

The Problems of Political and Parliamentary Leadership

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My talk today will focus on what I believe, based on years of working in politics, is a growing disconnection between our political leaders — and the parties which have traditionally nurtured and developed our Parliamentary leadership.

My comments will largely be directed towards the ALP since that is the Party I know the best. However, much of what I will be saying has equal applicability to the major conservative parties.

My argument — simply put — is that in the 21st century we can no longer rely on the Labor, Liberal or National parties to be the only sources of all the best talent for our parliamentary and ministerial representatives. I think for the most part they perform thankless tasks well and with real commitment. But the major parties are just too small and unrepresentative of the wider community to be the sole sources of the best and brightest legislators we can produce.

I want to stress here that this is not an adverse comment on the quality or commitment of our existing parliamentarians and ministers. Rather, it is an observation about the pool from which they are drawn — a pool that is simply too small to give us the breadth of life experiences and choice we need in the 21st century. We simply must move to address this problem before it gets out of hand.

Even in 2008 the administrative wing and the dwindling rank and file membership are still responsible for selecting *all* our political representatives. Even when so called ‘star’ candidates are recruited, the Party must formally endorse their candidature.

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Notwithstanding these facts, the Labor Party, these days, is much more pragmatic than the more doctrinaire Liberal Party. Accordingly, it is better placed to reach out beyond traditional party boundaries and engage with people with new ideas across a broader spectrum.

In fact Labor's parliamentary leadership is relying more and more on advice from outside the Party for its ideas and policies. I think this is a good thing — but it does put the administrative and parliamentary arms of the party out of alignment with each other.

In my view, the problem that is created as a result of this state of affairs is most keenly felt at the executive level. The ministers are drawn exclusively from the Parliament whose membership is in turn determined by our dwindling rank and file and a growing group of political careerists.

The problem of dwindling membership has been observed by senior party officials such as the late John Button, former Senator Robert Ray and the present Minister for Finance and Deregulation, Lindsay Tanner. Button, for example, wrote in 2002 that branch meetings often have only a handful of attendees — usually politicians or people associated with the party machine.¹

Writing after the 2001 election, Lindsay Tanner identified structural problems in the Labor Party as a reason for the collapse in branch membership. He wrote: 'in spite of occasional limited reforms, Labor is still encumbered by a structure, culture and organisational approach which reflects the old world'.² He went on to state: 'to add insult to injury, key party figures sometimes engage in branch stacking exercises which turn the entire concept of membership participation into a mockery.'³

The problem of branch stacking these days is being felt more keenly in the Liberal rather than the Labor Party — because Labor has mechanisms now to limit branch stacking, but the Liberals do not. This has been starkly demonstrated in Liberal party pre-selection stoushes in NSW, where an ideological battle between the small L liberals and the hard right is still being played out.

So, how can our political leaders be expected to have the best Cabinet line-up in such circumstances? Later in my address I will suggest some ways through this problem. But first I want to look at its causes.

Political parties have served us well for several hundred years and I am not arguing that they are finished — they still remain the best means by which differing political philosophies or values can be presented to the voting public. But they are under serious strain.

¹ Button, J. (2005) *What Future for Labor?*, Black Inc, Melbourne

² Tanner, L. (2001) *If not now, when?* ALP National Review, <http://onlinefocus.nationalforum.com.au/alp-review/tanner.html>

³ Ibid

It has been calculated that the Labor Party had about 370,000 members in 1939.⁴ Estimates of its *active* national membership in 2005 were as low as 7,500.⁵ I understand that the story in the Liberal and National Parties is much the same. The only time that any Party's numbers grow these days is when they are being fertilised by a branch stacker seeking pre-selection.

I won't spend much time here exploring why this drop in branch activism has occurred but I think it has a lot to do with the pressures in our lives — work hours, television, the internet — even U Tube — and many other factors, including the ability to influence public policy in other ways.

It is this last factor — the capacity to have a role in influencing policy without joining a Party — that is now a growing and valuable source of information for Labor leaders in particular. I will talk about that a little later.

So, how shallow is our parliamentary gene pool these days? And, what are the more enterprising and forward thinking leaders doing to deepen it?

A recent study of the previous occupations of federal Labor MP's immediately before they entered Parliament is telling. In 1971, only 24 per cent of MP's had come directly from an ALP or union job. In 2005, they had grown to 67 per cent of Labor's federal Parliamentary population.⁶ Some of these members would have had work experiences which were outside politics and the unions — but not many. In short, as the branches shrink — the strength of the political careerist grows.

There was much debate in the last federal election about the number of former union officials in the Labor team. While the Coalition argument was exaggerated it is true that representation by former union officials is very high because of the formal affiliations unions have to the Labor Party.

This ensures a particularly significant level of union influence in the selection of State Upper House and Senate candidates. It has come to the point where it is rare to find in the Senate these days someone who was not a union or party official before they entered Parliament.

The Upper House is therefore not a good recruiting place for talented, public spirited individuals who come from other backgrounds.

Neville Wran was recruited into the Parliamentary Labor party in 1970 at a time when the Legislative Council was used to recruit the brightest and the best from

⁴ Jaensch, D (2006). 'Party structures and processes', in Marsh, I (ed.) *Political Parties in Transition?* Federation Press, Sydney

⁵ Bramble & Kuhn (2007). *The transformation of the Australian Labor Party*, Joint Social Sciences Public Lecture, Australian National University.

⁶ Bramble & Kuhn (2007). *The transformation of the Australian Labor Party*, Joint Social Sciences Public Lecture, Australian National University.

outside the party. But times have changed. The last Senior Barrister to enter the Legislative Council was in 1990.

So, if we are to deepen the political gene pool, we will need to find ways of broadening Parliamentary representation. This does not mean severing the Union ties. Their major role in the success of the Kevin 07 campaign is testimony to their importance.

But Labor needs to be a broad church if it is to stay relevant to voters and the increasingly complex motivations behind their decision to support one party over another. In large part, it was this ability to appeal to a wide cross section of voters which delivered a Rudd government in 2007.

The same goes for all the State and Territory Labor governments elected between 1995 and 2002. It is this pragmatic approach to politics which has delivered Labor so many wins over those years. Kevin Rudd — like Bob Carr, Peter Beattie, Geoff Gallop, Jim Bacon, Steve Bracks and Mike Rann — brought his party out of the wilderness in large part because he is a centrist and a uniting force.

Rather than build his politics around division — a highly regrettable feature, in my view, of the Howard Government, Rudd has tried to bring people together and look for common ground. John Howard presented himself as a strong leader,⁷ best summed up with phrases like: you may not like everything I do but at least you know what I stand for. While this appealed to a large section of the public trying to deal with the fallout from the Keating economic reforms of the '80s and '90s, its attraction ultimately wore out because it did not allow for generational change.

In 2001, after struggling with quite a few issues, including the emergence of Pauline Hanson, and nearly losing the 1998 election, Howard leveraged remarkable public support when he used the Tampa/refugee issue to do two things. First, he drove a wedge between Labor and many of its traditional supporters on the question of refugees. Second, he effectively mainstreamed the Hanson vote back into support for the Coalition.

The ultimate problem with this approach to politics is that Howard himself became so symbolic of — and identified with — strong leadership that no-one else in his party could be convincingly identified with it. Peter Costello represented generational change and perhaps attitudinal change but neither the Parliamentary Liberal Party nor its supporters would accept Costello.

The upshot of all this was that the Howard Government — when contrasted with the consensus focused Rudd — simply failed to show it was capable of change or compromise — except when it was all too late — as was the case when Howard went from climate change denier to reluctant climate change acknowledger.

⁷ Brett, J (2007). *Exit Right: The Unravelling of John Howard*, Black Inc, Melbourne.

Or, when the ‘no disadvantage’ test was reintroduced by the Howard Government when the public was showing its fear of the impact of ‘WorkChoices’.

In other words — it is Rudd’s ability to take a more centrist position and his ongoing enthusiasm for reaching out to the public through consultations like the 2020 Summit and Community Cabinets that is giving Labor an image of engagement with and appreciation of the views of people who are not party affiliates or the Labor faithful.

This drive to the centre and beyond his party extended to appointing Brendan Nelson as co-chair of a bi-partisan commission on Aboriginal Housing. Interestingly, Nelson first accepted then later declined the position — citing as his reason the Government’s failure to include Mal Brough.

Only this week the Prime Minister appointed former National Party leader, Tim Fischer, as our next ambassador to the Holy See.

Writing recently in the *Monthly* magazine, Judith Brett argued that ‘the best days of political parties are over and ... we have entered a transitional period in the evolution of our political institutions ...’.⁸

Community cabinets, active responses to citizens’ petitions and the 2020 Summit were all cited as examples of the new politics — the new engagement with the electorate — bypassing the parties.

Not so many years ago it was easy to typecast the Labor Party as ‘left’ and the Coalition as ‘right’ and their economic policies reflected those opposing descriptions. Today, it is much harder to use those traditional descriptors to define them. Labor is less a party of ideology than the Liberals.⁹ Working class voters are now quite conservative and the middle class inner suburbs always have the largest concentration of Green voters. Labor has embraced the free market while damning the excesses of ‘Work Choices’ and its impact on family life.

Once upon a time the Labor Party platform was promulgated and defended by ‘faceless’ machine men. Their adherence to the platform would have impressed the 16th century Jesuits. Labor’s catastrophic split in the 1950s is testimony to the damage this does to the electoral prospects of a Party. Today, key parts of the ALP’s platform — like the ‘Socialist Objective’ — are honoured in their breach. You need only look at NSW — which is currently in the throes of a debate over energy privatisation to see how blurred the traditional lines have become.

⁸ Brett, J (2008). *Is Malcolm Turnbull all that stands between Australia and a one-party state? The Monthly* (June), Black Inc, Melbourne

⁹ McKnight, D (2005). *Beyond Right and Left: New politics and the culture wars*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest

So, today the world has changed, the Parliamentary leadership has changed and is reaching out to many non-party sources for policy input. The Party itself has shrunk, overall union membership is declining but the method of selecting our parliamentary representatives is almost completely unchanged.

A shrinking group of people is determining who our parliamentarians will be and they are less representative of the broader community than at any time in living memory. They are the pool from which our ministers are drawn. I believe that something has to be done to put balance back into the process of identifying and appointing our Ministers. I think that most of our Ministers do a sterling job — but their background is simply not diverse enough.

In other jurisdictions the question of appointing the best ministers available — regardless of where they come from — is nowhere near as vexed as it is in Australia. I believe that this is a problem which, if not addressed, will only get worse and the quality of our governments will suffer.

So what can be done?

First we can look at how other jurisdictions appoint their ministers and see what we can learn from them.

In the United States all Ministers are nominated by the President and ratified by the Senate. They are never elected but are answerable to Congress and Committees. However, since the American system is so different from our Westminster traditions, I don't propose to spend any time advancing their processes.

In Britain there is a very convenient method by which the Prime Minister can appoint Ministers from outside politics. It is called the House of Lords.

When he succeeded Tony Blair in 2007, Gordon Brown took some significant steps to create what he called a government 'of all the talents'.¹⁰ Membership of the Labour Party would no longer be a prerequisite to a ministerial post and nor would a long stint in Parliament be necessary.

In a move described by even the conservative press as a 'coup', Brown made the former Director General of the Confederation of British Industry, Sir Digby Jones, a life peer and immediately appointed him Minister for Trade Promotion. Sir Digby had never been a member of the Labour Party. Since then, Brown has made a number of other appointments in the same fashion, including Sir Allan West, the former Navy chief, as Security Minister and a prominent surgeon Professor Sir Ara Dazi as Minister in charge of improving patient care.

¹⁰ Brown, Colin & Morris, Nigel (2007). 'Brown completes Government of all talents', *The Independent*, 30 June

There are other examples of Prime Ministers and Provincial leaders being empowered to make ministerial appointments from outside Parliament, allowing non-elected ministers to sit side-by-side with elected ministers. A number of Italian State governments have similar arrangements. In Puglia, Toscana, Lombardia and Veneto several non-elected ministers sit in their parliaments with up to 17 elected ministers.

Right here in Australia, South Australian Premier Mike Rann has gone further than any other leader in dealing creatively and constitutionally with this issue. The story of how he deepened his government's political gene pool is worth telling.

In 2002 the Rann government was elected by the slimmest margin. Over the course of his first term, Rann secured a working majority on the floor of the house, initially by obtaining the support of former Liberal member Peter Lewis and subsequently through the support of the sole National party member of the South Australian parliament, Karlene Maywald, and Liberal turned independent Rory McEwen. Maywald and McEwen were made Cabinet Ministers and Lewis was elected Speaker. This was, at the time, a marriage of convenience but when his government was re-elected in 2006 with a massive majority both these non-Labor Ministers were reappointed to the Cabinet.

McEwen will retire at the next election but Rann has publicly stated that Maywald is doing such an important job as Minister for Regional Development, Water Resources and most importantly — the Murray River — that she will continue as a minister should his government be re-elected.

Despite some internal criticism Rann says his administration is stronger and is demonstrably a government for all South Australians. He said, 'they are good ministers and bring a rural and regional focus to the Cabinet table. We are a better government as a result.'¹¹

While these Ministers were already elected and therefore don't fit neatly with my argument that we need more ministers from outside the Parliament, nevertheless it is strong evidence of Rann's commitment to go beyond the confines of his own party to create a Cabinet which is much more broadly representative.

Even more significant was his decision to appoint two non-Parliamentarians to a special high level Cabinet committee called ExComm — short for the Executive Committee of Cabinet. This committee established to oversee the South Australian Strategic Plan — comprises the Premier, three of the most senior ministers and the two non-parliamentarians.

The first appointees were the Liberal-leaning mining magnate — Robert Champion de Crespigny (hardly a Labor name!) and the Vicar General of the Roman Catholic

¹¹ *Rann to govern 'for all SA voters'*, www.abc.net.au, 18 March 2006.

Church, Monsignor David Cappo. De Crespigny was also chair of the Government's Economic Development Board and Monsignor Cappo headed up South Australia's Social Inclusion initiative.

As well as sitting on a Cabinet Committee, these 'non MP's' are also subject to the rules governing Cabinet confidentiality and ministerial standards such as disclosing conflicts of interest. These appointees also have roving briefs to cross all Government agencies insuring the accountability of Departmental CEO's.

The results of this Rann initiative have been remarkable. For example, one De Crespigny initiative to accelerate mining exploration has seen a tenfold increase in South Australia's mining explorations in just five years. Mining exploration in South Australia now exceeds all States except Western Australia.

Finally, another Rann Government initiative — although not related to ministerial appointments or cabinet committees — is the appointment of Thinkers in Residence. Thinkers in Residence have included Baroness Greenfield, the Director of the Royal Institution in London, and Stephen Schneider, adviser to Arnold Schwarzenegger on climate change. I mention them because they are further evidence of Rann's commitment to going beyond traditional Party sources to get the best ideas, programmes and policies.

Rann's pioneering developments, I believe, should just be the start of real changes — constitutional changes — to allow Australian Prime Ministers and Premiers to choose some of their ministers from outside Parliament.

Australia, thankfully, does not have a House of Lords so there is no easy mechanism for slotting ministers into Parliament and then into the Ministry. Some might argue that the Senate or State Upper Houses — where they exist — should be the means by which talented citizens are put into Parliament.

The truth however, as I've shown earlier, is that these positions are always chosen by the Party machine — whether it be Labor, Liberal or National. So, the Parliamentary leader seldom has any meaningful input into the pre-selection of the candidates for unloseable positions on the Party's Upper House ticket.

Given then that some of the greatest democracies in the world allow their Parliamentary leaders to appoint some Ministers, why should the Australian Commonwealth, States and Territories be denied this injection of talent? I can see very little wrong and a lot of good in a system which would allow the Prime Minister or Premiers to appoint say 20 per cent of their ministry from outside Parliament.

The federal government has 30 ministers and state governments have up to 20 ministers. I would advocate a system which allows the Parliamentary Leader to make those appointments into the Upper House — except Queensland where the

appointments — by necessity — would be to the Assembly. The appointed Ministers would have all the responsibilities of an MP and Minister except that they would not be able to vote in Parliament. They would be subject to all the rules and laws governing Parliamentarians and members of the Executive.

I believe that the Leader of the Opposition should have exactly the same right to appoint 20 per cent of the Shadow Cabinet in exactly the same way. I am not so naïve as to think that a departure of this dimension both from Parliamentary conventions and from the existing party power arrangements will receive whole-hearted support. This sort of change challenges the status quo. But do we have choice? Is the body politic so healthy that there is no need for some strong medicine?

The measures I'm proposing would require amendments to the Australian Constitution. At some time in the not so distant future, we will revisit the question of the Republic. That will require a referendum. If we are to have another look at how we are governed why should we confine ourselves entirely to the question of who should be our head of state — important as that question is.

Why don't we have a series of constitutional conventions — just as our forefathers did in the 1880s and 1890s — to see how suited our Executive is to meeting the challenges of government in the 21st century. Let's have a debate about how we appoint our ministers and how they should relate to parliament and the people. Section 128 of the Constitution makes constitutional change in this country very difficult. Time and again, we have seen referenda passed by a majority of Australians but defeated by a majority of states. Today there is a perfect alignment of Labor administrations across the country. As I said earlier, parliamentary Labor leaders at State and Federal levels are much more centrist and less dogmatic than they once were. They certainly seem much less doctrinaire than the previous government. Labor and Coalition leaders around the country have much to gain and very little to lose from actively debating these issues — particularly in the context of the republican debate.

And while I'm on the topic of republic, in Plato's republic the rulers of his ideal city/state are the philosopher kings. They are the guardians of wisdom — society's best minds. I believe that we have to keep searching for new ways, contemporary ways, of identifying and recruiting our best minds into the highest offices in the country.

I have suggested a possible way forward today. I don't think for a moment that it is perfect — but I do believe Australians must seriously and thoughtfully debate this most pressing issue. ▲