

From Your Editor

It has been a pleasure preparing this edition of the journal. The quality of the papers presented to the 2007 Conference in Adelaide was exceptional and it has been a delight to read them all and present them to you. In addition there are some fascinating parliamentary reports and some additional pieces, all of high quality I believe.

Unfortunately I am receiving no correspondence — which may mean you are all content with the journal, or at least nothing you have read has irritated you sufficiently to put pen to paper. If that is the case, so be it. It would make a more lively journal if some of you were to make comments, which do not have to be acerbic, and extend some of the points; develop them from your perspectives; and generally make this journal ‘your own’. I invite you to do so.

The period since our last issue has seen a new government in Canberra as we all know. There will be a book on the election edited by Professor Marian Simms, as part of the election series that has been running for some years. I commend it to you as it contains an overview, some lively comments from practitioners, chapters on the election in each of the States, on the media, on political cartooning, on women, on ethnics — who of course played a critical part in the defeat of the sitting prime minister, John Howard in his own seat of Bennelong. I have written the chapter on NSW which of course you must all read.

In general what I, as an observer of elections and writer on elections over many years, found fascinating was the feeling of ‘book-ends’. When Labor was defeated in 1996 its leader had lost touch with what was going on with the people, insisted on his own agenda, and failed to do the ‘politics’ right. So it was in 2007 when the Coalition was defeated. The difference, and one which should concern anyone interested in a healthy democracy, is the present demoralised state of the Opposition. It is to be hoped that the Liberals will again find their drive, recruit people of talent to fill the vacancies that seem inevitable, and act as a true critic and thorn in the side of the Government — as they should do. There must be real choice between parties and leaders for a democracy to have meaning; the Opposition must fulfil its role, presenting an alternative government at every turn, and having thoughtful critical alternative policies. Without it we are in trouble, as we have seen at State level, especially but not exclusively in NSW.

I am also an observer and analyst of US elections; and 2008 has presented possibly the most exciting, unexpected competition for presidential candidacy in many years. It has shown the strengths and weaknesses of the American primary system as well

as the obscene profligacy of money raising and spending by candidates. The fact that the major candidates chose not to conform with the voluntary federal funding arrangements shows that those arrangements are 'broken' and also demonstrates a cynicism towards the electoral process. Big bucks are what it is mainly about to pay for the experts, polling analysts, organisational capacities, the enormously expensive television ads, the speech writers and the full circus that now accompanies presidential candidates. At this point with three months to go, there is no clear winner for the Democratic nomination, the campaigning if tough, indeed vicious, and there are challenges over the delegates from two States in terms of whether they will be counted. For the first time we are seeing the super-delegates who are the party professionals and members of Congress, playing a critical role. They will decide the candidate. The expectation (and hope) is that the super-delegates will confirm one candidate, most likely, Obama if he continues to build in strength and goes to the Democratic Nominating Convention with more delegates than Clinton (from the primaries and caucuses); has the majority of the popular vote from the primaries and is outpolling McCain in terms of the actual likely voting intentions of the American people in the general election. If there is no clear leader in these terms then the battle will be very bitter. Whatever the outcome of the Convention, it will test the unity of the Democratic party. The concern is that if Clinton is nominated then black Americans and young people will not vote in November, and there will be anger especially among black Americans. If Obama is nominated there is a real question as to whether women and Hispanics will back him.

Polling data at this early stage are notoriously unreliable; moreover there is a real question as to whether or not people are telling the truth when they say they will vote for a black American or a woman. If the Democrats squabble, as they did in 1980 for example, and do not show real unity and commitment to the nominated candidate, they cannot win what should have been a guaranteed election victory in the presidency. No Republican candidate should have stood a chance, given an extraordinarily unpopular, and clearly out of touch president and a failing economy. Yet at this stage McCain is showing well in the polls.

For those of you interested, the national polling data are extremely misleading because they blur the fact that the American presidency is won state by state on a winner-take-all system, each state being allocated 'electors' according to its numbers in Congress. What you need to follow are the figures for each candidate in states they are likely to win. For example, some of Obama's support comes from the Democrats (black and white, especially white males) in Southern States. Those states are very likely to be won by the Republicans, so Obama's support in those areas needs to be discounted. The questions need to be asked: between Clinton and Obama who is attracting most support in which marginal states, and is either outpolling McCain in these states? Finally you should really ignore all these polls at this stage — it's a long time until November and the general election.

Politics remains a fascinating spectator sport for those of us privileged to watch and analyse it. ▲