many) nuances of the word 'freedom' (see Cooke 1973). He is able to successfully peddle what are laughable 'facts' despite the fact that the Australian governments which acted to ameliorate the health ravages of the pandemic did so with democratic support. The 'facts' he reports about Australia, however, should not be thought of as merely risible, since in real world political contexts they provide a perverse illusion that it is the radical right that is holding ground against a collapse of society's most cherished values.

Why then does such a narrow re-definition of 'freedom' meet the needs of today's radical right? A possible answer is that for too long economic debate has been too narrowly focussed on economic efficiency and economic growth, with equity or distributional matters treated as an afterthought. Inequality has grown much greater in recent decades, however, mainly insofar as the very rich have become even richer, leaving many of the non-affluent to become disaffected with 'establishment' platitudes. To the disgruntled, therefore, it seems that much social 'success' celebrated in the name of efficiency and GDP growth, was little more than a veil over their lack of participation in that success. It therefore seems to the contemporary radical right that obligation to oneself has become absolute, while obligation to the community (including protection of the freedoms of others) has become not just redundant, but anathema.

Other social issues add fuel to this fire. For example, conscription was abolished in the USA in 1973 when free market economist Milton Friedman helped persuade

the country to move to an all-volunteer army. Friedman claimed that this would improve efficiency in providing military services (Friedman 1981) – but to the disaffected, this may now seem to have been less a concern to improve military efficiency than a ruse to redistribute the risks of military service away from the rich, at the perhaps lethal expense of the relatively poor. Abolition of conscription meant that the rich no longer had to take their turn standing in front of bullets, since military defence could now be left to the relatively impecunious (and ethnic minorities) who accepted those risks in exchange for a somewhat elevated pay rate, as they defended the property of the rich. The wealthy were thereby freed to use the poor as cannon fodder, and insofar as this is true, the contemporary disaffection of many ex-Democrat voters should be no surprise.

Also complementing this growing perception that the relatively poor were inconsequential, were tax cuts that disproportionately favoured the rich, and rises in remuneration rates for corporate executives which saw their incomes rise to extraordinary multiples of average payrates. A perceived demonstration of a growing power imbalance between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' tilled the ground for rising social dissension, and institutions which were once seen to embody a social contract fell into disrespect – evidently including even the electoral system, and the sanctity of the Capitol. In this context, people accepted with increasing willingness that 'freedom' must be defined in a purely individualistic way, without obligation to community, since community was perceived to have demonstrated no obligation to them.

Some 180 years ago, a different mood prevailed. Abraham Lincoln (1838) counselled that nations do not die from invasion, but from internal rottenness. His concern was not that America would be destroyed from the outside, but from failed allegiance to its own founding principles: 'As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide'. Lincoln was emphatic that 'There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law', and that while passion informed the Revolution, passions would become the enemy in future, as attachment to founding principles inevitably faded over time. He berated the notion of allowing passions to overrule cold, sober reason, and counselled that a threat to the perpetuation of America's political institutions would eventually arise with the appearance of a person or persons of towering ambition for whom their craved distinction would be indifferent as to whether those institutions

were built up or torn down. At that point it will be the duty to posterity of all Americans to frustrate the designs of such a man by uniting in attachment to their government and their laws. Otherwise, said Lincoln, the 'fair fabric' of political life which was the fondest hope of freedom lovers for the previous half century would be imperilled.

Lincoln's words could be read as a prescient anticipation of the contemporary divisions stirred up by Trump's 'big lie' about theft of the 2020 election, and the risks posed by the Radical Right's migration away from respect for traditional economic philosophy, and its understanding of freedom and democracy. History tells us that Lincoln plainly cast a broad view of freedom which required it to be applied to *all* people – including those who had been slaves – and the threat that agitated him was not one of mandatory mask wearing and such like, but the threat that comes from towering ambition unrestrained by respect for well-established laws and principles.

Few could believe that Lincoln would hold truck with the radical right of the contemporary Republican Party, or that he would have granted individuals the freedom to infect others with a deadly disease.

Today however, in an effort to claim radical right 'purity' by insisting that mandatory mask wearing or vaccine mandates are seen as intolerable left wing over-reach – rather than as the embodiment of a foundational conservative understanding of 'freedom' properly respectful of the freedoms of others – DeSantis sued the Biden Administration in late October 2021 over a vaccine mandate announced in September for federal contractors (Clark 2021). Ten other Republican states quickly followed. In Florida, DeSantis banned businesses from requiring proof of vaccination, and prohibited mask mandates. Respect for the J.S. Mill limitation on individual choice was not rebutted, just ignored. Indeed, it has been surreptitiously *reversed*. Only *unrestrained* individual free choice is now tolerated – except of course insofar as specific limitations have already been institutionalised in respect of road safety laws and defamation laws – and those entrenched restraints on individual freedoms are evidently best left unmentioned. Astonishingly, *those who adhere to the traditional foundations of conservative thought on individual freedom are now effectively dismissed as dangerous interventionists.* Presumably that goes for Friedman too. Krugman

and other opponents of the radical right of course have no problem with vaccine mandates and see no need to waste time rebutting claims that requiring workers to be vaccinated is an assault on liberty, since in Krugman's paraphrase (2021b; 2021a) of J.S. Mill: 'Sorry, but freedom doesn't mean having the right to expose other people to a potentially deadly disease'.

One of the nuances of the word 'freedom' is that there is a clear difference between 'freedom *from'* restraints and 'freedom *to do'* specific things (Sen 1999; Duhs 2008; Collignon 2018). Australians (and New Zealanders) don't accept that individuals should have the freedom to pass deadly illnesses on to others. Indeed, they want *freedom from* that particular freedom. To the US hard right, that apparently remains incomprehensible, and DeSantis and his supporters remain happier to give the unfortunate victims of community transmission the freedom to die premature deaths. Australians – and others with a reasoned understanding of the limitations on individual freedom when individual freedoms are interdependent – would not see a radical right society as having greater freedoms than their own. They would instead conclude that a radical right society simply has a less nuanced understanding of just what meaningful freedom really entails.

All three quantified freedom indexes cited above confirm that position. Australia did of course experience protests about lockdowns, but on the whole, most citizens accepted that certain restrictions on individual freedoms were needed in the pandemic – a la Thomas Jefferson, J.S. Mill and Milton Friedman – in the interests of preserving the freedoms of others. In late 2021, however, a vocal minority, especially in Melbourne, where lockdowns had been most restrictive, became more hostile to continuation of those restrictions, and Premiers in Victoria and Western Australia (WA) reported receiving death threats. Majority support for the pandemic restrictions nonetheless appeared to hold firm in Victoria, as elsewhere. And in May 2022 that appeared confirmed by the results of the federal election, in which the lockdown-imposing Labor-governed states of both Victoria and WA helped federal Labor achieve a decisive swing to victory.

Americans/Floridians certainly have some freedoms that Australians lack. As noted, they have greater freedom to die premature deaths in this pandemic, for example. As of 26 May, 2022, 74,466 had died in Florida, versus 8,374 in Australia

(where the population is 21% higher) (New York Times 2022). They also have greater freedom to carry concealed weapons, or automatic weapons, and to use them in school shootings, which the American right can tolerate, even though they can't tolerate mandatory mask wearing during a pandemic. They have greater freedom to engage in partisan manipulation of election boundaries, given that in about half the 50 US states re-districting allows legislatures to dominate, and doesn't even require independent electoral commissions. Moreover, in the US justice system, police are free to lie to suspects during interrogations (Macdowell Law Group P.C. 2022). That is not legal in Australia, NZ, or the UK, and as far as is known, no other country wants that freedom. Again, within the US justice system, the State sometimes actually pays jailhouse 'snitches' for giving evidence against others – who may be, and sometimes are, innocent. This may happen even when the 'snitch' evidence is subsequently proved to be false (Innocence Project 2019). A land of individual enterprise should scarcely be surprised by the 'initiative' shown by those 'snitches' who provide false evidence against others in response to the prospect of personal reward. Unsurprisingly, other justice systems see this as a tactic too problematic to endorse.

In the context of racism, however, it must be conceded that even if racist attitudes are more deeply entrenched in the USA, Australian prisons too are disproportionately home to the black indigenous population. In *both* the USA and Australia, black minorities are disaffected by the way freedom *appears to them* to be disproportionately constrained in *their* circumstances.

Three final oddities are worth noting. Governor DeSantis's 2020 clean waterways legislation (2021a) sees it as reasonable to use government intervention to protect Florida's waterways and *physical* environment, but not to use analogous protective interventions to protect Florida's *human* environment. Secondly, despite its willingness to accept a huge death rate from the pandemic, Florida has not joined California, DC, New Jersey, and other states which have legalised voluntary assisted dying (euthanasia). Thirdly, DeSantis has introduced some mandates of his own, in banning some books from Florida schools, and in restricting ways in which schools can teach racial history (Milbank 2022).

Conclusions similar to the above are also reached by Collignon in his treatment of various theoretical dimensions of economic philosophy. In objecting to what might be called 'conservative authoritarianism', he protests that when negative liberty is understood as freedom to act as one wishes – along the lines now proclaimed by DeSantis and the Republican right – the externalities of individual actions inevitably interfere with the lives and liberties of others, implying that 'Powerful individuals push less powerful individuals to lower utility levels'. Collignon (2018, pp. 57-58) ends his consideration of the interdependence of positive and negative liberties by concluding that 'It is the paradox of neoliberalism that by scaling back the democratic state and therefore minimizing positive liberty, it is also reducing negative liberty'. Adding even more emphasis to this understanding, Collignon (2018, p. 39) endorses an Isaiah Berlin implication that (unreserved) belief in negative freedom is compatible with generating 'great and lasting social evils', such that neoliberal over-emphasis on negative freedom may well have distorted the project of modern liberty, both by ignoring the norm of equality and by stifling positive freedom.

We may well ask 'Is there *any* measure by which contemporary America can be deemed a freer country than Australia?' With the broad support of their respective populations, Australian (and NZ) governments took restrictive pandemic control measures in 2020 and 2021, leaving the people inconvenienced, yet generally supportive. Rather than feel chastened themselves, many Australians weep for America, as it splinters into civil disunity and political tribalism – largely because so many Americans no longer respect their own philosophical foundations, or agree on what 'freedom', 'democracy', and 'tyranny' mean. In the hands of the radical right, President Joe Biden is now deemed an 'illegitimate President', despite winning an election described by electoral authorities as perhaps the cleanest ever. The winner of the 2020 election is portrayed as a 'tyrant', more especially because he then uses his 'illegitimate' office to introduce vaccine mandates and such like, while the loser of that 2020 election is looked to as the defender of democracy and 'freedom'. To coin a popular American phrase, 'go figure'.

Americans, or at least Republican Americans, have re-defined not only 'freedom', but also 'democracy' and 'tyranny' too. To boot, they have also re-ordered *the place of reason relative to emotion* in political debate.

## Australia's pandemic response policy – a second iteration

From the start of the pandemic Australia adopted a health-first policy, featuring mandatory mask wearing, social distancing, and recurrent lockdowns when deemed necessary in the interests of community safety. While the community waited for vaccines to become available, and for vaccination rates to become high enough to offer 'herd immunity', these restrictive measures were quite readily accepted as necessary – but by December 2021, nearly two years into the pandemic – Australia's vaccination rate for over 16s had reached 80% (Leigh 2021). The federal government and some State governments were therefore eager to see relaxation of the earlier mandated rules, which no longer seemed as necessary. Mandated masks and social distancing requirements were therefore lifted, but the outcome did not really proceed as hoped. The omicron variant took hold, the infection rate grew exponentially, and there was a sudden spike in the Australian death rate, such that by February 2022 Florida's death rate had fallen to (merely?) 17.8 times the Australian rate (from 48 times that rate some five months earlier). By 26 May, 2022, that ratio then dropped to 10.77, as Australian pandemic deaths spiked from 1,148 in October 2021 to 8,374, notwithstanding that the Florida death rate remained about 14% above the American national average (New York Times 2022). Hindsight implied that Australia's earlier mandated restrictions were removed too precipitately, given that a more gradual removal of those mandates could have allowed better health preparations to be made, especially in the aged care sector. Critics complained too that the ready availability of Rapid Antigen Tests had not been ensured before the earlier rules were relaxed.

During this process, the West Australian government remained an outlier, however, and kept its borders closed as it continued to give first priority to the protection of community health. By early 2022, only 10 deaths had been recorded in WA since the pandemic began, at a death rate little above zero (0.000003749), making Florida's then death rate some 827 times higher than West Australia's. Presumably an uptick in the WA rate was to be expected when they finally removed restrictions, but by then triple vaccination would be widespread. WA border restrictions were relaxed on 3 March, 2022, after being maintained for about two years, and by 20 May, 2022 the WA death toll had risen to 215 (Rintoul 2022).

American hyperbole denouncing a 'horrifying Australian attack on civil liberties' reflects misunderstanding and ideological dogmas, e.g., on Fox News (Armitage 2021), not a reasoned understanding of reality (Duhs 2006; 2009; 1998). Extremists make themselves look silly by comparing vaccine mandates to Nazi medical experiments, or by denouncing 'medical tyranny'. It is probable that conservative icons such as Milton Friedman would have supported the essence of the Australian response to the pandemic, and its implicit defence of 'freedom meaningfully understood'. Nonetheless, two years is a long time to live with restrictions, and in Australia too, minority 'pro-freedom' protests gained traction (Bardham 2022), and had the potential to influence the outcome of the federal election on May 21, 2022. The actual outcome of that election, however, saw the biggest swing against Australia's conservative Morrison Government in West Australia, where State Labor government border closures and lockdowns had been the most restrictive. In Victoria too, where recurrent lockdowns had been imposed, conservative federal politicians lost what were once 'safe' seats. Candidates who touted anti-mandate, 'pro-freedom' platforms did not prosper.

## Conclusions

The first and most obvious conclusion is that Governor DeSantis's comparisons of Australia to communist China are nothing more than risible ideological nonsense. More importantly, the American radical right has lost sight of what it is that conservatives themselves traditionally have sought to conserve. They have narrowed the definition of freedom until it dispenses altogether with the J.S. Mill dictum that individuals should be free to do as they please *only so long as they don't impede the freedom of others to do as they please*. In fact, Governor DeSantis has introduced a new law in Florida whereby any business seeking to protect its workforce by imposing a vaccine mandate on its own staff can now (November, 2021) be fined for doing so. This doesn't merely *disregard* the traditional J.S. Mill stricture regarding the limits on an individual's freedom, but *positively reverses* it. In effect, it is now *illegal* in Florida to act in recognition of Mill's stricture that in exercising individual freedom one needs always to account for what that is doing to the freedoms of others.

For American society, such changes at the hands of the radical right are nothing short of revolutionary (see also Rubin 2021). Moreover, the hard right's

conception of democracy too has been radically narrowed to something like 'one person, one vote', as against 'one person, one vote, one vote one value, at polling booths equally accessible to all'.

DeSantis's extremism evidently sells well to his home base but given the palpable absurdity of his statements about Australia 'as not a free country at all' in comparison with the USA, that is a matter for regret. Australian responses to the Covid pandemic have been far more successful than Florida's in saving lives, and most Australians would offer no more than a wry smile in response to DeSantis's fevered imaginings. In what is apparently another appeal to his home base, DeSantis announced in March 2022 that Florida will be the first State to recommend *against* vaccinating healthy children. A chorus of medical experts immediately denounced this move as irresponsible and dangerous, predicting the needless loss of more lives, more especially since the proportion of children fully vaccinated in Florida in mid-January 2022, was only 13.1%. Nationally, the US rate for children aged 5-11 was higher, but was a still low 18.8% (Montgomery 2022). Medical experts objected that such further undermining of public confidence in vaccines was sadly counter-productive in a country then nudging one million pandemic deaths (Glenza 2022).

DeSantis and the hard right to the contrary, most Australians would be unsurprised that measured freedom indices consistently rank Australia above the USA. There is no evidence that most countries want a DeSantis definition of 'freedom'. Nor do they want partisan manipulation of electoral boundaries, in entrenched gerrymanders. Nor do they want American gun laws, which they do not see as promoting freedom. Nor do they want the death penalty. They do not share the view that these things reflect superior 'freedom'. Once vaccination rates approaching 80% of the over 12 years community were surpassed in Australia, strict international travel restrictions were eased, and a return to 'normal life' grew nearer. The task of the Covid restrictions was largely done, even if the easing of regulations from December 15, 2021 was precipitate, and subject to heavy criticism. Whatever the inconveniences suffered by the people, they remained broadly supportive of government-imposed restrictions dedicated to community safety and remained committed to the J.S. Mill definition of individual freedom as being limited by the need to recognise implications for the freedoms of others. To purport otherwise, as DeSantis, Cruz and the radical right

do, is simply to deny reality. In expressing support for these community protections, one Australian Medical Association spokesperson went further and suggested that if individual citizens do have the right to be 'vax deniers', or opponents of mandated mask wearing and other such community protections, they should also agree to debar themselves from subsidised treatment in the public hospital systems, if and when they do contract Covid-19. He asks why should these individuals have the right to impose costs on others, and then also claim a subsidy from them, when that suits?

America would do well to forget DeSantis's fevered comparisons between Australia and China, or *The Federalist's* counterpart claim that Australia 'has effectively become a giant prison for its 26 million residents' (Daniel 2021) and start remembering some actual history. Dominant societies have never stayed ascendant forever. Ancient Rome, for example, was also once a hegemonic state, but it lost its internal cohesion and fell on its own sword. America (or the radical right part of it) now seems hell-bent on doing the same. In Adam Smith's conception of 'the invisible hand', individual self-interest and overall social interest remain integrated. But for the current generation of Republican hardliners, only 'individual liberty' has meaning. Conservative politics and socio-economic policy are no longer based on the traditional endorsement of John Locke, Adam Smith and J.S. Mill, (or on the practices grounded in Jefferson or Lincoln), and for the many Republicans who continue to affirm that Biden is not 'a legitimate President', motivation is drawn not from such principles, but from the self-serving pragmatic affirmation that it is they who are 'the good guys' and the true embodiment of white American Christian Godliness, while it is the Democrats who are 'progressive' to the point of having betrayed 'fundamental' American principles. In effect, their affirmation is of a certain teleological view, which – however contentious – they thought was somehow guaranteed by the 'individual liberty' principles once at the core of the conservative position. They now view that 'guarantee' as all but negated, however, in the absence of their forceful rejection of 'illegitimacy'. Of course, Abraham Lincoln also held a certain teleological vision, but it was not the same as the contemporary hard-right's. He was a Republican President who was prepared to fight a civil war to prevent the shallower prejudices of the many from overwhelming the need to give voice to the Declaration of Independence and its aspiration to give freedom and respect

to *all* Americans, regardless of colour or station. Lincoln's *inclusiveness* has become contemporary Republican *exclusiveness.*

In America today, partisan interest is trumping wholistic societal interest. When a society – or a splintered part of it – starts reifying just component *parts* of its own foundational concepts, social cohesion is in danger of fracturing irreparably. The Republican right would do well to stop pretending that they need to 'save' Australia from democracy and start recognising that they have much bigger problems closer to home. When Republican governments of American States can excite support by nonchalantly perverting the foundational understanding of their own conservative ideology of just what 'freedom' means, it is apparent that the teaching of economic philosophy has been neglected for far too long. They could start dealing with those problems by showing more respect for the philosophical nuances of such keywords as 'freedom', 'democracy', 'tyranny', 'rationality' and 'equality' – and by ensuring that the broader society is reminded of the need to recognise the *practical* importance of their implicit philosophical foundations.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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