Australia's Representation Gap: A Role for Parliamentary Committees?

Now it has a majority in both Houses, the Howard government will be able to pass all the measures it desires. Will this mean that the government can more effectively tackle difficult longer term issues like salinity and water management, nursing home funding or lifelong learning?

In a new study, David Yencken and I argue that it will not. Preparing public opinion for action on longer-term issues requires a significant change in approach. [1] There are fundamental problems both in the way parliament and the executive works and in the density of the links between these institutions and the wider community. Basically, we argue the incentive structure that is at the core of our familiar two party, adversarial system hampers rather than facilitates the development of public opinion. We also argue the links between the political system and the community have weakened to a degree that jeopardises policy making capacity. There is now a representation gap between the formal political system and the Australian community.

For evidence of both failings, we need look no further than the recent election campaign. The rhetoric and promises of the party leaders had almost nothing to do with the big issues that face the country. For example, the aging of the population has wide ranging fiscal and institutional implications. Who will pay for the hospital system, medical care, nursing homes and pensions as the baby boom generation passes into retirement? How will delivery systems be reconfigured to accommodate these pressures? How will the education system be reconfigured to allow re-skilling? Or take environmental sustainability. The Murray-Darling Basin is one of the most important water catchment and agricultural regions in the country. The problem of salinity has been recognised for years. In the face of continued inaction, it grows worse.

The gap between policy needs and political rhetoric has been recognised by a wide range of community organisations. These include the Business Council which last year conducted a major long-term review of Australia's outlook. It concluded much more needed to be done to prepare the community for the uncertainties ahead. The Productivity Commission has recently added its voice with its call for attention to challenges facing the health, education, nursing

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[1] *Into the Future: The Neglect of the Longer Term in Australian Politics*, Australian Collaboration/Black Inc. ($18).

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home and pensions systems as well as for a wider debate about Telstra privatisation and greenhouse issues.

Prime Minister Howard has himself acknowledged that there is a problem. After a leaked Cabinet submission thwarted consideration of Higher Education funding changes, he observed: 'We have got to have a capacity in this country to have a sensible discussion about long-term policy issues without everything being distorted and blown out of the water by misrepresentation' (SMH, 16th October 1999).

What is the ultimate ground for effective policy making? We argue there is only one – an informed public opinion. Political processes should aid the development of a broad consensus if such is possible, at least on priorities and directions. The more an informed public recognises the significance and priority of an issue, the wider the range of actions available to governments and the better the outcome for the whole community. An informed public also allows governments to respond more rapidly and realistically to exigencies. Of course government's must sometimes confront their publics. But mostly they need to work by persuasion.

Why have our political leaders been unable to generate public understanding of longer-term issues? We argue the cause lies in the way the present system engages public opinion. The basic problem concerns the way longer-term issues come before the public. This happens through the parliament. When political leaders bring matters into parliament, fake adversarialism typically takes over. If the Government declares a contentious issue to be white, and public opinion is divided or uncertain, the Opposition almost invariably declares it to be black. Yet in government, the Opposition may often have supported a similar approach (e.g. both major parties on a consumption tax). This is not because the Opposition front bench is perverse or malevolent. It happens because, when public opinion is divided or uncertain, rewards accrue to leaders who champion contrasting alternatives, even if they are hollow or only manufactured for political impact.

The present political incentive structure is the culprit. It rewards sharp distinctions. This encourages the major parties to create differences even when they don't exist or to exaggerate them when they are minimal. Or it encourages parties to try to manufacture issues that shift debate away from matters of real longer-term significance towards

those that offer most advantage in the struggle for office. Hence the rise of wedge tactics.

When Australia's political parties were divided ideologically, there was merit in an adversarial structure. It ensured that sharp distinctions in the parties' approaches would be clearly communicated to the public. Now there is overlap and convergence between the major parties. The political system has not adapted to this development.

One key problem concerns the transparency of the policy development process. Issues only come to the parliamentary arena after the government has decided what to do. This means that its prestige is implicated in the successful passage of its proposals. This encourages posturing and attention to electoral advantage. Electoral incentives invariably trump arguments based on merit and prudence. There is no setting for a prior phase of inquiry in the parliamentary domain where the scope for even partial consensus between the major parties could be explored. There is, in other words, no scope for a 'contemplative phase' in public debate.

This is despite the high degree of common ground between the parties about broad strategies. Take policy developments after 1983. The major changes introduced after that time all enjoyed bipartisan support. These included financial deregulation, floating of the exchange rate, an independent Reserve Bank, competition policy, tariff reductions and change to the IR system, although Labor did not go as far as the Coalition wished.

Tacit bipartisanship is not a base for effective policy making. On the contrary, it has perverse consequences. A gap between elite and public opinion creates a climate that is very congenial to populism, as exemplified in the rise and fall of One Nation. Populist surges introduce new pressures on the major parties. It encourages them to distort debate and to conceal important but difficult issues. As a result, opportunities are lost for building public understanding of longer-term issues such as the environment, Indigenous disadvantage, globalisation, or continued economic reform. Is it any wonder public opinion remains divided and uncertain about action on these fronts? Hansonism may have passed but the public uncertainty and distrust that provided the base for its mobilisation is alive and well.

For most of the twentieth century Australians were well served by the two party adversarial system. This reflected the social reality: a community in which socio-economic class was the primary determinant of political orientations and allegiances. But over the past couple of decades, these attachments have been overlaid by a variety of cross cutting influences. These include gender, attitudes to the environment, regional loyalties, religious affiliation etc. The community is now much more differentiated and pluralised. Voters are also generally better educated. Via the media, they are subject to a wider array of opinions and images. As a consequence, political loyalties are much more fluid. But the formal political system has not changed to accommodate these developments.

As a result, a representation gap has opened up between the formal political system and the community that it nominally serves. A number of developments have combined to create a particular problem concerning longer-term issues. The major party *organisations* once contributed critically to their identification and resolution. Debates at party conferences were then real events. They provided the opportunity for new agendas to be promoted and for the leadership to connect with the party's activist vanguard. Since the dominant interest groups (trade unions with Labor and business with the Liberals) were closely linked to one or other of the major parties, their perspectives were also well represented. The major parties were also once critical linkage organisations. In the 1950s and 60s, mass memberships reflected the tie between the parties and their supporters. Mass membership was symptomatic of visceral voter loyalties.

All these conditions have now changed. Mass memberships have collapsed. Party conferences are stage-managed. Australians no longer have visceral political loyalties. Interest groups no longer link closely to either party. Activists join social movements not the major parties.

This past federal election bucked the trend of a drift in voter support towards minor parties and independents. There were apparently some gross misjudgements by the Labor leadership. For its part, the Senate result partly followed the (temporary?) suicide of the Democrats. But no serious commentator or participant, not least the Prime Minister, regards this outcome as marking a durable shift in underlying public sentiment towards the major parties.

If we want to improve the management of longer-term issues, what is to be done? Political parties have historically been critical transmission belts for two-way communications between the community and the formal political system, particularly about long-term issues. Prime Minister Howard has lamented their diminished base in the community. Speaking at the centenary dinner of the Australian Women's National League, the Prime Minister commented: '(The political parties) are becoming too narrow…..they need to find ways of relating more comprehensively to community concerns.'

Reviving the major parties is not the solution to the representation gap. They played strong linkage roles in a very different social environment. Then, Australian society was broadly divided on class lines, and socio-economic class was the principal determinant of political attitudes and loyalties. These days have long since gone. They are unlikely to return. Economic status remains an important source of social cleavage but it is criss-crossed with all the other divisions noted earlier. Australian society is now much more diverse. This is a positive development to which the formal political system needs to adapt.

There are a number of steps that need to be taken covering research and technical analysis as well as public and interest group engagement. In relation to research and technical analysis, our report identifies a variety of institutions in other countries that focus on longer-term issues. For example in the UK, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology undertakes assessments of new scientific and technological developments and promotes parliamentary and public awareness and debate. Think of the debates here on stem cell research or genetically modified foods or the current discussion of abortion rates and hazards. Discussion of all these issues needs to be based in an understanding of the underlying scientific evidence. Of course, this will not and should not determine the outcome. But clarity about the factual base may limit or undermine the scope for wild and irrational claims. New Zealand has a Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment who performs a similar role in this important policy area. Another example in a different issue area comes from the United States. Here the Congressional Budget Office plays a role something like our old Economic Planning and Advisory Council. But there is a critical difference: the CBO it reports to the Congress, not to the Executive. This is the right reporting relationship if technical analysis is to inform public opinion. An agency reporting to the executive will always be under pressure to conceal or obfuscate politically difficult findings.

There is a precedent in Australia for transparent reporting on longer-term issues – this is the basis on which the Productivity Commission now operates. The government has recently funded a defence-oriented think tank – the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Again, a reporting relationship to parliament would add to the status of its reports and would aid their dissemination.

In general, we have well developed economic reporting arrangements in Australia but substantially under-developed social and environmental reporting. Other countries have quite well established systems, institutions and indicators. We need more extensive and transparent reporting frameworks in Australia where appropriate with the results disseminated through the parliament.

Research and technical analysis is an important part of the remedy. But perhaps the most important and most difficult aspect involves managing the politics of longer-term issues. In essence, a 'contemplative phase' in public debate is required. This would improve the chance for these issues to be considered on their merits. This phase would need to occur prior to the parties making their detailed policy decisions. There is only one institution in the political structure with the necessary formal standing and authority to create this capacity. This is the parliament. It is the only institution capable of achieving an immediate, comprehensive and direct impact on public, interest group and official opinion. It provides the only setting where the scope for political consensus can be explored.

Within the parliament, the Senate, the House and the joint committees constitute a prime setting for routine review of strategic issues. Committees are the right institutions to introduce new strategic issues to the political agenda and to engage interest groups and the broader community in their consideration. They provide a forum where official, novel, sectional and deviant or marginal opinions can be voiced. Bureaucrats, ministers, interest groups and independent experts appear on an equal footing.

The parliament can also stimulate the formation of broader public opinion through its varied processes and deliberations. The theatre of parliament creates the cameo dramas that communicate the significance of these issues to a broader public. This is now mainly fostered through rituals such as Question Time and Urgency Motions that have

lost their original purpose. The political drama needs to be refashioned to contribute positively to the development of sectional and public opinion.

The present committee system provides basic infrastructure but many of its features fall far short of what would be required. To amplify parliament's contribution to the broader policy making process, its committees would need to have enhanced standing, roles and powers. The present system is inappropriately structured; committees are insufficiently focused. The present committees work on a shoestring and their staffing is totally inadequate. The incentives for committee work are weak; those with ministerial ambitions may be fearful of taking an independent line. Finally, the use of latent parliamentary powers, particularly in the Senate, to gain attention for committee findings and recommendations is hugely underdeveloped.

Developing the role of parliamentary committees on longer-term issues would be a radical step, since it would involve new parliamentary arrangements outside the immediate authority of the government and the immediate influence of the major policy departments. Those used to adversarial approaches may find an attempt to explore the scope for even limited consensus between the major parties impractical or worse. The idea of routinely probing the scope for even limited consensus between the major parties, at least on guidelines and principles, might instinctively be rejected as giving too much away. Yet this is one key promise of these changes. Of course consensus will be limited, often partial and often unavailable. This is at it should be. But the notion that we are stuck with present ritual adversarialism staunches any possibility of imagining an alternative approach.

In sum, an assessment of the neglect of longer-term issues by the Australian political system is also a study of the way in which the present structure of politics is implicated in Australians' capacity to choose. The current political system does not provide the setting for sustained review and analysis of long-term trends. There are inadequacies in research, in technical analysis, and in public engagement and consultation. Australia needs to invest in each of these areas if it is to have the capacity to respond to new contingencies and persistent trends in an effective way.

An informed public opinion is the ultimate foundation for wise political choice. There is not now sustained concern for public education, involvement and debate. There is minimal

capacity for constructive discussion of strategic issues in parliament. There is little capacity to make transparent the bipartisanship that is so patently present between the major parties. There is little capacity to engage interest groups in the consideration of strategic issues. The net result is a political structure at odds with our real situation and our real needs. The familiar competitive two-party system is now itself a principal obstacle to the capacity of Australians to exercise wise policy choice.