

‘Opposition one day, government the next: Can oppositions make policy and be ready for office?’

Presentation to ASPG

***The Changing Face of Oppositions:
Independents, Parties and Houses
Conference***

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Overview

- **Oppositions have a unique position in Westminster democracies**
- **Issue: are they still (?) capable to fulfill their roles and what are these roles?**
- **Any proposed changes?**

Roles of Oppositions in Westminster democracies

- **Organised and formal opponents of government**
- **Government 'in exile'**
- **Critics of government**
- **Hold governments to account**
- **Provide alternative policy**
- **Training ground for new governments**

Fitzgerald: The accountability argument

“Unless the Opposition can discover what has happened or what is happening and give consideration to events with expert assistance, it cannot expose and criticise the activities and the people involved. It is effectively prevented from doing its job.”

Fitzgerald Report, p124

Why an issue?

- Possible change of governments
- Long incumbency of current govts
- Dominance by executive government
- Accountability issue
- Party policies needed for elections – are they appropriate for government?
- Without some policies – govt dominated by bureaucracy?
- Expectations
- **Issue: Are Oppositions up to it?**

Why parties need policies and type

- **Electoral battle – key weapon**
- **More than negative approach to win support**
- **Anchor for overall direction – avoid bureacratic inertia/achieve ideological goals**
- **More than visions – need policies with both ends and means!**
- **Detail to gain votes**

Dilemmas of Oppositions – how detailed?

‘The trouble with Mr Gaitskell is that he is going through all the motions of being a government when he isn’t a government. It is bad enough having to behave like a government when one is in power. The whole point of being in opposition is that one can have fun and lend colour to what one says and does.’

Harold Macmillan

Challenges

- 1. Incumbency**
- 2. Government dominance and manipulation/secretcy**
- 3. Resources and research**
- 4. Talent and experience**
- 5. Contact – realities of policy development**
- 6. Coming to office: nature of modern public service**

1. Incumbency

- **Qld:**
 - 1915-1957 (brief period 1929-31)
 - 1957-1989
 - 1989-2009 (except 1996-8)
- **Federal**
 - 1983-1996
 - 1996-2007
- **Victoria** - 1999-2009
- **NSW** - 1995

Regime changes since 1922

- Tasmania - 9 major regime changes,
- New South Wales 10
- South Australia 11
- Western Australia 11
- Victoria 14
- **Queensland 6**
- Implications: new govts take time to learn what to do
- Hit the road running- just hitting the road!!

2. Govt control

- **Parliamentary processes:**
 - Sitting days
 - Question time
 - Committees
 - **BUT:** upper houses help
- **Information non-release**
- **Manipulation of information eg hospital waiting lists**
- **Access to public service**

Fitzgerald Report

“In order to be an effective forum, Parliament must have sufficient resources to enable it to research topics and to evaluate Government proposals ... Any government may use its dominance in the Parliament and its control of resources to stifle and neuter effective criticism by the Opposition.”

Fitzgerald Report, p123

3. Resources & research capacities:

- **These cover:**
 - Range
 - Amount
 - Quality
- **Oppositions have considerably less resources than governments**
 - Federal Oppos c70 vs 350 plus govt
 - Qld <20% of govt staff
 - Ignores the public service equation
 - Fewer members

What can an Opposition do?

I have said time and time again—and I will say it again in this place—the government will consider any serious credible amendment to these bills that is put forward in the national interest and that is put forward with the support of the opposition party room.

I have made that offer time and time again, but there is not a single amendment on this enormous challenge.

On this very substantial economic environmental reform, you have not had the wherewithal and the strength to put one single amendment before this chamber. 9

There has been no policy from those who claim to be the alternative government. There is no recognition of the serious need to act now to preserve Australia's national interest in the face of climate change.

Senator Penny Wong

4. Talent and experience

- **Necessarily smaller**
- **Attracting talent for both MPs and staff**
- **Lengthy oppositions limit the attractiveness**
- **Partisanship –Non-Labor parties less successful in oppositions**
- **Lack of experience**
 - **eg Whitlam Govt**
 - **Howard Govt only a couple of former ministers**

Experience

- **What sort of pre-government training is needed to perform well in government?**
 - **Ministerial office**
 - **Ministerial advisers**
 - **Public service experience**
 - **Professional**
 - **Others**

5. Contact: Realities of policy development

- **Policy development seen to be vertical/top down/ decisionist**
- **BUT:**
 - **Administration and policy separation - myth**
 - **incremental/ongoing/based on feedback - rather than visionary and episodic**
 - **increasingly expert/evidence rather than ideologically driven (the rational policy discourse)**
 - **Complexity of policy**
 - **Interaction with interest groups & info**

6. Coming into office: Nature of modern public service

- **Politicised**
- **De-professionalised**
- **Loss of continuity**
- **So, less of a helping hand for new governments**

OR

- **Are these possible new ways for assisting new governments eg do they bto (bring their own)**

Reforms?

- **More resources but where to locate:**
 - with members
 - with party organisations
 - with parliamentary services
- **Should parliamentary oppositions be the real focus?**
- **Extra-parliamentary sources/centres**