

POLITICAL RECRUITMENT IN AUSTRALIA

University of Tasmania

Symposium Dinner

Why do we not trust our leaders and politicians?

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Why join a party?

I am old enough to recall when people joined a political party, or sought to run for Parliament, because they had a deep commitment to a cause: it might not have been a popular cause but it was passionately felt: three obvious examples were opposition to the Vietnam War, and to capital punishment, and to the proposed damming of the Gordon-below-Franklin wilderness area for more hydro-electricity. But this view now seems obsolete. The era of conviction politics has gone and been replaced by transactional politics. People now join political parties (not many, about a few) to pursue a career – nice clean work, no heavy lifting.

As a society Australia seems to face a hollowing out of values. We live in the era of retail politics. Politicians no longer ask about a proposition, ‘Is it right? Is it the best thing to do?’ but instead, ‘Will it sell? How can we put a spin on it?’

Just thirty years ago, in 1983, there was a national debate about the proposed damming of the south-west wilderness area of Tasmania for the production of hydroelectricity as against the preservation of Heritage values. As it happened the ALP, led by Bob Hawke, took a strong line, although it was deeply unpopular in Tasmania with members of construction unions. The Coalition was split – Malcolm Fraser was sympathetic to saving the Gordon-below-Franklin wilderness area, but his party was very much committed to States’ rights issues and suspicious of increased Commonwealth powers in the environment. Labor won (although seats were lost in Tasmania), the law was changed, the heritage area was saved, the High Court gave the process a big tick and we moved on. Nobody in politics, even Tasmania, wants the Gordon-below-Franklin wilderness area inundated a new power stations built.

But in 2013 the debate about the future of the Tarkine wilderness area has worked out in a completely different way. ‘Jobs! Jobs! Jobs!’, which could be translated as ‘Votes! Votes! Votes!’, is now the priority and the environment has

fallen off the agenda. There is, I think, no possibility that the Tasmanian dams controversy of 1983 would have had the same outcome in 2013.

Eleven novelties in Government.

Eleven novel elements in our system of Government, not recognised in the Constitution, are of increasing importance in producing (or blocking) national outcomes: Factions, Minders, Spin Doctors, Pollsters, Focus Groups, Lobbyists, Management Consultants, the Media as political players, the Press Gallery, Shock Jocks, Social Media.

Factions – both in Labor and the Coalition – essentially represent a privatisation of politics in which factions operate as executive placement agencies, with semi-feudal allegiances and networking based primarily on interest groups and personalities, less so on policy.

‘Minders’ in the offices of Ministers and Shadow Ministers are an increasingly powerful but unscrutinised and unaccountable element in policy formulation and decision-making. As ‘gatekeepers’, minders may provide important fire-walls of protection for their Ministers, creating the defence of ‘plausible deniability’ (‘Nobody told me about that ...’)

Some Ministers boast that their minders benefit from having no specialist knowledge of specific subject areas, and that detachment is more useful than knowledge or experience.

‘Spin doctors’ have developed the black art of transforming a bad news story so that it looks good (a requirement in Government) and representing good news as bad (the Opposition’s role). Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair’s main spin doctor, emphasised the need for three major news stories every day, to meet the demands of the beast, and that there was little point in going back to revisit yesterday’s story, one just pressed on...

Pollsters, especially Newspoll and the A C Nielsen Poll, have a powerful, sometimes paralysing, influence on how politicians and minders think. When challenged by journalists politicians routinely say, ‘I never comment on polls, the only poll that counts is on election day.’ There is a slight lack of candour in that approach.

Focus groups play a significant role in the trivialisation and evisceration of politics. A small group is invited to sit around a kitchen table and asked, ‘What should be done about refugees?’ If the predominant answer is, ‘Drown them,’

this can have a tremendous impact on Government policy, if Ministers feel impelled to *follow* public opinion (however misinformed) rather than to *lead* it.

Ex-politicians, party officials and bureaucrats join lobbying firms (or casino management) as ‘consultants’ after retirement (sometimes called ‘the revolving door’.) It would be less than human for a Minister contemplating life after politics change not to speculate: ‘Should I show this lobbyist the door, or, three years from now, will I be seeking access to a Minister myself? These transitions have serious implications for transparency and accountability in government.

The great international management consulting firms McKinsey’s (1926), Boston Consulting (1963), KPMG (1987), Deloitte (1989), Ernst & Young (1989), PwC (1998), essentially consolidated and globalised provision of business services which began in the UK and US in the 19th Century. These firms essentially became wings of Government, and policy formulation is often outsourced to them.

Departments contract out important elements of their core business to consultants. A consultant has been defined as somebody to whom you lend your watch, then ask him to tell you the time. Consultants, eager for repeat business, provide government with exactly the answers that they want to receive.

Governments seemed to have difficulty in developing major policies to reform education, so advice was sought externally, from David Gonski and his expert panel. Outsourcing policy formulation can be described as a ‘circuit-breaker’, presumably because of a hope that using high profile non-political panel members would help to protect its recommendations from partisan attack.

The report is outstanding, and I hope it was adopted, but were the resources of government inadequate to think the education crisis through?

Similarly, the Houston Committee on refugee policy was another example of ‘contracting out’.

Newspapers, historically, have often played favourites and can help to make governments, a practice which developed in Britain and the United States over a century again. But there is a striking and, to me, disturbing change in the role of the media. Some outlets, that some chains, especially the Murdoch newspapers, are no longer concentrating on reportage and analysis but are in the advocacy (or entertainment) business, relentlessly, full time. The twin aims are (i) securing regime change and (ii) being perceived as maintaining, or even enhancing, influence. Newspapers are no longer in the reporting business – often their editors see them as players. There is a move away from powerful

investigative reporting, to emphasising opinion, in which columnists become celebrities in their own right I would prefer to see some of them nominate as candidates for election in 2013 – and perhaps they will. At least it would make their ideas contestable. A pro-science story

Parliamentary press galleries tend to adopt ‘group think’ to an excessive degree, seeing the world through the prism (if I can misapply a metaphor from physics) of Parliament House Canberra, or Sydney or Adelaide. Thus, the Prime Minister’s powerful speech about misogyny (9 October 2012) was seen by the Canberra Press Gallery as being solely in the context of Peter Slipper, a view not found anywhere else in the galaxy.

The ‘shock jock’ phenomenon on talk-back radio is the equivalent of social media for the over 50s, now following the U S model (pioneered by Rush Limbaugh) of creating a sense of outrage that listeners are being robbed of the birthright by someone – generally Governments, but especially by refugees, or by Muslims. Shock-jockery, rage-filled, often paranoid and evidence free, appeals, with the significant exception of Victoria, to an ageing but passionately loyal and electorally significant Anglophone demographic, angered at the way history is working out. When ‘shock jocks’ are accused of outrageous distortion this is vigorously assailed as an attack on ‘free speech’.

A voracious media looks for diversity and emotional engagement, requiring three new stories every day, weakening capacity for reflection and serious analysis, compounded by the rise of social media where users, typically, seek reinforcement of their views rather than being challenged by diversity. Social media, with its emphasis on immediacy of response (especially Twitter) may emphasise shallow and non-reflective communication without examination or analysis of data. However, it is clear that social media played a significant role in removing President Mubarak in Egypt in 2011, getting out the vote in the 2012 Presidential election and created international interest in, and approval for, Prime Minister Gillard’s speech on sexism in politics.

A feature by Michael Leunig in *The Age* (Oct 27, 2012) was uncomfortably accurate:

‘Most Read Articles: 1. Nude mum stalks injured footy star, 2. Croc grabs nude model and priest. 3 News reader locked in car boot with porn star. 4. Aussie stripper hurt in quake as stage collapses. 5. ‘Check-out chick spat on me’ – war hero.

‘Least Read Articles: 1. Greenies deported as honeyeater cull begins. 2. Anguished Palestinians plead for help and justice. 3. Grim warning about new child-care drug, 4. Habeas Corpus to go. 5. Botanical Gardens sold to developers.’

Retail politics/ Retail education/ Retail sport/ Retail everything: the collapse of values

What I propose to discuss may seem like a very conservative or traditional view, barely an advance on Montaigne, or even Marcus Aurelius, or even the Gospels, but I am deeply troubled that as 14 September (election day, as if you needed to be reminded) approaches, as a society Australia seems to face a hollowing out of values. We live in the era of retail politics. Politicians no longer ask about a proposition, ‘Is it right? Is it the best thing to do?’ but instead, ‘Will it sell? How can we put a spin on it?’

There is something touchingly anachronistic about the argument that elections should be dominated by the issues that families discuss as they sit around the kitchen table. I suspect that this is now a rare event as adults dash off and young people look yearningly at their iPhones, waiting for them to ring. I wonder when these discussions would take place. Would it be before or after milking the cow?

Ten National (and Global) Priorities

1. We must redefine politics – and grasp its importance, not just at election times. Politics is the fault line between tectonic plates in society and the electoral struggle is an expression of, or a metaphor for, unresolved, often unspoken, divisions within society - race, class, gender, religion, region, language, education, sexuality, consumption patterns and time use, self-definition and the expression of individual differences/ aspirations (both positive and negative), offering a choice between different moral universes. This is the underside of politics. We see only the tip of the iceberg.
2. Managerialism has largely pushed the politics (i.e. ideological commitment and dialectic) out of politics. Generic managers promoted the use of ‘management-speak’, a coded alternative to natural language, only understood by insiders, exactly as George Orwell had predicted. The managerial revolution involves a covert attack on democratic processes because many important decisions are made without public debate, community knowledge or parliamentary scrutiny. Many elected leaders in 2012 are not politicians in the historic sense, who campaign passionately for a set of beliefs/ values and set out to change the world: they are essentially managers or technicians who are process driven and concentrate on how systems work, or interest groups interact, and have little engagement with the history of the nation or the philosophy and

traditions of their party. They reject ideology and promote pragmatism. Political parties are managed by factions, essentially a form of privatisation. Managerialism asserted that relying on specialist knowledge and experience might create serious distortions in policy-making, and that generic managers, usually accountants or economists, would provide a more detached view: accordingly expertise was fragmented with vital decisions being determined by a managerial mindset and experience. Expertise has been 'hollowed out' in many government departments and advice is often sought externally, from management consultants or expert panels. This leads to major weaknesses on policy formulation, compounded by extreme partisanship in political life and media reporting. Universities are no longer just communities of scholars but also trading corporations. The BBC is full of impressively qualified managers, but this does not mean that they have a clue about investigative journalism or how programs are made. Vested interest is almost always more powerful than community interest.

3. Tackling complex problems will demand complex solutions (e.g. refugees, climate change) which cannot be reduced to parroting a few simple slogans ('turn back the boats', 'stop this toxic tax'.) 'Retail politics', sometimes called 'transactional politics', where policies are adopted not because they are right but because they can be sold, is a dangerous development and should be rejected. We must maintain confidence that major problems can be addressed – and act accordingly. Revive the process of dialogue: explain, explain, explain, rejecting mere sloganeering and populism. We need evidence-based policies but often evidence lacks the psychological carrying power generated by appeals to prejudice or fear of disadvantage ('They are robbing you...') A voracious media looks for diversity and emotional engagement, weakening capacity for reflection and serious analysis, compounded by the rise of social media where users, typically, seek reinforcement of their views rather than being challenged by diversity. Social media, with its emphasis on immediacy of response (especially Twitter) may emphasise shallow and non-reflective communication without examination or analysis of data. However, it should be recognised that social media played a significant role in getting out the vote in the 2012 Presidential election and created international interest in, and approval, for Prime Minister Gillard's speech on sexism in politics.
4. Infantilisation of debate, with its emphasis on gross oversimplification, personal politics, tribalism, rejecting the need for an evidentiary base for argument, has become standard practice. We observe appeals to fear, greed and the short-term which deforms and degrades our national

discourse and capacity for self-definition and goal setting. (The phenomenon is common in Australia, the US, the UK and much of Europe). The Parliament must conduct serious, comprehensive, evidence-dependent debates on major issues (refugees, population, water, violence, addiction, foreign policy.) Citizens have a moral responsibility to engage with the political parties that they habitually vote for. Nevertheless, despite an intransigent Opposition and relentless hostility from much of the media, the 'hung Parliament' elected in 2010 has a formidable legislative record (carbon, price, national disability scheme, plain packaging of cigarettes, Minerals Resource Rent Tax, marine parks, infrastructure investment, National Broadband Network.) The refugee/asylum seeker issue is unresolved, and some other issues (human rights, law reform, constitutional change, indigenous affairs) remain contentious and have poisoned the Parliament and turned rational debate into a mirage. Lying and exaggeration have become staples in campaigning and in the media and attempts to demand accountability are rejected as attacks on free speech. (In the US, it was commonplace to assert that Barack Obama was a Muslim, born in Kenya.) There is a disturbing conflict between evidence v. opinion ('You have evidence, but I have strong opinions.') and political processes tend to be driven by opinion rather than evidence in a short political cycle.

5. Scientific method, rational analysis and evaluation of evidence has been a central factor in defining Western society and culture since the 18th Century, and these skills can be/ should be applied to a variety of disciplines – politics, law, economics, social sciences, health. Scientists have come under unprecedented and damaging attacks arising from the climate change controversy. It is essential to distinguish between scientific scepticism (an essential element in the evaluation of evidence) and cynicism (dismissing evidence, however compelling, to promote confusion and inaction.)
6. We should put science and research higher on the political agenda (as medical research already is). Research must be regarded as an investment (positive) not as a cost (negative), while recognising that there will inevitably be failures. Successful outcomes (Bionic ear, Wi-Fi, the Square Kilometre Array, cervical cancer vaccine, research on dark matter and dark energy) have global potential. However, scientific vocations are falling in Australia, and this has important implications for our future economic and scientific capacity. Governments have an obligation to take up and understand the challenges raised by science, reach a national consensus in promoting scientific vocations, encourage investment in science-based products for which there is international demand. Australia

should take a global role in encouraging other major polluters to devise strategies to abate climate change, accept the transition to a post-carbon world, and use its scientific and engineering skills to promote renewable energy capacity, improved energy efficiency, alternative power sources (wind, solar, geothermal) and reduced dependence on fossil fuels.

7. Education for life – not merely to fit the requirements of next year’s labour market – must be a national priority. Education should be recast to emphasise thinking, understanding, analysis, creativity and self-realisation, with less emphasis on pedagogy, following a set of rules to create economic units. This is vital for the Lalor electorate, although contrary to the currently received wisdom. There should be stronger emphasis on science, music, languages, history and philosophy. Use the capacity of IT to expand understanding, examining conflicting or complex ideas and promote personal growth, rather than merely reinforcing the familiar, trivial and immediate, preparing students for a lifetime. Seek access to the masterpiece (despite its complexity and challenge) rather than always settling for the familiar best seller – in all art forms. We need to resolve current confusion between alternate educational models for Australia – split-level, Confucian, American: perhaps Finland and Reggio Emilia (Italy) have more to offer. We should restore universities to being communities of scholars, rather than trading corporations.
8. Distinguish between population policy and immigration practice. Recognise that, given Australia’s geography and our urban tradition of huge, dispersed cities, each additional million in population will have serious impacts on the environment and social networks. We could accommodate additional population but only if we change behaviour and give things up (high energy consumption, car based cities, damaging the biota.) Rethink Australia’s use of premium water, and create infrastructure to promote water re-cycling for industry and sewerage. Make appropriate policy responses to dramatic increases in longevity.
9. Recalibrate Australia’s foreign policy, asserting our priority to be an honest broker in resolving international or regional conflicts and tackling global issues such as the loss of sustainability, water and food security rather than being automatically co-opted as a military participant in coalitions for the more-or-less willing. We need to sign a peace treaty in ‘the history wars’, redefine patriotism and distinguish it from military sacrifice. Should we be celebrating Antarctica with Mawson (ceremonial dinner, February 1912, as suggested by Tom Griffiths) rather than Gallipoli (Anzac Day, 1915)? Is the military funeral to be regarded as a

central expression of our civic culture? Except in sport, we have avoided the patriotic excesses of our trans-Pacific partners and we are generally prepared to accept that in some areas we can learn from the experience of others.

10. Act courageously to enlarge the national political agenda. Address the next stage of Aboriginal reconciliation to promote better health, better education, more self-reliance and reduce substance abuse and domestic violence. Settle the Murray-Darling issues of water use and the conflicts over states' rights, the environment and quotas for irrigators. Revive the issue of Australia becoming a republic, explain why the change would be important (especially in the context of updating the Constitution) and demonstrate how Australia's robust democratic institutions can tackle and resolve complex issues. The priority is to be honest in redefining who we are and what we stand for.

1983 Hawke Government

Bob Hawke – ACTU President. Boards of ILO and Reserve Bank. Rhodes Scholar. R

Lionel Bowen – solicitor, State MP, Mayor R

Tom Uren – ex POW, Manager L

Ralph Willis – economist R

John Dawkins – economist C-L

Susan Ryan – teacher, university tutor C-L

John Button – solicitor, writer C-L

Don Grimes – medical practitioner U

Paul Keating – union organiser R

Mick Young – shearer – party official C-L

Kim Beazley – university lecturer. Rhodes Scholar R

Stewart West – wharfie L

Peter Walsh – farmer C-L

Bill Hayden – policeman C-L

Gareth Evans – barrister and academic R

Gordon Scholes – loco driver U

Peter Morris – retailer, public servant, councillor U

John Kerin – agricultural economist, axeman, chook strangler U

Christopher Hurford – accountant U

John Brown – meat wholesaler R

Neal Blewett – professor, writer. Rhodes Scholar C-L

Barry Jones – lawyer, teacher, writer, State MP C-L

Michael Duffy – solicitor, racehorse owner C-L

Barry Cohen – retailer R

Clyde Holding – solicitor, State MP R
Arthur Gietzelt – union official L
Brian Howe – lecturer, sociologist, clergyman L

Minders = 0. Party and union officials = 4.

In the first Hawke Ministry (i.e. Cabinet + outer Ministry) the breakdown was Right 9, Centre-Left 9, Unaligned 5, Left 4, and in the Cabinet itself allegiances were Right 5, Left 1, Centre Left/Unaligned 7.

When I was writing *A Thinking Reed*, I asked a number of Hawke's Ministers if they believed that they could have won pre-selection for safe or winnable seats under existing factional arrangements, and received a series of 'No's', from Hayden, Button, Evans, Grimes, Blewett, Dawkins, Kerin, Ryan, Walsh and Duffy. I would have answered 'No' too. All of us had a life outside the major factions and won pre-selection against them. It would not be possible now.

2013 Gillard Cabinet

Julia Gillard – vaguely Left. Solicitor. M (Brumby)
Wayne Swan – R. M (Beazley) Party official. Lecturer.
Bob Carr – R. Journalist. Premier of NSW. Writer
Bill Shorten – R. AWU national secretary. (Highly qualified)
Stephen Smith – R. Lawyer, Party official, M
Tanya Plibersek – L. Public servant. M. University official
Jenny Macklin – M (Brian Howe) Researcher. L
Anthony Albanese – Party official. M (Uren and Carr)
Stephen Conroy – R M (RK and BJ) TWU official. Councillor
Penny Wong – L. Worked for CFMEU. Solicitor.
Mark Dreyfus – Barrister. QC. R
Joe Ludwig.– R. Son of Bill. Barrister. AWU official
Tony Burke – State MP. R. M (Richardson and Forshaw). Official with Shoppies
Gary Gray – ALP National Secretary. Worked for Woodside. R
Brendan O'Connor – ASU official. Monash + Harvard. R
Craig Emerson – D-G. Qld Dept of Environment. UN. M R
Mark Butler – Union official. L
Jason Clare – M R
Greg Combet – L. Union official. Secretary, ACTU.
Peter Garrett – Non-aligned. Musician.

Right 11, Left (sometimes hard to define) 8, non-aligned (Peter Garrett) one.
Minders: 10. Union or party officials: 12, Lawyers: 4. (Some doubling up.)

2013 Abbott Shadow Cabinet

Tony Abbott – M (Hewson) Rhodes Scholar

Julie Bishop Solicitor. Board member.

Joe Hockey. M (Greiner). Solicitor.

Andrew Robb – Party official

Scott Morrison – Party official, Tourism Council

Eric Abetz – solicitor

Christopher Pyne – M (Vanstone) – solicitor.

George Brandis – barrister, QC

Malcolm Turnbull – Rhodes Scholar. Barrister. Banker.

Sophie Mirabella – Barrister

Kevin Andrews – Barrister. Researcher. Associate to Jim Gobbo.

Greg Hunt – M (Downer), Judge's associate, McKinsey. Yale. Fulbright
Scholar

Peter Dutton – Policeman. Company director

David Johnston – Barrister and solicitor

Ian Macfarlane – farmer

Bruce Billson – M (Rod Kemp). Municipal manager

Warren Truss – farmer (grains). Board member.

Nigel Scullion – fisheries, mining

Barnaby Joyce – accountant, banker

John Cobb – farmer and grazier

Lawyers 10 [anomaly re Greg Hunt], Minders 5, Party officials 2, farmers 3,
bankers 2.

Good reason to be proud of the Australian electoral system –probably the
world's best.

Pennsylvania: In the 2012 election, Obama won all 20 Electoral College votes
from Pennsylvania (52%). Democrats won the Senate seat (53.7%). Democrats
secured a majority of votes cast for the 18 seats in the House of Representatives
(50.3%) but won only 5 seats of 18. [The incumbent Governor, elected in 2010,
is a Republican.]