

## Restoring the Grassroots

**Christopher Pyne**\*

Abraham Lincoln in the famous series of debates with his Democratic Presidential opponent Stephan A Douglas said:

Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.

He was referring to Douglas' indifference to slavery, but the lesson is easily applied to any political issue in any age. Lincoln recognised the importance of engaging the public, and attempting to shape the public mood.

He recognised that the person who can do that will achieve their policy goals.

Some commentators argue that WorkChoices destroyed the Liberal Party's electoral chances in 2007.

Whether or not the policy was a dog is not the point. The point is that the Howard Government struggled to shape public sentiment or make the case for industrial changes, leaving public sentiment to be shaped and influenced by the union movement.

We failed, where previously we had succeeded, in selling these tough decisions. Consider the GST. Consider the war in Iraq.

Once the emotive union fear campaign had captured the public imagination, and framed the public debate, it seemed like there was nothing we could do to win it back.

---

\* Christopher Pyne, MP, Shadow Minister (Liberal Party) for Justice, Border Protection & Assisting Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship.

A vote for the Liberal Party was unpalatable for many swinging voters in the 2007 election — the same voters who had supported us despite the GST in 1998 despite the Iraq War in 2004. The WorkChoices reforms were seen to be hurting ‘working families’ — or as some called them earlier, ‘Howard’s Battlers’. We had lost their trust. Nothing could be more dire for any political movement than such a circumstance.

The Australian Labor Party had successfully created the impression that John Howard had lost touch. During the campaign, this attitude was one of the most difficult to overcome around the country. A political party that is perceived to have lost touch will always be punished at the polls.

Every politician will claim to have their ear to the ground — to being in touch with his or her local constituency. Continuing success within the context of a representative democracy depends on demonstrating that the local representative is aware of, and acts upon community issues and concerns.

Many politicians rely on constituents or community groups making the first contact to become aware of sensitive issues.

But it will be vital to the Liberal Party’s future success that it proactively engages with the community — at a local level as well as a national level. A responsive MP is better than an apathetic one, but a higher standard that must be applied is for MPs to be proactive. Local representatives need to be actively engaged with their community.

Founded in 1944 by Sir Robert Menzies the Liberal Party was to be a party of progress, a force for change. As he famously wrote in *The Afternoon Light*:

We took the name ‘Liberal’ because we were determined to be a progressive party, willing to make experiments, in no sense reactionary but believing in the individual, his rights, and his enterprise, and rejecting the socialist panacea.

Today, the Liberal Party needs a forward agenda, underpinned by a modern philosophy.

The Liberal Party is currently under review. We have a review taking place into our policy platforms, and we have reviews in different states and federally being undertaken into our constitutional arrangements. I mention this because it is worth noting that my comments today are not just my contribution to the ether of discussion about politics in Australia. This is an issue that will come up for debate at the Liberal Party Federal Council later this year and how the party responds to it could well result in the election or not of future Liberal Government.

The Liberal Party must again be a force for change. It also needs to ‘value-add’ to its membership, offering greater participation, and greater incentive and opportunity to be involved. A larger, more engaged membership will lead to a greater more

diverse policy engine room, and a more substantial troupe of spokespeople in the broader community.

In my home state of South Australia, in the 1950s there were around 50,000 members of the Liberal and Country League, the forerunner of the modern Liberal Party. Many of them were extremely active and engaged in the political process.

Today the membership is slightly over 5000 members, a small fraction of whom regularly attend branch meetings, participate in policy debate or assist at election times.

This is certainly not unique to South Australia. Despite holding federal government for eleven years, Liberal Party membership declined around the country to unprecedented lows.

Even more of a concern is that a small and narrow membership also reduces the scope for Members of Parliament to be kept in touch with local community concerns by their local party membership. Low membership means the Liberal Party's policy base being more influenced by fewer people. I aspire to see the light of many voices illuminating the dark recesses of the caves of ignorance.

WorkChoices enabled our political enemies to make the case that we were out of touch. How much of this is a result of a dwindling, disengaged membership base? Political parties cannot function effectively without the involvement of active, engaged people. The Liberal Party needs to introduce innovative new ways to embrace our membership and the wider community, and involve people in the democratic process more generally.

This year, I have argued that to re-engage and reactivate our membership base, all Liberal Party members should be given the opportunity to vote for the party leader. For many this has seemed like a radical idea. But it is not too radical for the practice to be the case in the UK Conservative Party, the French Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), the Canadian Conservative Party, or the Likud in Israel.

The Republican Party and the Democratic Party in the US have raised grassroots participation to unprecedented heights. I would envisage that the Liberal Party adopt a similar model to our sister party in the UK. In essence, the Conservative Party in the UK allows the parliamentary party to choose the candidates that will be offered to the membership from amongst their number. The broader membership of the party then chooses between the two candidates who emerged from the parliamentary party ballot.

Leadership ballots are only held when a spill of the leadership is initiated and carried by the parliamentary party or when the leader resigns or retires. A person whose leadership is overturned in a spill cannot nominate as a candidate for leader in the subsequent ballot.

The experience of the Australian Democrats has soured such ‘primary’ style elections for many in this country. I would argue that the Democrats imploded not because their system gave every member a vote in the party leadership — but because their system gave their membership the power to remove the leader by a petition of a hundred members.

A party unable to reconcile the philosophies of its members and the personalities of its leaders, as was case with the Australian Democrats, was always doomed to failure under such a system.

Critically, in the UK Conservative Party model that I advocate, the membership itself cannot spill the party’s leadership — that job is left to the parliamentary party whose regular accountability to their electorates should encourage responsible use of such power.

Candidates for the leadership of the party would have to prove their mettle in the glare of national media and they would have to show their energy and capacity to handle a national campaign.

The mere activity of running for party leader would ensure that the person elected would be engaged in a way neither main political party has demanded. Such campaigns could also give candidates a handy profile boost as well.

In fact, the international experience overwhelmingly supports this thesis. John Carey and John Polga-Hecimovich of Dartmouth College recently conducted a study into 900 candidates contesting 90 elections in Latin America, where an increasing number of political parties have started choosing their leaders through this sort of method.

Their findings were that leaders chosen by the various ‘primary-style’ methods were the recipients of bounces of between 3 and 6 per cent, when compared to leaders chosen by their peers alone. There hasn’t been an Australian federal election result since 1975 that wouldn’t have been altered by a 3 to 6 per cent swing the other way.

Carey and Polga-Hecimovich attribute the success of primary systems to a range of factors. In part, they say that voters like the transparency of these systems. Even those members of the public who would never formally wish to join a party, or officially register their preference for that party, can appreciate a party that their neighbour or friend has had a hand in choosing the leader.

And for those members of the public who are not so politically squeamish, but who just haven’t had any motivating influence previously that would make them join, reform to such a system would give the broad community a real incentive to join a political party for the first time.

Our elections are increasingly disparaged as ‘presidential’ — the vast majority of the electorate votes for their preferred party leader rather than their local representative, (present company excepted, of course.)

Recognising this fact gives us an opportunity to engage them by letting them have a say in who leads the party.

Once people have actually gone to the trouble of joining a party, the benefits to the party are many. The new members increase their investment in the chosen candidate — they are more likely not only to vote for the candidate in which they’ve had a hand in choosing, but they are also more likely to support that campaign with financial donations, personal labour, and their advocacy amongst their friends and communities.

People often throw around the phrase ‘grassroots activism’. If political parties aspire for this to mean anything or for their own brand of grassroots activism to achieve anything, then they need substantially more members than is currently the case.

The researchers also suggest that another reason the primary elected candidates did better was that selection by a broad base of party members or party supporters are more likely to discover and support a gifted or charismatic politician who would also appeal to the broader public. When the decision is left to party insiders, MPs and factional leaders playing kingmakers in the back rooms of Parliament House or Sussex Street, they are likely to select candidates based on other factors that are less important to the public at large.

Let me cite three examples of leaders who have won their party’s leadership through such systems, despite being considered outsiders by those within their party’s hierarchy: Junichiro Koizumi, David Cameron and Barack Obama, none of whom was supposed to stand a chance against Ryutaro Hashimoto, David Davis and Hillary Clinton respectively.

First: Junichiro Koizumi.

The system employed by the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan gives overwhelming power to the members in the House of Representatives, but at the same time it does give a say to each of the party’s 2.4 million other members. In 2001, with the politically terminal Yoshiro Mori standing aside as Prime Minister, the 346 LDP lawmakers had one vote in the contest, and the party membership’s ballots were boiled down to 141 votes — three for each of Japan’s 47 prefectures.

Traditionally the ballots of the party membership were seen as unimportant — the faceless men of the LDP factions would choose their leader from amongst the leaders of the most powerful factions, and their overwhelming numbers in the ballot would make the Party members’ votes worthless.

In 2001 former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto was the leader of the largest faction in the Diet, and his success was presumed to be a fait accompli.

Koizumi ran a very public campaign for the leadership unlike any seen before in Japan. He gained the support of the nation's media, and opinion-makers. He was charismatic and presented an agenda for reform that remarkably made his party — in power for all but a few of the previous fifty years — look fresh.

In the first poll of prefectural party organizations, Koizumi won 87 to 11 per cent. The result was so overwhelming that in the subsequent ballot of Representatives, a majority of the Diet members voted against the wishes of their factional seniors, by 51 to 40 per cent, and Koizumi won with almost two thirds of the party behind him.

Within three weeks he had gone from being an unlikely outsider to being Prime Minister of Japan. More importantly he was an excellent Prime Minister — the second longest serving Prime Minister in Japan's post war history.

He utterly revived the fortunes of the LDP which was seriously ailing under Yoshiro Mori — the man he replaced. Under Mori, who had single digit approval ratings, the LDP were trailing miserably in the polls, and looking like being smashed in the 2001 Upper House elections. Three months after Koizumi's election he secured 78 of 121 seats in the Upper House elections in July.

Koizumi later led his party to overwhelming victories before retiring on his terms and at a time of his choosing. He had a strong record of reform, including his courageous policy in 2005 of privatisation of the post office - a long held taboo for the LDP's natural rural constituency.

He would never have been Prime Minister without the opportunity to campaign for and gain the support of his entire party membership. His party and his country were the benefactors.

When Junichiro Koizumi assumed the Prime Ministership of Japan in 2001, David Cameron had not yet even entered Parliament, but he is now leader of the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom. For more than a decade the Conservatives were utterly dominated — driven from office and consigned to political oblivion — by Tony Blair's Labour.

Upon the resignation of Michael Howard, David Cameron stunned older and more fancied rivals Kenneth Clarke and David Davis — representatives of the party's traditional wet and dry factions — and pitched his message directly to the British public, and Conservative members outside the inner circle.

If Cameron's message of party modernisation and a pitch back to the philosophical centre (previously owned by his Party but long abandoned) was challenging for that inner circle, it was a clarion call to the British public and the rank and file

membership. Tiring of Labour, David Cameron's emergence as a potential leader was the first time since Thatcher's that the general public had responded positively to the Conservative Party.

Although the first vote of MPs to determine which two candidates would be offered to the party membership for election had David Davis leading, Cameron won nearly 68 per cent of the vote and under him the Conservative Party first opened up opinion poll leads over Tony Blair, and now Gordon Brown.

In the most recent by-election and local election campaigns, the successful Conservatives have been marked not only by overwhelming victories across the country, but also by the revival of a reactivated and enthusiastic membership base. Twenty points ahead in the polls, the Conservative Party now looks set to win back the Treasury benches when an election is called.

Cameron's election was the turning point — not just the fact that party members elected him despite the initial reluctance of his Parliamentary colleagues, but the very process of the campaign helped provide his bounce. Through his campaign for the leadership he was afforded the opportunity to build a public profile through an interested media that enabled him to present the Conservative Party in the best possible light to the previously disaffected middle ground.

If David Cameron's rise was swift, it is nothing compared to Barack Obama. The young and fresh Cameron was already memorising his lines for his party conference speech when Obama entered the United States Senate in 2005.

But everyone in this room will be familiar with the way that the United States' primary system has given him the opportunity to appeal to the American people and become the Democratic nominee ahead of Hillary Clinton. Clinton was the most unbackable favourite to seek nomination for a non-incumbent ticket that there has been since Ronald Reagan ran in 1980. She had the support of hundreds of super-delegates — mostly Senators and Representatives — before the campaign even began. Yet she was defeated by a man who had been a Senator for only three years, and what's more he won with Democratic Primary turnout reaching unprecedented numbers, and went on to win the Presidency in November 2008.

Time will tell what sort of President he will make.

But the key point is that, in Clinton the Democratic lawmakers who were endorsing her overwhelmingly a year ago had chosen the candidate who was less successful — perhaps less capable — at reaching out to the great swathes of the American public who turned out at the polling station for the first time.

These three leaders' examples remind us of a sentiment that John Howard often expressed: 'The Australian people usually get it right'.

Having been a Member of Parliament since 1993, I have shared my time between Adelaide and Canberra for fifteen years. I have spent countless days and evenings discussing issues of the day with constituents and my loyal local party members. I have spent all too many Tuesday mornings in Canberra discussing issues of the day with my fellow Members of Parliament.

Let me conclude by making the observation that I have seen nothing in my fifteen years in Parliament to dissuade me from the notion that a party membership made up of the broadest possible range of the general public would be the best group of people to choose a leader of our party and a future Prime Minister. ▲