

Conservatives hate red tape – unless it’s to regulate the behaviour of their enemies

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It’s easy to understand rightwing Australia once you realise it is defined by interests and not ideas

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‘There is nothing right or wrong, good or bad, efficient or inefficient about regulation.’ Photograph: Image Source/Getty Images

Australia needs more regulation of the banks, more regulation of the aged care sector, more regulation of property developers, more regulation of the mining industry and more regulation of the way we use the water in our rivers. But conservatives are still calling for a reduction of so-called red tape. WTF?

[Hundreds](#) of high-rise buildings in Australia are [clad in the same flammable materials](#) that caused the deaths of [72 people](#) in London’s Grenfell Tower disaster. No “red tape” was there to stop the materials being imported past our “strong borders”. No red tape stopped builders installing it. And no red tape stood in the way of potentially deadly buildings being certified as safe to inhabit before units were sold to unsuspecting families.

Frail elderly people in Australian aged care centres are [physically restrained and overmedicated](#) to make them easier to manage. [The aged care royal commission](#) has found evidence of chronic [understaffing and a lack of training](#) at multiple aged care centres. Malnutrition is not uncommon, nor are bed sores.

Coalmining in Sydney's main water catchment has resulted in [bright-orange water](#) in the tributaries that supply the city's drinking water. And at the same time that [climate change threatens Sydney's water supply](#), subsidence cracks from one coalmine have led to an estimated 1.3bn litres of water being lost from the city's dams. Despite this, Peabody Energy are [seeking to expand](#) their coalmining under the catchment, and the Morrison government is keen to speed up approval processes for new mines.

The [royal commission into banking](#) spent months highlighting how easy it is for powerful institutions to exploit vulnerable Australians. After hearing evidence of the structural and moral weaknesses of Australia's largest financial institutions – including stealing from dead people – Kenneth Hayne made [76 recommendations for more regulation](#). With no weasel words about the need for a regulatory impact statement or cost benefit analysis, the government promised to act on all of Hayne's recommendations.

So, what's going on? How can the government accept the recommendations for the banking sector, yet still declare war on red tape and regulation?

If conservatives were serious about removing red tape Apple wouldn't be able to sue Samsung for making a [smartphone in the shape of a rectangle](#); Adani wouldn't be able to demand that a Wangan and Jagalingou man [Adrian Burragubba, pay them \\$600,000 in legal costs](#); and without regulation, the government's Australian Building and Construction Commission wouldn't be able to charge union officials for [having a cup of tea with a friend](#) at a worksite.

Indeed, conservatives love regulating the behaviour of their enemies. The right to strike is a fundamental human right, enshrined in international law, but no such protection exists in Australia – without permission from a bureaucrat at the Fair Work Commission, that is.

And, if you have an accident at work, there are specific laws that prevent most people from taking their employer to court for damages. While millionaires can get hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages if their feelings get hurt by defamatory statements, if you are permanently disabled in an industrial accident, there are [laws that cap how much compensation you can get](#). And it's a lot less than for the hurt feelings of a millionaire.

Then there's abortion. It is still a [criminal offence for a woman to get an abortion in New South Wales](#). The independent MP Alex Greenwich has [introduced a bill](#) to remove this anachronistic law, but – guess what – a bunch of conservatives think that there is no need to reduce the red tape women endure to access this particular medical procedure.

You would think that those who say the individual is best placed to make their own decisions would champion a woman's right to choose. You would think that those who rage against unnecessary government interference in our lives would be on the side of the liberty of individuals in the battle against oppression by the collective. But no, not in Australia.

The same is evident in Australia's so-called "anti-terror" regulations. According to [George Williams](#), since 2001 successive Australian governments have introduced more anti-terrorism laws than any other country in the world. Indeed, Australia's response to the attacks of 9/11 has been to [create more anti-terrorism laws than the US itself](#).

Why do Australian conservatives obsess about "freeing workers" from collective bargaining so they can be pushed on to individual contracts, but not a woman's right to choose whether to have an abortion?

It's easy to understand rightwing Australia once you realise it is defined by interests and not ideas. By arguing for deregulation in the market-sphere and regulation in the private-sphere, John Howard deregulated the labour market and [regulated who could marry](#); he wanted free trade deals but opposed voluntary euthanasia; he wanted to privatise our national assets but publicly [control a woman's right to choose](#).

There is nothing right or wrong, good or bad, efficient or inefficient about regulation. Different people, in different countries, at different points in time all have different opinions about which regulations are good and which are bad. Conservatives in the US are obsessed with the right of people to own semi-automatic weapons, but in Australia, it was Howard who won the fight to introduce bans on those killing machines.

When powerful people in Australia want more freedom, they demand less regulation – usually on the basis that it will create jobs. But when powerless people want regulations, the powerful resist and claim it will "cost jobs".

Regulations don't create or destroy jobs – they're simply the rules we collectively agree we should all live by – but, as we've seen with the banking, building and aged care sectors, a lack of regulation can destroy lives.

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