

How Not to Do It: Reflections on the 2010 UK Elections*

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I should confess from the outset that here I am involved in something of a reverie. A fraction more than a quarter of a century ago when I was a nervous young doctoral student I voyaged to Britain for the first time to carry out my program of research in the dusty paper archives of that era. It was a different Britain to the one you'll experience as a tourist today. The first six months I was there I lodged as a visitor in graduate accommodation at one of the old Cambridge colleges, an experience which at that time was still akin to being returned by time machine to the middle decades of the nineteenth century, possibly as a theology student. The male students still wore candy striped shirts and pastel pullovers in the *Brideshead Revisited* style and their skin had a pale apricot hue like that of a healthy, well-fed infant. The female students, I well remember, dressed with arch conservativeness, were as cool as ice, and averted their eyes as they spoke. A good many of the students still possessed what the Welsh Cultural Studies professor Raymond Williams once referred to a little cruelly as the English upper-class speech impediment—a cultivated affliction which gives its sufferers the appearance of children with a bad lisp. People still drank something called Pimm's No. 1 Cup on the college lawns and they played social cricket matches with the consumptive languor of romantic poets.

I do recall as a young Australian at that point having a reddish-hued beard. My slow medium paced bowling filled them with terror. Pretty soon I found myself gravitating, as I imagine other Australians might have done too, towards the plentiful American exchange students at that college, which had been the Alma Mater of John Harvard many centuries before. They seemed more familiar in their general egalitarian temper as well as in their consciousness of being treated as colonials even after the short space of 200 years. The second six months of my visit there, and I am talking the year 1984 and into 1985, after a youthful romantic catastrophe from which I'll spare you the details, I lived a quite different life in a rented flat in the tower block council-estate badlands of south-east London. In those far off days there were only two or three culinary options in those parts of London: you could order oily plaice and chips with mushy peas and a scalding cup of teabag tea at the local chippy; you could buy jellied eel in a paper packet from a corner kiosk that seemed not to have been scrubbed since the Georgian era; or you could order takeaway chicken vindaloo from one of the brand new microscopic Indian diners spreading like a benign species of

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reverse colonialism across the land. In that part of London black folks still drank in the back bar, universally, and white folks in the front bar while white men over 50 still wore flat caps, had bad teeth with nicotine stains and bantered cheerfully in a local dialect that elided the final consonants of every word. On Saturday afternoons the football fans still indulged in the traditional English urban recreation of rioting.

There was another curious symmetry about my hectic year of research, life discovery and romantic disaster. Shortly before I boarded the plane from Sydney the leader of Britain's National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Scargill, summarily, and without bothering to bail out his members, declared an indefinite strike on the nation's coalfields. At the end of winter, when the peak consumer demand for coal was already past and with the nation's coal stocks boosted to record levels by the wily manager of the nation's Coal Board in anticipation of just such an event. The strike was called off with the rump of the union industrially broken, financially bankrupt but emotionally unbowed, within days of my return. As a result to me personally the entire year, the miners' strike year, still has a strange unworldly character as if I had voyaged for another year to a fabulous distant world where different rules of logic and gravity applied, rather like a medieval fantasy travel writer like Sir John Mandeville.

Labour historians of a romantic bent in the best quixotic traditions of their trade have written up that catastrophic year in the history of the British Labour movement as if it were a paradoxical moral victory of some kind. Much like Dunkirk or Rorke's Drift or the Relief of Mafeking were written as victories in patriotic history books a generation or two before. Yet I think it is not inappropriate, and I hope I am not too blindly patriotic in saying this, to suggest that the great British miners' strike of that year, an event which lasted for a full year, bankrupted and broke the union, ruined the finances of thousands of families, destroyed interpersonal relations in dozens of communities, killed several people and in the end achieved more or less nothing, is exactly the kind of event that distinguishes British political culture in its elemental aspects from our own.

Political scientists sometimes like to distinguish between expressive and instrumental styles and politics where the purpose of a political expression is to let out and demonstrate your feelings, even to strike a pose perhaps, while the purpose of a political instrument is to achieve a concrete goal, regardless of how mundane or unglamorous you appear in the process. If you constructed a graph line where the two poles of expression on one hand and instrumentality on the other, for all the other links between our nations, Britain's and Australia's political cultures, I think, would surely sit almost as far apart as is practically or geometrically possible—we being crude instrumentalists and they being romantic expressionists. To put the matter

crudely, we would never have done things like that. It takes a special kind of national genius to get things that wrong.

Indeed if there is a single dominating image of that year still burning in my mind after a quarter of a century it is of a Britain, for all its seeming modernity and contemporariness, still a conflicted nineteenth-century romantic nation at heart. Still tying itself in clever verbal knots, still deferring the inevitable, still tilting at windmills, still struggling in perplexity with the problem of democracy and its implications for the national culture, and still, in James Joyce's exquisite old phrase, gazing at itself, as he said, through the 'cracked lookingglass of a servant'. The other striking thing about that peculiar moment in British history is, for the better or worse, and here the reverie is over and I'll get more to the point, that it launched almost all the trains of events that I've seen in Britain over the course of the last few months and years into the station, as it were, more or less at the same time, all pulling into the station around about April this year when Britain had its general election. After all if you go back to that period I'm reminiscing about, the early to mid 1980s, it was the 1983 election which properly inaugurated the period grandiosely titled 'Thatcherism' by its critics which first and most decisively remade modern British politics into what appeared for a good period of time to be a three-party system, even though the great bulk of the British political establishment managed to ignore this obvious fact rather stoically, I think, for another generation.

It was the same election that launched one of the western world's more remarkable political experiments, during which the supervisors of one of the world's most extensive and comprehensive welfare states set out on the business of dismantling the structures they had been ostensibly elected to superintend. To many observers back at that time, it seemed as if the British Labour Party in particular was finished as a major political force. After four years of civil war in which obscure Trotskyist conventicles took part in a large number of Labour city organisations and that party's conference seemed to be engaged in an all out war with its own parliamentary party, Labour's vote fell in 1983 to an extraordinary, unprecedented, unbelievable 27.6 per cent, which is to say about one and a half per cent less than what it was this year, a disaster never equalled since the end of the First World War. There was a long period in the British election campaign earlier this year when it seemed as if that record might in fact be broken. In the end, though, Labour survived, thanks in large measure to the selfless and patient efforts of its then party leader Neil Kinnock, perhaps Britain's equivalent of Bill Hayden in putting a party back together after a disaster.

In the long run, 1983 was actually most notable for the collapse of the British electoral system as an adequate instrument for the transmission of popular votes into parliamentary representation. Labour's 27 or so per cent of the popular vote that year

netted it no fewer than 209 seats in the House of Commons, a disastrous figure, but still far more than you might have expected, mainly due to the fortuitous concentration of Labour votes in strategic electoral heartlands. And yet the Liberal–Social Democratic Alliance of that time, the forerunners of today’s Liberal Democrats, secured a full quarter of the popular vote, about two per cent less than Labour, and nevertheless was rewarded with 23 seats. This means in effect that in 1983 a Labour voter’s vote was worth on average about 10 times that of an Alliance voter, a proportion that would seem ridiculous in Australia. This could only seem unremarkable and not a major fundamental political problem in a country such as Britain, which even though it was the birthplace of modern democracy was still allowing members of parliament to voyage down to London with a few dozen votes in their pockets in the nineteenth century and on a few occasions with no votes at all. I think history has to be at least one explanation of why the British electorate and the British political establishment is so tolerant of political outcomes that by our standards seem absurdly perverse.

Of course Britain is not just the mother of democracy—although Americans might contest that fact, they were more democratic at an earlier stage as they like to point out—it’s also the mother of the two-party institution. Before the Labour and Conservative parties of today there were the Conservative and Liberal parties, the Whigs and the Tories, Hanoverians and Jacobites, Roundheads and Cavaliers. Indeed you could almost style Britain as the birthplace of the modern political binary opposition: the idea that the political spectrum only works when it is divided into two warring groups who in a sense monopolise the political space. In the early decades of the twentieth century, when the morning star of the Labour movement seemed to be in ascendancy, the old Liberal party, which traditionally had been the centre-left party in the way the spectrum was aligned in those days, more or less graciously consented to die as if to allow the new party into being and to allow the two-party system to continue. Historians have often wondered about that peculiar event, why it was that so neatly a two-party system of Liberals and Conservatives morphed into a two-party system of Conservatives and Labour, as if the Liberals willingly consented to die, as if it seemed to be crucial to have two parties and no more and no fewer.

In the 1980s there was for a while a lively debate about what was wrong with British political institutions and the possibility of a three-party system emerging in the country as it seemed at that time to be doing. And you would expect that they should have had such a debate. After all, the Conservatives won a swingeing majority in 1983 on the basis of about 42 per cent of the popular vote. They also won in 1987 and 1992 with an almost identical popular base each time meaning that they dominated British politics for about a decade even though three in five voters voted for centre-left parties. Again, in this country I would think we would normally assume that was

an aberration that maybe we might allow to happen once but not continuously for a decade and not periodically, even semi-normally, for a generation.

I think there is a recent history in Britain of a failure to come to grips with developments which in Australia would appear very obvious: that the traditional model of the two-party system was falling apart for reasons that still aren't clear, least of all to the British political class; and an inability to imagine where to go from there. I suspect therefore that the problems of the 2010 election in Britain where you had a similarly odd result and then a long period after the election where nothing really happened and no one knew what was really happening was in a sense the long-delayed outcome of a generation worth of prevarication and avoiding the question—the great British national disease, I guess you could say.

One other feature of British public life that I want to mention which seems to me pertinent and relevant to current events and which always strikes Australian observers there, I think, is by our standards the relatively low level of economic debate there and indeed of bare rock economic literacy even amongst supposedly informed members of the political class. Paul Keating once quipped something to the general effect that Australians had been forced to turn ourselves into amateur economists because of the manner of our introduction into the global economy in the 1980s and 1990s. We had all been forced to think like miniature economists and we all read the business pages. He might have added that we are compelled into the same role by the confluence of our high levels of home ownership and our predilection for variable interest rate mortgages which means we get incredibly anxious about our entire assets in the world possibly disappearing down the drain on the basis of movements in interest rates, inflation and other factors. And he might have topped this off by pointing out, contrary to what a British visitor might expect, that many of our best practical economists live not in leafy neighbourhoods or chic inner-city apartments where their denizens are blissfully free to think post-materially, but in the highly geared outer suburbs of our major cities where a percentage point or two either way on the cash rate can make the difference between a week of sleepless nights and a full restful eight hours a night.

Now British citizens today are certainly more economically literate than they were a quarter century ago when as I well recall the ceremony of opening a bank account still felt like it was a sacrament best conducted, especially by visiting graduate students, in a borrowed tie and white shirt and when most households' dreams did not extend in that country beyond a pocket handkerchief back garden and three or four rooms in a blitz-era duplex. As we know in Britain they have also moved into the world of shares, investments, managed funds, foreign holidays, pastel-coloured lounge suites and all the rest of it. And yet I think it is still fair to say that the expectations placed on

public policy competence there are still lower than we would be inclined to tolerate. The costing of public policies for the purpose of public debate there is now in fact a business best done by people other than government such as the admirable Institute for Fiscal Studies that produces studies and papers about it, which I think in some respects were the stars of the British election campaign of 2010.

It was often claimed at the time that Margaret Thatcher's premiership from the end of the 1970s to the middle of the 1990s overthrew this culture of benign fiscal vagueness which I think has probably been traditional in Britain ever since the Second World War when they were still using American dollars to build the welfare state in the late 1940s. Supposedly Thatcher threw that over in favour of a severe model of balanced budgets on the model of the household budget according to which running public deficits was akin to sending a family to the poorhouse. But like so many agreeable political myths, I think this one has endured so well because it pleases everybody—Mrs Thatcher's supporters who saw in it evidence of her revolutionariness and her critics who saw it as evidence of her heartlessness and yet I don't think that subsequent scholarship has really borne it out.

Mrs Thatcher and the other conservatives of her era cut public services, of which she disapproved, and privatised public utilities so as to introduce market forces into previously state monopolies. The rationale for both of these actions was really political, much more than economic. Public spending as a percentage of GDP actually fell only quite modestly between 1979 and 1997 during the great maelstrom of the Thatcher years, and mostly that was in the course of two or three years in the mid to late 1980s. And yet tax receipts fell by an equal or greater amount over the same period mostly as a result of political tax cuts by Margaret Thatcher in fact. So the net fiscal position of the British state at the end of the long conservative hegemony was little different from the beginning except that the total amount of spending was less.

Again, while the Blair/Brown administration of the last decade or so from 1997 was bitterly criticised from its left as being far too modest in its public spending, we now know in retrospect that Britain's fiscal position was being allowed to grow steadily more parlous over the course of all of the last decade from the early 2000s. So that after the world economic shocks of late 2008, Britain's public finances more or less collapsed within a matter of months, and as you may be aware from the papers, Britain is now more heavily indebted than it was at the end of the Second World War. Of all of the G7 countries it has by some distance the largest structural component of its deficit of all. It now stands in a fiscal state not dissimilar to the Mediterranean countries or even Ireland albeit that it has a much better ability to service its debt. Again, I'd probably suggest, at risk of sounding like a naive patriot, that this is the end result of several decades of concerted economic absentmindedness.

Certainly Tony Blair saw himself as a modernising leader and I think one does have to give him that. He did attempt to modernise Britain in various ways. He attempted to form public institutions, and indeed parts of the welfare state to be more consumer focussed and I think you would have to give him some of those points. Yet in other respects it was still politics as usual throughout the Blair period and nothing had really changed in other elements of the political culture. British political parties by our standards are still quite antiquated as institutions and his own Labour Party managed to spend a large part of the last decade more or less oblivious to its deadly diminishing popular base. Labour is now back in the same place it was in 1983 when people thought it was on the brink of ceasing to exist as a major political party and they have not really done that much to address it in the meantime.

I think that it is also fair to say that Westminster politics is still more distant and secretive than in Australia and political and service delivery much more centralised and inscrutable. Not every aspect of a more centralised government system is good. We are presently in this country in a sense of wanting to abolish the states and how much better it would be to just have a national government and a local government. Some overseas experiences might seem to bear that out but not all of them. I am not sure that Britain is a case in point. The level of centralisation and the effects it has on public debate and public openness have not always been good. Definitely Britain has moved on since the days of *Yes Minister*. But even today I think it is hard to imagine making a program like that in this country. It wouldn't ring true in a way it does there. The same arrogance and insouciance of the public service elite, apparently with no sense of obligation to explain themselves to the public, doesn't quite work in our setting it seems to me.

We all have somewhere in the back of our minds accompanying fantasy that says that history is a kind of deity which passes wise judgements on events in retrospect, sorts out the saved from the damned, and gives a kind of tidy logic to events in retrospect. I'm here as a trained historian to tell you that history in fact does nothing of the sort. Chiefly we use it to confirm our prejudices, settle scores and explain how we got to be the kinds of interesting people we are today, much more interesting than the people of the past. So as an historian I never expect history to tell me what really happened or to illuminate what seemed obscure at the time although retrospect is an invaluable tool for all that. There are also historical moments that I think in retrospect assume a new significance and I think in retrospect 2010, like 1983 to 1985, will seem like that in the modern history of Britain. It stands if you like as an historical henhouse in which a great many political chickens came home to roost at the same time.

There are two points then I think worth making. The first is I think that Britain has been in a de facto non-two party state now for a generation, but had been in denial

about that—partly out of self interest of the different political parties. At points it suited the Conservatives; more often it's Labour who's done best out of that situation. You can argue the toss back and forth and people more expert than me could do it better, about how that would look if they had a different electoral system, if they had preferential voting such as we do. They are now toying with the idea, but being British of course they can't say 'like they do in Australia'. Instead they call it the 'single transferrable vote' which always reminds me of the days when they used to call the secret vote the Australian ballot. And the reason why you couldn't have the secret vote in Britain was because that's the way they did it in Australia. You could ask yourself would Britain be a three-party system now if they had preferential voting such as we have in federal elections here and I don't know what the answer to that is. Maybe it would ironically have morphed to something being closer to the two-party system again. Would the Liberal Democrats be more like the Democrats here or the Greens? I don't know. But nevertheless that is what they have had for generations.

The second point would be a distinct point from that really. Over that period of time there had been also a kind of willed blindness about the fragility of British public finances which has been obscured by the great political turmoils of that period. Even today people in Britain say 'Thatcher's Britain' which of course summons up all the fires of hell as if in that period Britain was completely remade and from that you would expect the statistics would tell us all sorts of things went up and down and unfortunately on the whole the statistics don't show that, with a few exceptions, at all. On the whole Britain was not perhaps transformed as dramatically over that period as we may have imagined. And even today, which was still obvious in the recent election campaign, Britain has still remained remarkably vague. Obviously the state of its public finances and their robustness and how to reinforce them and make them sounder but also how to communicate that and discuss that in public political debate. And it has really not happened in that country, I think it is fair to say, in any concerted way in the course of the last generation at all.

And again this is naive patriotism on my part, but when you compare the debates and the turmoil we've had in this country over the same period—think Paul Keating and the banana republic and all those other things. Remember we all thought the country was going down the plughole because of our current account deficit at one point. We kind of all forgot that because it didn't seem to be so much the case. If anything we worried too much rather than too little whereas in Britain for whatever combination of historical factors, it can't just be World War II, they clearly worried much too little. A matter of equal concern is that they have also not found a way to address it in public debate. That was the thing about the 2010 election there. Very strikingly from an Australian point of view Britain faced the most dramatic economic events since World War II. It is in a fiscal position, potentially even other kinds of economic

positions, resembling the Great Depression (possibly) over the next few years and yet there has been no serious attempt to address the underlying factors in public debate. Most of the British public have not been drawn in to that knowledge in a way we would expect in this country. There has been clearly a failure of public debate. It doesn't just say something in a parochial sense about Britain, but about the perils of public debate in parliamentary democracies even in the mother of them all.

Two points I want to make. Firstly, the two major problems with the British election this year are that the campaign was conducted in a fashion that still presumed that Britain was a two-party system—and it hasn't been for a generation—and the manner in which that was done gravely compromised the workings of representative democracy. Point two: in the context of the gravest fiscal and possibly even economic malaise of Britain since the Great Depression, there was no serious attempt to articulate to the public the depths of that and what would be required.

The Institute of Fiscal Studies costed what the parties were saying would be needed between now and 2015 to address just the structural budget deficit of public finances in Britain, not worrying about unemployment, and concluded that all the parties thought that it was somewhere between about £45 and 64 billion. Then the Institute for Fiscal Studies looked at all of the statements made by all the parties up until the election day and what they were proposing to do and it varied according to the party. Labour was the worst offender: they had costed savings up to about 13 per cent of the total of what they said would be necessary—87 per cent of what presumably needed to be done they weren't about to tell the British electorate. The most virtuous were the Liberal Democrats. They enumerated about one quarter of the cuts they said they thought would be necessary but then theirs was the most optimistic picture of what would be needed so maybe they weren't being so virtuous after all. The British election of 2010 was a basic failure of democratic protocols and trust even in the electorate which is very sad to say about the country that in a sense invented the system and our system as well.

The Liberal Democrats were widely described in the British election campaign and presented themselves as a centre-left political party. Labour also still presents itself as a centre-left political party. The Conservatives present as a centre-right political party moving more centrewards. The centre has become much more densely populated in British politics than it was a generation ago. It's fair to say that British voters going into the polling booths would have voted on those presumptions. None of the three parties at any point talked about what they might do after the election even though I think it was manifestly obvious that no party was likely to get an electoral majority in their own right. None of the three parties said anything about what would happen in the overwhelmingly likely event that a coalition had to be formed so anyone thinking

of voting Liberal Democrat, a party presenting itself as a centre-left political party, had no idea whether in voting Liberal Democrat they were voting in a government of the left or in fact a government of the centre-right.

So 25 per cent of the British electorate—plus other people voting for minor parties, who got nowhere of course in their system at all, their votes were just lost—voted in pure hope with no knowledge whatsoever of what their vote would mean for the outcome of the election and which government would be formed. I would have thought that this is simply a miscarriage of democracy in a moral sense. Likewise, even Labour and Conservative supporters had no idea what their parties were going to do after the election. No one would talk about it. I would have thought that with a generation to think through this point it should have been possible to imagine beforehand how you would speak to the electorate and take the electorate into your confidence about those issues.

I hope that in similar circumstances in this country we would not go down that path. It's not immediately on the horizon. There is no third party immediately in the process of becoming big enough that that would become an issue, but if it did then that obviously would be a problem. It is hard to imagine what circumstances in this country would approximate that. I came up with Liberals and the National Party refusing to campaign together but then coming back into the coalition after the election. Labor and the Greens campaigning separately but then forming a joint government would be a paler version of the same imposture but on a much lesser scale. It is hard to imagine this country in the near future which would mirror that but I think the basic principle is simple: that the British electorate should have been taken into the confidence of the party leaders.

Even to make things more bizarre, after an election campaign in which Labour and the Liberal Democrats both presented themselves as centre-left political parties, neither seriously engaged in talks with the other to form the centre-left government that most people assumed they were trying to form. So even people's best guesses of what might happen were confounded and they were given no hint otherwise. All the anecdotal evidence that has come out since the election campaign has suggested that neither the Liberal Democrats nor Labour seriously intended to form a coalition as a result of the election. So what it is the British electorate were supposed to make about that series of political events and how they should vote I have no idea. It is a travesty of a venerable and worthy electoral system.

The second point, as I have mentioned already, is that there was no serious effort to deal with the fiscal crisis in political terms or to explain in any serious way how it was going to be dealt with. Immediately after the election the new Conservative–Liberal

Democratic government did exactly what you would expect, they said ‘oh my goodness, things are so much worse than I thought. Even worse will be needed and we might now tell you what that is’. Clearly that was a failure of politics and democracy as well. Again, in terms of lessons for Australia we have no immediate lessons of that magnitude where the parties have failed to take the electorate into their confidence in that spectacular way. However, the possibilities are there. Over the last couple of years since the global economic crisis of 2008 out of a sense of the urgency of the times, clearly there were standards of public accountability and public disclosure to do with aspects of the stimulus program which were troubling in terms of developing economic policy in secret. Ever since the early 1980s Australian federal governments have taken the electorate broadly into their confidence about our economic difficulties, sometimes even exaggerated them as in the case of Paul Keating and the banana republic. There are even some signs that in times of what appears to be economic emergency—and in retrospect maybe 2008 for us in Australia was not an economic emergency—governments might be tempted to do things without taking the electorate into their confidence or providing costings that we would otherwise have expected them to have done.

To be frank, watching the 2010 elections in Britain it was hard not to be affected by a rather unscholarly and even complacent sense of patriotism. This was the point of course of my opening reverie, that even in the mid-1980s it was still possible for a visitor to see Britain in that nineteenth century fashion. With our imagined national ethos that we like to think of as being pragmatic and problem-solving, what we like to believe is our general willingness to face political problems squarely. We would like to believe we’ve avoided most of the egregious problems that afflict British political culture today. Yet, observing the largely improvised and untidy populism that’s already in place in our own electoral process in 2010 it might be useful to keep in mind the recent British experience, as they would have said in the Middle Ages, as a *momento mori*, a remembrance of death, a reminder of what happens to democracy when simple respect for the intelligence of the electorate is lost.



Question — Why are Britons so indifferent about their electoral systems? Is it that the flat caps that you saw being worn in 1983 are very much a state of mind still and a large proportion of Britons think that someone else will look after them, they don’t have to be engaged? Why don’t they demand electoral reform?

David Burchell — Of course, it was an impressionistic paper and I run the risk of being too impressionistic in what I said there as well. A more mundane explanation, I guess, would be interests—political interests. You could say that it has suited the Labour and Conservative parties at different times to keep things as they are, and yet ironically, at the end of it all, I think it is a bit of a case study, sometimes, doing the right thing for the long run. I don't think in 10 years time, looking back, the British Labour Party will think they were as clever as they thought they were because not addressing the problems with the electoral system in Britain and the manifest bad representation it has led to over the last generation. By not addressing those problems as they emerged, they possibly in the longer run have condemned themselves to a worse fate than they might otherwise have endured. Because paradoxically, if Britain had moved towards what Gordon Brown was vaguely talking about over the last 12 months, which is a sort of watered-down approximation of our exhaustive preferential system, I would have thought that the British electorate, over that time, could have got used to preferential voting and would not feel that they had to make a choice about who the centre-left party of the future was going to be if they have to make that choice. If they do make that choice it's entirely possible it may not be Labour. That was entirely possible after the 1983 election. A lot of people in the Labour Party at the time feared the party's extinction. It's not impossible, it could happen again.

I don't want to sound like some sort of freshly scrubbed baby in this respect in my innocence, but it could be one of those cases where you look back and think, maybe actually doing the right thing would have been the right thing. Maybe addressing the problem at the time, even though it seemed electorally expedient to Labour to keep a system that worked for them, might, in the long run, have served them better. Because as their old historic base fell away, and they were more reliant on more lukewarm support, it may have been, actually, that a system closer to ours would have suited them better. They are now really reliant on strategic heartlands. If you look at the electoral map of Britain now, if you look at the election results of Britain from 2010 you will see what I mean. Virtually the entirety of England is Tory, with the exception of certain neighbourhoods around south-east England, and everything from north of the midlands is Labour or Liberal Democrat. It's purely tribal in a sense, which is a result, I would say, of having failed to address some elementary problems of the needs for change in the electoral system over a generation.

Question — Your statement at the end, that simple respect for the intelligence of the electorate is lost, really resonated with me. Frankly, here in Australia I don't see our parliamentarians of any party really speaking to our better nature and I find that a great tragedy. What can we the electorate do about that?

David Burchell — I have to confess my expectations are lower than yours. I know exactly what you mean. I am kind of with you there and kind of not. I am a believer in majoritarian politics, so I believe one has to find political solutions to things that are morally complex, and I don't believe we can expect better of our politicians than that and if we do, we are probably expecting things they can't deliver. But I do think there is some level below which politicians shouldn't stoop and should be expected not to stoop. Even if they don't incarnate our best natures, as we might wish they did, at the very least they shouldn't deceive us egregiously or leave us in the dark. They should give us choices that at least we understand and then if people make the choices we think are the wrong ones, at least a choice was made. I understand the problem you are alluding to. I think I'm talking about a much more mundane lower-level problem, which is not even politicians doing the right thing, or following their hearts, but simply making it possible to understand what the options are, even if people choose what you or I might think is the wrong one.

Question — Two brief examples, using asylum seekers as ping pong balls, and the wars in Iraq where everybody was sort of being hairy-chested. I don't understand how that is talking to a better nature.

David Burchell — Well I just say again, what I said just then. I distinguish between two orders of problem there. A problem where you think, where you are angry that politicians you think are behaving in an immoral fashion and my lower-order problem, which is whether or not the politicians even present the choices on offer. Even if you feel the people have made the wrong one.

Question — I would like to call into question the point you made that the 2010 British elections proceeded on a two-party basis and I would like to do so in the context of the televised debates. The very first time that Britain had televised debates, all three leaders were represented and that is something that would be unthinkable in Australia.

David Burchell — It wouldn't be unthinkable if we had a third party that was on track to become a second party. The Liberal Democrats, when those debates were held, were a serious possibility of polling more than Labour and when that happens in this country I would hope we would do the same thing. You are absolutely right, of course, I misspoke and I would take your point entirely. The British election campaign of 2010 was conducted in certain respects as a three-party election campaign. Of course that was also unbelievably novel and what blew everyone's socks off, if you were following the British newspapers, cynical columnists were caught up in this. I remember one of my favourite English columnists, a guy called David Aaronovitch, he writes for the *Times*, he just thought this was the most exciting

election in history. I think just because, somewhere in his mind he felt they were finally addressing the world that was there in terms of how people were intending to vote. You are absolutely right, of course, it was presented for the first time as a three-party system and yet the parties didn't behave that way, which is the simple point I was trying to make. They still behaved as if each of them was in a two-party system which accidentally had a third party, if you know what I mean. Yet clearly what was going to be the outcome of the election was a coalition government. That was the overwhelming likelihood and yet they still behaved in the two-party mentality of talking as if one of the three parties would govern. So you are absolutely right and I didn't express my point correctly and you forced me to express it correctly and thank you for that.

Question — I think there is a fourth party in the British system that you haven't mentioned and that is the apathy party, of people who don't vote. And the big difference between Australia and England is, of course, that in Australia we have compulsory voting—something which I think is absolutely brilliant, having come from England. I wonder to what extent that the lower vote is a possibility in Australia too given that we now have parties that are competing at the centre rather than being clearly defined as left or right. People could become so pissed off, disillusioned with politics, that they will just not turn up to vote even though we have compulsory voting.

David Burchell — The political historian in me has to say, and this is something political sciences, I think, have established as well as you can empirically, as far as I'm aware there is no evidence that Australians are actually more disenchanted with politics now than they were a generation or two generations ago. Australians were always cynical about politics. We always want to believe we are getting more cynical and Australian political parties have always tended to cluster to the centre and of course most times they do in most countries except in exceptional circumstances. But you are absolutely right that something that distinguishes not Britain but us is compulsory voting, or at least compulsory attendance at elections. We are not forced to vote, of course. It is possible to argue that point in law, I suppose, but compulsory attendance at polling booths at the very least. Of course that is our peculiarity rather than the British. I cannot actually remember what the turnout was in 2010 in Britain. I do remember that people were disappointed. They expected all the excitement of the new three-party debates and all that would make the turnout higher than it was but I can't remember what it was.

But certainly in a lot of Western countries there has been a slow decline in participation, spectacularly in America, over the last couple of generations. There has been a slight decline in Australia as well, of more people being fined for not turning

up to polling booths. But we don't exactly know why that is. That might be apathy. It might just be busyness. Who knows? And of course people in Australia have argued for the longest time as to whether our system is better or worse. But certainly what we do know is it's more representative. The most egregious thing about the British system is that if you have a first past the post system without preferences, and without our system of compulsory voting, it does mean that, in effect, Margaret Thatcher believed she was re-making Britain on 42 per cent of the vote of about 70 per cent of the population. The legitimacy of governments by our standards becomes, in a sense, absurd. I would have thought that if you put those two things together you have a major problem. The first past the post system I think is antiquated and they should get rid of it. Put it together with voluntary voting and the legitimacy of balance starts to look shaky.

Question — What I would like to ask you is what you think for the UK, and perhaps also for Australia, is the best electoral system? The Liberal Democrats want proportional representation. Having seen what havoc that created in France in the fourth republic with unstable governments, I don't think it is a good idea at all. Perhaps for the same reason you're suggesting that they won't copy Australia in the UK, nobody thinks of copying the French system of constituencies with two rounds of voting. As you know it is said in France that in the first round you vote with your heart, in the second with your wallet.

David Burchell — I confessed five or six times to naive patriotism today already and here is the seventh. I actually think our system works well. It's not flawless, of course. Minor parties often feel quite annoyed about it, feel they are underrepresented and minor parties in Australia always think that proportional representation would be better. On the other hand, of course, minor parties like the Greens sometimes get to enjoy themselves and run the prospect of winning seats like Melbourne or Melbourne Ports or Sydney with far less than 50 per cent of the popular vote, not even coming close to coming first in the electorate. So occasionally they get their moment in the sun as well and it would be a very big moment in the sun, maybe even a bit of a minor travesty of democracy when it happens, but nevertheless. So we have our aberrations in our system going both ways, both to the disadvantage and to the advantage of minor parties but nothing compared to first past the post. Of course you will be aware in Italy, after the great corruption scandals of the 80s, the Christian Democrat hegemony collapsed. They were so disillusioned with proportional representation, regarding it basically as a mechanism for corruption, which it sometimes is, that they then borrowed the British system, or thought that was what they were doing. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, I guess you could say. I think proportional representation does have the problems you have mentioned by itself and some hybrid system often. It's one of those things, where hybrid systems are often better than pure

systems. Our system is really a hybrid and, as you say, the French is another. Hybrid electoral systems often work quite well.

Question — I wonder if you would comment on the actual mechanics of the voting process because the failure of the first past the post system is a fairly obvious thing, even on a superficial reading. I was astounded at some of the mechanics where one person has to check the roll off in each polling booth. There is only one person instead of half a dozen as we have here, and enormous queues, voting on a working day, and apparently not enough papers in some electorates. How could they be so administratively incompetent when you compare the efficiency of the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) here?

David Burchell — Well I don't know how the AEC does it, I have to say, having lived in a number of countries over the years. I don't know how they do it, they are brilliant and I have no idea how, unlike almost every country in the Western world, using a purely mechanical, analogue, non-digital system of voting, we can know what happened in federal elections across the entire country in an hour and a half. In other countries of a similar level of affluence and political sophistication it can take days to find the same answer. It is a tribute to the AEC. So there is my ninth bit of naive patriotism for the day. I suppose to be fair to them you would have to say that in a country, which is every country in the Western world but us, where voting or at least attendance is not compulsory, the question of how many ballot papers to print is slightly more vexed. Obviously it's an era of constraint on paper usage as well. You're hinting at, I think, an element of antiquatedness there that might be specifically British and there might be that as well, but certainly our AEC is a model, or ought to be a model. I am not aware of anyone else in the world coming to see how it does it. I don't know how we manage to do it. Having been in all aspects of the polling process myself in different parts of my life, working as a young person in there, having scrutineered in the past and all sorts of things, it's pretty impressive.