

The Complexities of Representation: Balancing Interests, Reality and Philosophy

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Abstract

The issue of my discussion would be the internal dynamic that has elected representatives dealing with the juxtaposition between representation and manipulation, necessity and honesty, philosophy and pragmatism.

Politics has to deal with common interests essential to the long term prosperity of the nation which may be not palatable to the short term interest of the constituents but this must not be used as an excuse to provide for the short term interest of certain pressure groups. For instance, the interest of big business may be similar to the long term economic prosperity but how honest are politicians when they know that there is line that is crossed and the payment may be financial support at the election?

With Australia's general disengagement from active political involvement in a political party, what is the threat to the political system? Where are we drawing our politicians from and why?

Where are the Australian Hamilton and Jefferson? Where is our development of a political treatise now that we have had 108 years of federation? Where are we in the development of our nation's philosophies compared to other democracies such as the US and England?

Are there other non secular philosophies which or shall become more encumbered on the secular notion of our parliamentary system, is this the price or is it even a problem of the peoples lack of participation?

What is the Australian political philosophy or is there an Australian political philosophy? Has the race to the middle ground, because of compulsory voting, neutered the vibrancy and dynamics of what may be possible? Are there any longer any real differences or is politics the theatrical manifestation of a core mundane bureaucracy?

*Treason never prospers; what's the reason?
For when it prospers, none dare call it treason.*

(Sir John Fortescue)

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Common Interests

Lobbying is a legitimate activity, a significant factor in the democratic process. Lobbyists present to the government the views and interests of individuals and organisations and they contribute to improving outcomes for the community. Lobbying plays a powerful role in politics, reflected in the some 1000 lobbyists in Canberra alone. The income of the industry tops 1 billion dollars per year.¹

Without the benefit of true transparency, we presume lobbying will be performed in a principled manner, and that government representatives approached by lobbyists will have the opportunity and desire to establish whose interests a lobbyist represents. Without this, those representatives are not capable of making educated judgements about the outcome a lobbyist is seeking to achieve.

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Lobbyists Register indicates 39 consulting services and lobbyist groups have registered as at June 3rd, 2008.² Lobbyists who have not registered by 1st July 2008 will not be permitted to meet with government representatives in their capacity as a lobbyist until registration is completed. This does not reflect a strict framework of regulations and leaves the public in the dark on the true source of political influence.

Lobbyists currently registered represent a wide variety of industries, including telecommunications, medical research, financial institutions, educational institutions and consumer brands companies. The most iconic companies within these industries include Telstra, Select TV, Virgin Blue, St George Bank and Mars Snack foods Australia. With high profile organisations and individuals seeking outcomes which are advantageous to their own agendas, a balance must be established between the interests of the community and those of the individual or corporation. Whether this can be achieved is debatable.

Purchasing Power

In a democratic society, decisions are made by the elected on behalf of the electors, with the expectation that policies are created based upon the best long and short term interests of the nation, taking into consideration those vulnerable communities and individuals who require support and protection from externalities. In Australia, the political donations are generally delivered as financial gifts from corporations to be directed to the funding of election campaigns. In the past we have also seen substantial donations from trade unions and, although to a lesser extent, individuals. While the Australian Electoral Commission attempts to regulate political donations,

¹ Warhurst, J. (2007). 'Lobby World: Political lobbying is a \$1 billion a year industry' [Electronic Version]. *Arena Magazine*.

² Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Lobbyists Register (2008). <https://secure.dpc.wa.gov.au/lobbyistsregister/>

donors are often known to hide behind associated entities, protecting reputations at both ends of the transaction.

Both major Australian political parties receive millions of dollars in financial contributions, most commonly sourced from corporations who are potentially greatly affected by government policy or are perhaps likely to benefit from the sourcing of government contracts. Insufficient regulations on political donations threaten the character of our political system and acceptable, practical regulations on political donations have failed to be implemented. In their absence, this perception of a system which permits shady fundraising practices and the purchasing of influence continues to erode already low levels of public confidence in the integrity of Australian politics.

Regardless of past acts of imprudence, the problem remains that the often dubious nature of political donations has resulted in a bottoming out of public confidence in the political system and its actors, a great concern in a democratic nation which is so dependant on the presumption of trust in public figures.

Party Politics

*'What Government is best'?
'That which teaches us to govern ourselves'.
(Goethe)*

The bitter truth is that, as a society, there is a tendency to take for granted the significance of political parties. Most voters admit to identifying with parties rather than candidates, not surprising considering the role of political parties in mobilising electorates and serving as links between government and the people. It has been said that politics in Australia is almost entirely party politics.³

Australian politics has utilised American marketing techniques to target swinging voters through market research and polling. This has resulted in a shift in political communication to capital intensive conduct. While existing as a natural transition in business, this is also an indicator of the increasingly American influence seen in the Australian political arena which is responsible in part for the shift in preferences away from major political parties who are being viewed by many Australians as an identical mould of one another.

What concerns me about the prevalence of party politics is the accompanying restraint shown in the regulation of our political parties. We lack stringent legal requirements for political parties to be internally democratic and there is no obligation for policy formation and candidate selection to revolve around full membership participation. The insistence of formal written constitutions under the

³ Gauja, A. (2005). 'Keeping the Party Under Control: The legal regulation of Australia's political parties' [Electronic Version]. *Australian Review of Public Affairs*.
<http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2005/07/gauja.html>

Commonwealth Electoral Act provisions does not concern the structure of their content which is left to be resolved by the individual parties on their own grounds.⁴

Compare Australian political parties to the traditional pyramid formation. Final command rests in the peak and those residing in the base are subject to the direction and command of those in the peak and the powers that control them. I contend that those individuals seeking advancement in this hierarchal scheme must be prepared to adopt policies of manipulation in order to retain their position of power.

By the nature of such a structure, a political party cannot present itself as a democratic organisation and, despite promotions of public platforms and the ever-present public interest values, the Australian government is not a 'Government of the people, by the people, for the people'⁵ but rather a government designed to support and advance the select few in positions of power.

As we know, the role of a political party is exclusively to submit recommendations to the people based upon research, expertise and experience; however this function has been reemployed to deliver the public belief that the party system is the only way of ensuring parliament performs effectively. I propose that a political party, in its current depiction within Australian politics, enables manipulators to exercise maximum control over the people in accordance with the will of the very few power holders.

Party Discipline

There is a fine line between party discipline and control and I put to you today that the term party discipline is simply a euphemism for control. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade admits that 'elected politicians rarely vote against their parties in parliament',⁶ and at what cost to society? Without free debate and argument, we see not a democracy but rather a dictatorship in which those wielding the power and controlling the internal mechanisms of the government are solely responsible for the outcomes to which we arrive.

Non-adherence to the party position often attracts severe penalties and thus conformity is enforced under the threat of party discipline. The absence of free-voting results in extensive conformity and limits the power of individual members. The practice of floor crossing and the level to which it is tolerated is determined by strategic party politics.

Members of the Labor party are required to formally pledge their commitment to the Party Platform and accept all collective decisions as binding. The Liberal Party,

⁴ Australian Electoral Commission. 2008. <http://www.aec.gov.au/>

⁵ Lincoln, A. (1863) Retrieved from The White House Site:
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/al16.html>

⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2008. <http://www.dfat.gov.au/>

while not formalising the obligation in the form of a pledge, expects Party loyalty and support from all party member Parliamentarians. The National Party, does not impose unyielding expectations of conformity, however it does require the party policy to be followed ‘as far as possible’⁷. The Australian Democrats’ constitution entails adherence to party policies but allows a certain degree of freedom in matters of personal or electorate conflict and the Australian Greens follows a similar path.

This necessity for compliance continues in the Senate. The traditional custom of separation into political parties is displayed in the physical setup in the Senate. There is a division which has long been present in the political arena, encouraged to the point that one might be forgiven for thinking that political policies transmit some magnetic attraction and, as such, a respectful distance must be kept from opposing parties at all times. I pose the question, would it not be beneficial to the mechanisms of public representation for contrary views to be seated alongside one another in the spirit of free debate? And yet this practice of separation exists across many democracies including Canada, the United Kingdom, France and the US. In fact, this seating plan speaks so loudly to the principles of party politics that during the 1950s, when United States Senator Wayne Morse had left the Republican Party but not yet joined the Democrats, he placed his chair temporarily in the middle of the centre aisle to demonstrate his independence.⁸ The physical divide speaks loudly to the overriding concept of party loyalty.

I look back in history to some of our more controversial leaders, such as William, ‘Billy’ Hughes, and consider how the right to express personal convictions has been distinguished in the political arena. The co-creation and subsequent expulsion from three Australian parties formed a colourful career for Hughes, however he stands as an example of what the political climate has lost. The freedom to be divisive, to stand for the interests of those who have elected us, to take a stand against what is fundamentally wrong regardless of the party line. These rights are being sold at a hefty cost to the future of our nation.

Big Business vs. Social Interests

Another issue of relevance in modern politics is the participation of big business in policy reform. The Business Council of Australia, as we know, openly supported many of the former Howard government’s controversial policies including the Industrial Relations reforms WorkChoices. The BCA has been a key partner in many governmental reforms, but at what cost? The alliance between the BCA and the Howard government resulted in economic reforms which were shouldered by some of the weakest groups in the community. For an organisation with so much to gain from the slanting of policies towards the interest of big business, is it possible

⁷ National Party of Australia, website at: http://www.nationalparty.org/about_us/index.htm.

⁸ United States Senate. 2008. http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Wayne_Morse_Sets_Filibuster_Record.htm

to trust that any action taken will be in the best interests of society, even if it were to cause economic grief to their own members? Big Business engineered further support in their representation of mercantile interests in their alliance with the Howard government to reduce the presence of Trade Unions with the creation of the Industrial Relations Reforms.

Trade Unions purport themselves to be a channel for the ordinary Australian worker to secure his or her rights and job protection. Their value is debated by many — are they a benefit to the worker or a hindrance to economic growth? Are they representing the majority or directing the minority? Throughout history, Labour has utilised the trade union movement to secure support for their policies particularly in times of party weakness. They wave a flag of protectionism and attempt to identify with the everyday working Aussie, most recently done by abolishing industrial relations reforms. Labour shored up support for their campaign by identifying a weak link in the Howard government's policies and striking a cord with the popular movement away from WorkChoices. The philosophies of the Howard government were founded on balancing the needs of their biggest financial supporters with limiting the capacity of the Trade Unions. Both parties utilise channels appropriate to their cause in order to reach their desired market. The difference really rests in the level of understanding that the audience has of the message.

'Oilcodes', which came into effect 1st March 2007 as a prescribed industry code of conduct was introduced to regulate the conduct of actors in the petroleum retail industry. The Oilcode was created with a view to establishing minimum standards for petrol re-selling agreements, improving transparency in wholesale pricing, implementation of a national terminal gate pricing regime and establishing an independent dispute resolution scheme for the industry. Predictably, the Australian Institute of Petroleum welcomed new legislation which would see increased dominance of this market by the two large supermarket chains and the resulting reduction in the levels of competition among the retail and wholesale markets. We know that those with the benefit of market power have the capability to influence the profit making abilities of their competitors. Faced with predatory pricing it is difficult to fathom how small businesses will be capable of competing in a market which fails to deliver sufficient defence.

The Labor Party's position on the Repeal of the Franchises Act and the Sites Act was indicative of their totalitarian policies in which we see weak representation of the small business community in comparison to a propensity for falling into line upon the command of Big Business. While Labor claimed to be seeking the identification and resolution of market issues for the benefit of small business survival, they drop to their knees when it comes to their mates in the big oil companies.

Supporting legislation which facilitates concentration in the industry, which allows a few large companies to seize further control and increases pressure on motorists by weakening the position of independent retail outlets which results in motorists

driving longer distances to get fuel is a sign of things gone wrong. Stripping the industry of any specific restrictions on pricing behaviour drops the ultimate cost into the lap of the consumer and reflects the impact of major corporations assuming control over the policies of the government. Competition is vital to the operation of an effective market, however the facilitation of methods such as penetration pricing is an indication of a government seeking the reprieve of corporate giants, not protecting the rights of Australian families.

Political Participation

Political participation is declining, particularly among young Australians, and this decline is borne out of a growing distrust of politicians and an overall disillusionment about democratic institutions. We know that participation occurs when people become engaged in the process, whether it is through memberships, group involvement or community participation and it best measured through involvement in protests, petitions, boycotts and related movements which help to establish Australia as a Democracy. We need to increase political engagement among Australians to strengthen the position of our governors, to emphasise political equality — particularly for vulnerable Australians who feel alienated from politics — to improve the communication between the elected and the people and to help contest the influence of undesirable political and social forces.⁹

A number of contributing factors are responsible for the increase in civic disengagement including generational changes, shifting workforce participation levels, the booming popularity of electronic media and disenchantment with the political arena. Research shows that the most significant sources of influence in young people's interest in politics are family, media and schooling. While an estimated 95% of eligible Australians are enrolled to vote, the participation of young Australians is greatly reduced with research showing only 76% of eligible 18–25 year olds are registered to vote.¹⁰

Another reflection of our decreasing political interest is the increasing number of informal votes which are being recorded. The amount of 'donkey votes' has more than doubled in the last 30 years. Equally concerning, the participation rates of Indigenous Australians is recorded at around 36%. Prior to the introduction of compulsory voting across Australia in 1924, voter turnout was bordering 50% in the early 1920s with only 57.95% of registered voters turning out to vote for Senate in 1922, compared to 91.31% of registered voters in 1925. Compulsory voting has

⁹ Murray Print (2007). 'Citizenship Education and Youth Participation in Democracy', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 55(3)

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2004. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/A5F91A7BB33A9903CA256E7D00002653?opendocument>

improved participation, but more attention must be diverted to Indigenous and young Australians, both significant actors on the national stage.¹¹

Given the contribution that education has on that nation's participation, it is concerning that Australia has been complacent in encouraging learning and engagement in politics, and this lack of exposure has resulted in lack of interest. The political involvement of older Australians is prevalent and raises concerns, as Australia ages, it would appear our interest in politics is, and will continue, declining. Participation rates spike for Australians aged 45 to 64 and drop considerably for 18 to 25 year olds.¹²

Youth Movement

So this begs the question of how to instigate higher levels of involvement and genuine interest of young Australians in politics? A record number of young registrants have been captivated by the current US political nomination campaign and both Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama are attracting young American voters through social media channels, targeting African-American, Latino and faith-based online communities. The marked difference is that the Clinton Camp is uploading official campaign posts onto blogs, whereas Obama's team is personalising his messages to the target market. A political campaign is, in effect, a marketing activity and Barack Obama is successfully marketing to the most popularly marketed demographic in history. The key ingredients to his success? Obama offers solutions as opposed to blame — a unique ingredient in any democracy. Obama focuses on issues which are relevant to the next generation of Americans, he doesn't dwell on historical controversies. And the last, but likely the most significant ingredient to Obama's success is his ability as an African-American to advance the race debate in America. The youth of America is the most tolerant of all demographics in the nation and they seek the opportunity to demonstrate the nation's departure from traditional race factored politics.

In the past, young constituents have been displaced in politics, often raising their heads only to fight against high conflict policies such as communism and fascism. However, this is an indication not of a lack of interest in politics, but rather a reflection of the image that has been cast upon emerging demographics. There is a general presumption that wisdom can only be accompanied by experience, that young people are primarily selfish individuals, seeking immediate gratification. To believe this would be an error in judgment. Young Australians seek social justice, a sense of community and a work-life balance. Although protected from the sharp edges of economic crisis and peppered with esteem building commentary, younger

¹¹ Louth, J. & Hill, L. (2005). 'Compulsory Voting in Australia: Turnout with and without it', School of Economics and Political Science, The University of Sydney. *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, 6(1).

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2004. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/A5F91A7BB33A9903CA256E7D00002653?opendocument>

generations have grown up in a world filled with violence, retribution and increasing stress. The lessons they are learning are vastly different to the lessons learnt by the Baby Boomer generation, however they have the capacity to build a future for this country that many people have never dared to dream of.

Marketing or Manipulation?

The current government identified the ideals of young Australians and did a magnificent job of addressing them in the election campaign. Social marketing in the form of Kevin '07 was a splendid means for attracting the youth vote and was furthered by appearances on popular television talk shows, online blogs designed to attract the techno-savvy voters and short presentations on You Tube, MySpace and other video sharing websites.

The 'Click and Go' Generation were attracted to this image of a political party which utilised modern methods for communicating with them and seemed genuinely interested in obtaining their approval. This approach to marketing was used to achieve specific behavioural goals — namely increasing awareness of the Kevin '07 brand and establishing loyalty among young Australians. By implementing a marketing philosophy, the Labor party balanced voter satisfaction with electoral support. Kevin Rudd was hawked as the most popular opposition leader in 35 years,¹³ however, six months into his reign as Prime minister, we see Kevin Rudd's popularity plummeting as it becomes clear that this government offers no unique solutions and has simply played unrelenting blame games. Reminiscent of the Whitlam era, in which Labor ran a strong campaign for change, however a decline in public confidence in the government eroded the leadership. Is the same future ahead of Labor and Kevin Rudd? Only time will tell.

Conclusion

Australia lives on a borrowed political experience. We have not had the turmoils of despotic kings, wars of independence, civil wars or revolutions. Unfortunately, on the back of this lack of experience is a communal apathy that is probably bred by a range of reasons including everything from climate to space to abundant opportunity with no fundamental challenges to liberty, apart from the Second World War.

To challenge this apathy Australia has compulsory voting, but in a form that, rather than alleviating our complacency, compounds it. One of the problems that arises from this is that in land where the overwhelming political ethos is apathy, the motivated force is king. ▲

¹³ Coorey, P. (2007). 'Rudd Rockets into League of Political Stars'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/rudd-rockets-into-league-of-political-stars/2007/02/11/1171128816464.html>