Abbott stranded in between fuzzy nostalgia and a pessimistic present


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Tony Abbott began his career as a thoughtful politician. His 2009 book Battlelines is not a brilliant work but it is a notably more coherent and argued expression of a political viewpoint than anything Julia Gillard or Malcolm Turnbull has produced. But as prime minister, Abbott – like Kevin Rudd – was baffled by the responsibilities of government and was overthrown by his colleagues.

Abbott’s Margaret Thatcher Lecture, delivered in London on Tuesday night, provides a fitting epitaph to his government. To compare it to the confidence of Battlelines is to see the contrast between both who Abbott dreamed he was and who he actually was, and between conservative aspirations and reality.

**Policy and legacy**

To Abbott, Thatcher exemplified a dynamic conservatism that sought to do more than just “mind the shop”. Abbott’s argument reminds us that conservatism can be about radical change to return to an imagined past.

Conservatives can be utopians. For the Islamic State terrorist group this is about a literal recreation of a golden age. For Abbott, it is more about a mood.

Abbott pays conventional homage to Thatcher’s domestic policies but his most thrilling Thatcher memory is the 1982 Falklands War. To him this exemplifies a politics of moral clarity.
But Abbott struggles to evoke this politics in the present. His comments on Syria are elusive in the extreme – he hints at a more concerted intervention (boots on the ground?), but cannot actually nerve himself to argue clearly for this. In this he is in good company, as the confusions of US foreign policy demonstrate. But Abbott’s evasions are hardly an advertisement for the magical spirit of “Thatcherism” as a guide to real-world politics.

The gap between ill-defined nostalgic aspiration and mundane reality is apparent in Abbott’s treatment of domestic policy. His modest domestic policy record is dwarfed by Thatcher’s dismantling of socialism. Abbott’s ritual listing of free trade agreements and the trade unions royal commission seems out of place – an exercise in nervous self-congratulation.

Tony Abbott’s lecture in full.

**On immigration**

Casting around for a great cause, Abbott can find only immigration. His approach here reflects his own legacy. He identifies with two competing traditions – political Catholicism and a populist suburban conservatism. The latter’s origins lie in sectarian Protestant suspicion of Catholics and their imagined malign and illiberal hold on the institutions of NSW via the Labor Party from the 1920s to the 1960s.

Abbott’s response to the European refugee crisis reflects more of the latter. He evokes the spectres of “hundreds of millions” of potential immigrants. It is wildly over-egged, but it probably is true that improving living standards outside Europe has lifted aspirations and made emigration more imaginable.

But why oppose immigration and condemn Syrian refugees to an eternity of existence in camps in neighbouring countries? Here Abbott returns to a classically conservative and deeply pessimistic position. Europe’s superiority is, in his view, due to cultural norms built up over centuries, which is now being challenged by “culture-shifting” mass immigration. It is an old argument that recalls the post-second world war elite defence of the White Australia policy as “cultural” rather than “racial”.

This is an interesting position for a politician from Australia, a nation shaped by mass immigration from nations largely without a strong liberal-democratic tradition. For Abbott the basis of his pessimism about contemporary mass immigration is Islam. The contemporary Islamic revival gnaws at his Catholic conservatism the way the fact of Indigenous dispossession gnawed at John Howard’s benign nationalism.

Abbott is careful to stress that “the overwhelming majority of Muslims don’t support terrorism”, but he then argues that:

> … *many still think that death should be the punishment for apostasy.*

Like many conservatives, Abbott shares one notable feature with the Marxist-Leninists and Jacobins.
of the past. Both have a secret pessimism behind their public bravado.

The apparently secure edifices of Western civilisation and the utopias of existing socialism were both seen as desperately fragile. Russian peasants or Syrian refugees were not poor, desperate and frightened survivors but a potential enemy within. One of Stalin’s comrades promised in 1934 to build a state such as the world had never seen. And even in the 1980s, communism gave us the logistic wonder of the Berlin Wall. As Michel Foucault argued, we learn as much about politics from the technologies of government, such as border control, as we do from histories of ideas.

Abbott now calls on European conservatives to build a wall without precedent in its size. But maybe the legacy of Ronald Reagan, with his optimistic call to “tear down this wall”, has more to offer European conservatives.