Fightback! is not what it appears to be. It is not a liberal document within any of the definitions of liberalism available in the relevant literature. The only way in which it might be understood to be liberal is if neo-liberalism is taken to be non-liberalism; clearly an absurdity. Fightback! is, paradoxically, both conservative and revolutionary. Viewed from the standpoint of one major strand of liberal philosophy—classical Anglo-Scottish liberalism—it is conservative; viewed in relation to the other it is revolutionary.

Classical Anglo-Scottish liberalism originated some time in the 17th century. It was a philosophy of change developed in the face of an existing order. That order was a feudal one. Those people in positions of power held those positions for either of two reasons: because they held title to significant quantities of land—which, in an agrarian economy, is control over the source of wealth—or because they held significant positions in the Church hierarchy. These two groups supported each other.

Within Anglo-Scottish society, however, other groups were emerging as challengers to those who held positions on the basis of the ownership of land or presence in a religious hierarchy. The philosophy referred to as classical liberalism was part of this challenge. In part, the challenge reflected a shift from an agrarian to a trading and, eventually, industrial economy. In part, it reflected the development of a group who held only intellectual capital. However you understand the challenge, it was a challenge. It was a challenge to those who were dominant in society; it was a challenge to position, and it was a challenge to authority.

This is particularly important in the case of land. Land ownership was based upon titles. The way in which land was attained was primarily through inheritance. The classical liberals were not so much concerned with the ownership of land; rather, they were concerned about the acquisition of land and, consequently, social position.

Challenges to dominant orders raise immediate problems. The first and most significant is the problem of chaos. Take away position and you might be left with disorder. Hobbes argued for the use of force to maintain order. Locke argued for the use of reason. The classical economists, of whom Adam Smith was a key figure, had a more interesting solution. In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) Smith did not place his faith in the invisible hand of God as the means of maintaining social order. He placed his faith in the invisible hand of the market.

The beauty of Smith's position was that the market served three functions. First, it was a coordinator of all economic activities in a given society. Second, it was a distributor of goods and services. Third, the market was a distributor of social position. Success in the market was the means for the acquisition of wealth and, consequently, social position. The market rewarded those who understood it and worked effectively within it; those who did not understand it or work effectively received their just rewards (though it was Malthus who drew the ultimate conclusions from these principles).

The consequence of all this was that the classical liberals were oriented to what Berlin has called negative freedom—that is, freedom from interference. If the market mechanism was left free from interference it would serve both to reward those who were worthy and regulate...
economic activity within society. Those who held significant positions by other than economic means would lose their social positions as long as the market, and not inheritance, distributed rewards.

_Fightback!_ looks like a classical liberal document. Government interference is constructed as a problem. Government interference frustrates people and strips them of their abilities to self-direct. The market is represented as a means to allocate and reward properly. People are represented as autonomous actors who are self-interested and have the ability to further those interests in a market situation. But _Fightback!_ is not a challenge to an existing order. It does not acknowledge difference in social position. The only ‘privileged’ group that is given much of a mention is unionists. But somehow it is hard to construct them in the same position as the lords of feudalism.

_Fightback!_ does not indicate a recognition of the transmission of power from generation to generation on the part of its authors. Put simply, they do not address the question of inheritance. _Fightback!_ certainly is not a challenge to the processes of the transmission of position and authority from generation to generation. If such processes do not go on, then _Fightback!_ is not inadequate. If they do, then _Fightback!_ from the standpoint of classic Anglo-Scottish liberalism, is both inadequate and pernicious.

If classical liberalism is taken out of its historical situation and, as a result, stripped of its political significance, then _Fightback!_ might be understood to be a classical liberal document. But to take such a view would require, or at least allow, that _Fightback!_ also be taken out of its historical context. Both moves would be mistakes. In fact, _Fightback!_ looks much more like a conservative document. At best _Fightback!_ will merely serve to entrench the interests of white middle-class men. The distributional impacts on workers, women and migrants will be such as to reinforce their inequitable social positions. If white middle-class men were not a dominant group, then _Fightback!_ would not be a conservative document.

People’s abilities to achieve success within a market framework depend on a number of things. These things might be described as various forms of capital; social, intellectual and economic are probably the most important ones. These forms of capital are not evenly distributed in Australian society. This uneven distribution will not be overcome through individual initiative within a market framework. Those who already possess these forms of capital will be more successful in a market situation. They will be more able, therefore, to maintain their social positions. To take government out of the market will not be to create greater possibilities for justice or freedom.

It will merely serve to enhance the ability of those in dominant social positions to maintain their dominance. This is not true only with respect to the current generation. Given that _Fightback!_ does not address inheritance, we must assume that nothing will be done about it.

So, we are left with a policy package that will serve to facilitate the maintenance of position by those in dominant social positions. We are left also with a policy package that will allow those in dominant social positions to transmit those positions to their offspring—imperfectly, of course, but fairly consistently. It seems like conservatism to me.

But this is not the end of the story. _Fightback!_ is presented as a document of change. And it is. The question then becomes: against what is the federal Coalition fighting back? I think the answer is clear. The Coalition is fighting back against the second strand of liberalism, the liberalism that has been dominant in white Australian politics since federation: revisionist liberalism._ Fightback!_ is a revolutionary document within this Australian liberal tradition.

Conditions in 19th century Britain represented a challenge to those who espoused liberal ideas. The market was failing to deliver benefits to all members of society. Not only were some people a lot better off than others, those others seemed to have little chance to improve their position. Social inequality couldn’t be explained simply in terms of a failure on each individual’s part to adapt their behaviour to the market. Inequality seemed to be, and probably was, systemic. That inequality exists is not a problem for liberalism of any sort. The market will tend to produce inequality—which might otherwise be understood to be a reward for initiative and effort and a punishment for a lack of either or both. But when inequality becomes systemic, a problem arises. In that situation, individuals are not allowed freedom to pursue their own end without hindrance.

To accept the existence of systematically produced inequality is significant. It is to accept that individuals do not emerge fully formed but go through a developmental process. The revisionist liberals basically introduced the idea that individuals underwent formative processes that were not always equal and which tended to cause them to end up in unequal positions in society. The process upon which early revisionists concentrated was usually education.

John Stuart Mill was just one of the liberals who became convinced of the necessity for the provision of an education that was accessible to all. Mill was also sensitive to, and concerned about, the socially-produced inequality of women. Other revisionist liberals such as T H Green were motivated more by what they took to be the
moral indifference of market relations. Christian liberals like Green were appalled by the spiritual poverty of classical liberalism in action.

The first consequence of this revision of liberalism was that the state was given the task of ameliorating certain social problems—those which seemed to have been produced, to a significant extent, by the unregulated, or the not very significantly regulated, market.

Amelioration, however, was not enough. The problems would be bound to recur, or would continue to be reproduced, if something was not done to provide a greater opportunity to those who would, under normal conditions, have had their life chances significantly curtailed by the processes of social reproduction. A minimal education had to be provided for all, for example, if everyone was to have close to an equal chance in life. Physical conditions that caused developmental problems in children also had to be addressed. Many aspects of the welfare state were justified within this philosophical system. Later, Keynesian economics provided an economic justification for state intervention in society. The shift was one that placed more responsibility in the hands of those in government to ensure a real opportunity for all. The freedoms that Berlin has called positive freedom had to be ensured by the state, since they would not emerge from the workings of the free market. Freedom needed to be freedom to pursue ends and attain goals, not simply freedom from government control.

Revisionist liberalism has always been the dominant ideology in white Australia. This has been due to a number of factors. Five come fairly quickly to mind. First, the penal origins of white society meant that government pre-existed white society. Second, the government has always been understood to be a provider of social goods and a facilitator of social development. Third, with the rise of the labour movement the government was seen to have a role to play in the redistribution of wealth. Fourth, agricultural interests have always required support and protection from the government—and have usually been successful in getting it. Fifth, those concerned with the promotion of the position of women within Australian society have often looked to the government for support and action.

The liberalisms of Deakin, Higgins and Menzies were liberalisms of the active state—that is, of the revisionist liberal state. While all of these men were committed to ideas of individual freedom, they were also sensitive to systematically reproduced inequality. To one extent or another, they all tried to do something about it. Menzies was also committed to spiritual values that he felt were superior to those found in market relations and saw education, among other things, as one of the sources of such values. While Australia might not be understood to be an active Christian community, it is still a Christian community and a sense of the significance of the Christian values pervades our society.

I agree with Tim Rowse’s assessment in his classic Australian Liberalism and National Character that the dominant ideology of both of the major party blocs has almost always been revisionist liberalism. Moreover, the principles that have supported the practices of government in Australia have always been revisionist liberal. When Fightback! calls for a new role for government it is a role radically different from that constructed within revisionist liberalism. Effectively, the role for government that Fightback! outlines is really a non-role. In the view of the authors of Fightback! Australians will be forced out of their ‘culture of dependence’. They will be forced to take responsibility for the provision of their own health insurance and retirement. They will be forced to take personal responsibility for their wages and conditions.

The mechanism through which the services that people require will be delivered is, of course, the market. Government provision of services, according to the authors of Fightback! is necessarily inefficient. Market provision is efficient. But market provision will not merely be more efficient, it will also be a spur to individual responsibility. This connection between individual responsibility and the market is used in a very interesting way in Fightback!. The authors of the document make the claim that market-generated responsibility will lead to market-generated morality. An intimate relationship between markets and morality is presented. Markets are understood to require morality and morality is understood to require markets.

Fightback! presents a conception of the role of government that has never before been practised in this country. While Australia has never allowed a particularly extensive role for government compared with, for instance, the European social democracies, neither have we had a theory of government that denies to government anything but a minimal legitimacy. While we have never had big government, neither have we had miniscule government.

Revisionist liberalism might not have been enough to redress the significant, systematically produced inequalities in Australia, but it did address some of the sources of systemic inequality. Fightback! does not. Fightback! is a fightback against the way we have always done things. A new social order, something like the old one, but a lot more unequal, awaits us.

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