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## **National Sovereignty in a Globalising World\***

*Jeremy Rabkin*

Let me begin with a quick overview of international law. I would divide it into three categories. These are not the categories international lawyers commonly use but they are a useful division of the terrain for our purposes.

The first category we can call ‘customary law’. This was the subject of the great treatises on international law—the works of Grotius and Pufendorf in the Seventeenth Century, Vattel in the Eighteenth Century, Wheaton and Westlake in the Nineteenth Century, down to the works of Lawrence and Oppenheim in the early Twentieth Century.<sup>1</sup> The classic treatises start with the sovereignty of independent states as the first principle of international law and rely on customary practice—with some admixture of natural law reasoning—to elucidate the rights and duties of sovereign

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\* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 1 September 2000.

<sup>1</sup> For scholars of international law, ‘customary law’ has a more precise and in some respects also a broader meaning than I intend to capture here. On the one hand, even the classic treatises often distinguished those norms which rest on nothing more than custom from those seen as resting on natural law principle. Yet the classic treatises, themselves, blurred this distinction by citing actual practice (in other words, ‘custom’) as proof that natural law obligations had been widely acknowledged by states. So perhaps ‘traditional international law’ might have been a better term for me to use for this category. On the other hand, modern treatises extend the term ‘customary law’ to practices of quite recent origin, such as the claim by coastal states to exercise control over fishing and mining within an ‘exclusive economic zone’ stretching as much as two hundred miles from the shoreline (a claim first advanced only in 1945). I do not mean to exclude all such modern developments from my category and that is my reason for avoiding a term like ‘traditional law’. But some things now claimed for ‘customary law’ seem to be quite contrary to the spirit of the classical treatises—such as the claim that there is now a developing ‘customary international law of human rights,’ a claim which supposes that we can infer ‘international custom’ from practices that have no actual inter-state content.

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states in their dealings with each other. If a state wants others to respect its sovereign authority in its own territory, it should respect the comparable claims of other states on their territory. That is the basic idea, at any rate. Much of this is now codified in treaties (on such subjects as the reach of national authority over coastal waters), but it is fair to say that the treaties derive their moral force from the sense that they do simply clarify long accepted practice.

A second category might be called contractual law. Countries often impose quite new obligations on themselves by treaties and these obligations are binding only so long as the other party or parties observe the terms. Military alliances are of this character. So are disarmament agreements. And most trade agreements have this character. Each party has a strong inducement to comply with the terms of the agreement, because if it violates those terms, the other party or parties may retaliate in kind—by withdrawing promised benefits or concessions. The enforcement potential is built into the nature of the undertaking: you fail to remove trade barriers, as promised, and we will restore a trade barrier against you.<sup>2</sup>

A third category of international law might be called ‘constitutive’. It erects some new authority, empowered to impose specific, new obligations on the signatories, without their consent. The pre-eminent example, of course, is the European Union (EU). By a succession of treaties, the member states have established a whole series of supranational authorities, whose decisions and directives take direct effect in the domestic law of the member states and can even overrule parliamentary enactments of the member states. If you like, you may say that the UN Charter was a ‘constitutive’ treaty, since, on paper at least, it authorised the Security Council to impose binding directives on non-consenting states (and even on non-member states of the UN), when the Council judged such measures necessary to ensure international peace. But the framers of the United Nations Charter put a strong brake on this authority. Any one of the five permanent members (US, UK, France, China, Russia) may veto a Security Council resolution, so genuinely intrusive resolutions are quite rare.

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<sup>2</sup> Here again, scholars of international law may see complications that are not acknowledged in the text. Trade agreements are unusually clean examples of contractual treaties, even when they involve multiple parties, as with the agreements negotiated in connection with the World Trade Organisation. If Japan, for example, imposes a trade barrier against imports, contrary to the promises it made in the latest round of international trade agreements, exporting states can complain—and if they do not get satisfaction, each exporting state may impose a proportionate trade burden on Japanese imports (or in other words, withdraw promised concessions to Japan to a proportional extent). Not every agreement allows for such individualised and neatly reciprocal methods of self-enforcement. If most countries in a particular region are committed to a certain agreement—as for example, to limit pollution discharges into a shared waterway—they may not find it easy to enforce compliance on a single delinquent, by acting in kind (as here, by increasing their own pollution practices). But countries do not devote great efforts into cajoling delinquents into complying with their pledges unless they do feel some direct self-interest in maintaining the general terms of the agreement—and unless they feel they do have some reasonable prospect of cajoling delinquents into better behaviour. So agreements designed to ensure conservation of marine resources (such as particular kinds of fish) have not worked very well, because countries are not much inclined to honour agreements in this area when they are widely flouted by others. For useful illustrations, see Peter Haas, ‘Protecting the Baltic and North Seas’ in contrast with M.J. Peterson, ‘International Fisheries Management’ in Peter M. Haas, Robert O. Keohane, and Marc A. Levy, *Institutions for the Earth, Sources of Effective International Environmental Protection*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1993.

I doubt it is worthwhile to think of any other treaties or trends in international law as 'constitutive' in this sense. Accordingly, I think we should acknowledge a fourth category, which I call 'ceremonial' or 'consultative' agreements. I do not think they should be considered 'law' because they impose no serious obligations, beyond the exchange of documents or dignitaries or ceremonial gestures. The British Commonwealth is an obvious example. It imposes almost no obligations on Australia and promises almost no benefits, because it does not seriously oblige the other members, either. Probably the OECD should be viewed in this light, as well, since membership offers no distinct benefits and imposes no meaningful duties.

I think most human rights agreements and at least some environmental agreements should be viewed in just this light. They are ceremonial or consultative. They cannot be taken seriously as law. To confuse them with serious treaties, such as trade agreements, is to misunderstand the nature of international law and of the 'international community' that sustains international law.

I believe this view would have won wide acceptance only a few decades ago. Now many people think that international law can be more ambitious. In effect, they think we are constituting new international legal authorities, somehow above the authority of nation-states, in a whole range of areas. Some legal scholars even speak of 'constitutional law for the international system'.<sup>3</sup> To me, this seems altogether fanciful.

To see why this is so, it is useful again to make some distinctions. If we think of globalisation as primarily a social phenomenon, then everyone agrees it is a fact—but nothing evidently follows from the fact. It is true, for example, that Chinese and Indian and Mexican food have started to appear in restaurants all around the world, along with Hollywood movies and a whole range of other cultural icons. We know more about each other than we used to and borrow more from each other in fashion and taste, as in technology and commercial practice. But none of this implies that we must submit to the same legal authorities.

Secondly, many observers emphasise the economic aspect of globalisation. We are not just sharing ideas but actual products. There is more trade and more foreign investment than there was only 20 years ago and much more than 50 years ago. Successive agreements on reciprocal lowering of tariffs, under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and more recently under the successor entity, the World

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<sup>3</sup> See Louis Henkin, *International Law: Politics and Values*, M. Nijhoff, Dordrecht, Boston, Mass., 1995: the development of fundamental norms regarding human rights 'can be explained and justified as something new—the growth of a *systemic constitutional law* [original emphasis] of fundamental values identified and adopted by the international system. As fundamental values, they do not derive from or depend on state practice, or on law made purposefully by the consent of the states.' (p. 39). After Britain arrested former Chilean president Pinochet, for trial in Europe on charges of human rights abuses against Chileans, on Chilean soil, by the Chilean government, a British scholar hailed the event in these terms: 'Contemporary international law recognises that there exists an international public order' which 'assigns and limits powers which may be exercised by states' and an event like the arrest of Pinochet simply highlights an ongoing 'transformation ... to an international constitutional system.' Weller, 'On the hazards of travel for dictators and other international criminals', *International Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 3, July 1999, p. 599.

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Trade Organisation (WTO), have undoubtedly encouraged this development. But these are, in essence, contractual agreements. Do we need anything more?

Critics of trade liberalisation say that it limits the policy choices of government, because it exposes domestic industry to more competition from other countries with different policies. The way to correct this, they say, is to standardise more policies within countries. We should all agree on common standards (or at least, minimal standards) for the treatment of labour, for environmental protection and perhaps for a range of other things.

But if goods are produced cheaply, purchasers have strong incentives to take the bargain and ignore questions about how the product was made. Formal requirements might be easily avoided by non-compliant or delinquent states by arranging to have their products repackaged or relabelled in other countries. How can the world enforce common standards, then, if importing countries do not have reliable incentives to insist upon them? The implicit answer is that we will establish new, constitutive treaties or elevate existing measures to this stature.<sup>4</sup>

We are often told that the world is ready for this because sovereignty has become less and less important. It is too bad this news has not reached the Palestinians and the Israelis. They could solve their disputes over Jerusalem and other places with no difficulty at all if sovereignty didn't matter and both or neither could be sovereign over the disputed territories. Are these Middle Eastern countries exceptional? I don't think so—at least, not in this respect. Let's look at some well-known trends in the English-speaking world.

The cohesiveness of the British Commonwealth has been dwindling throughout the Twentieth Century. Did Australia—or Canada or New Zealand—have more cultural exchange with Britain in the early part of the century than in later decades? In many ways, of course, movies and television and satellite communications made the exchange more intensive later on, but this did not make for closer political ties.

Internally, the Canadian confederation seemed quite solid in the early decades of the Twentieth Century. Since the early 1980s, Canada has been in a continual constitutional crisis, culminating in the bizarre situation where the role of the principal opposition party in Ottawa—the 'loyal opposition'—fell to the Parti Quebecois, the Quebec separatist party, whose central purpose is to break up the country. Was there more trade between Quebec and the Anglo provinces in the earlier decades of the

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, many advocates for such standards are simply looking for ways to constrain competition from producers in other countries in order to help producers (or their employees) in their own country. For such advocates, international production standards are simply a cover for protectionist policies which they would favour for their own domestic reasons, whatever the policy impact on other countries. But for people who really want to improve labour conditions or environmental conditions in other countries, it is not enough to arrange trade sanctions by one importing state; sanctions are not likely to have much effect unless many countries go along. And how do we force them to go along if they actually want the benefits of free trade? One has to imagine some way of coercing these third states—perhaps by secondary sanctions. What kind of organisation is in a position to organise and impose such secondary sanctions? It is not a power which the WTO is now organised to exercise. We would have to have something much more ambitious.

Twentieth Century? Of course there was less, because the Quebec economy was so predominantly agricultural.

Or look at the trend in local government. Thirty years ago, observers predicted a trend toward the establishment of metropolitan governments. We would have more regional governments in large urban centres, because this was the logical way to handle regional problems. It has not happened at all in the United States, and I am told it has not happened in Australia. People who live in suburbs are very well aware of what goes on in the cities and usually depend on the neighbouring city for their livelihood. There is far more intense and sustained and intimate interaction across city-suburban boundaries than across any international boundary. Still, people in suburbs want to retain as much political autonomy as they can. They think they are better off. And maybe they are right. Perhaps it is selfish of them not to want to share their tax base and their local services with the neighbouring city. At any rate, it is a common enough reaction that it can't be dismissed as a quirk.

But there is surely more disposition to share resources and accommodate common institutions within countries than between them. The powers on the Security Council cannot even agree on measures to disarm Iraq—which threatens to use weapons of mass destruction as soon as it can lay its hands on them. Mass killing in Rwanda did not stir the world to action. Is it plausible to claim that countries which won't extend themselves in the face of such horrors will nevertheless make significant sacrifices for the 'international community'—even when they get no clear or immediate return for such sacrifices?

It is true that the European Union has imposed remarkable sorts of discipline on member states and the member states do accept such supranational controls. But this is the exception that proves the rule. The European Union has a European Court of Justice (ECJ), which can hear cases brought by citizens against their own governments, overrule the decisions of national courts, overturn enactments of national parliaments and impose fines on national governments. These are enforcement powers beyond anything known in any other 'international' body.

Moreover, the ECJ purports to be enforcing rules laid down by European Union authorities. How are they made? The European Union now has decision rules in its Council of Ministers by which national representatives get extra votes, in rough proportion to their relative population. In the European Union Parliament, the apportionment of seats among the member states is also roughly proportionate to population. The European Union is in many ways organised as a federal super-state rather than an international organisation, and it already acts as a single, sovereign entity in international negotiations on trade and environment and a few other issues.

Is Australia ready to enter into anything at all like this with its neighbours? Would it agree to proportional representation (by population) in a system with neighbouring Indonesia—with more than ten times its population? Or with China—which has more than 60 times the population of Australia? If not regionally, would Australia agree to submit itself to the disciplines of the EU? If not, you must draw the logical conclusions. Let me sketch them for each category of international law, in the same order as I initially presented them.

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First, then, if you want to protect your own sovereignty, you have a stake in restraining the growth—or distortion—of customary international law. You have a stake in ensuring that customary law does not generate amorphous new claims that encroach on traditional notions of sovereignty. Already, the UN’s Human Rights Committee claims that customary international law has come to embody human rights norms of various kinds. Thus, it claims that even countries which have not signed particular human rights conventions (or have signed them with relevant reservations) are bound by these norms—as articulated by the Human Rights Committee.<sup>5</sup>

The government of the United States has largely ignored such pronouncements. But a great many American legal scholars claim that customary international law of this kind should be enforced by American courts as law of the land—that is, enforced by American courts even on American officials. As it is, similar constructions of customary law have been invoked by American courts in suits which seek to hold companies liable in American courts for alleged abuses in other countries—under standards not accepted by those other countries.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, Britain’s House of Lords has decided, in the Pinochet case, that national prosecutors may use their own national courts to prosecute heads of states of other countries for injuries which the latter committed against their own people in their own territory. Only a decade ago, such practices would have been considered a form of international aggression. All countries have a stake in limiting such unaccountable and unwarranted extensions of ‘customary’ law, which allow countries to be bound without formal consent and bound even without a record of actual state practice over a long period (which was usually taken as signifying tacit consent in classical treatises).

Second, as you recall, there are the sorts of agreements I have called contractual agreements. You have some stake in contractual treaties like the trade agreements in the WTO. You may have considerable stake in such agreements, if you doubt your bargaining power in a world where all rules break down. There may be some environmental agreements of this kind. The US has environmental border agreements with both Canada and Mexico where both sides have strong incentives to honour their commitments, in order to secure promised efforts from the other party.

But you should not pursue such agreements when they do not seem to serve your interests. If you get little in return for the concessions you offer, it is not very sensible to make such concessions in the hope that, later on, others will be encouraged by your example to become more cooperative. Your willingness to make sacrifices for international cooperation does not, in itself, seem to make much difference to countries that are not disposed to be cooperative. After all, other countries have to

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<sup>5</sup> See ‘General Comment, No. 24,’ UN Document CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.6 (1994). In effect, the Committee claims the authority to determine when states can be bound to human rights norms without their actual consent. The US government has objected to this claimed authority: ‘Observations by the United States of America on General Comment No. 24,’ UN GAOR, 50th Sess., at 131–32, UN Document A/50/40 (1995). But the Committee has not retracted its claim.

<sup>6</sup> For example, *Beanal v. Freepport-McMoRan, Inc.*, 969 F.Supp. 362 (E.D. La., 1997), on behalf of workers in Indonesia; *Doe v. Unicol*, 963 F. Supp. 880 (C.D. Cal, 1997), on behalf of workers in Burma; *Aguinda v. Texaco*, 850 F. Supp. 282 (S.D. N.Y., 1994), on behalf of workers in Ecuador.

deal not only with Australia but with lots of others—and they have no reason to think others will make policy based on such fond hopes in the power of moral leadership.

If you try to escape from this problem, you may be tempted to participate in the construction of stronger international projects—those treaty schemes that I have called ‘constitutive’ because they do seek, in a serious way, to constitute some authority above sovereign states. Supranational authority may reassure you that other states will be forced to conform to the same standards that Australia agrees to accept. I do not think the record suggests that such institutions have much hope of success, outside regional groupings of like-minded states. But you may not be very pleased, even if they do prove somewhat effective in coercing member states. The more such institutions depart from contractual or reciprocal undertakings, the more likely they are to respond to the promptings of the strongest powers.<sup>7</sup> For all its fine qualities, Australia is not likely to emerge as one of the strongest powers.

This danger is not an entirely hypothetical challenge for Australia. The Appellate Body (AB) of the WTO, a kind of standing court of appeals for trade disputes, should be watched carefully. In principle, the AB is supposed simply to interpret the actual provisions of trade agreements. Since the shrimp-turtle decision, however, the AB (with many commentators cheering it on) has suggested that it may interpret actual trade agreements in the light of ‘background’ agreements on environmental protection and other matters, even when these agreements make no direct reference to obligations under existing trade agreements. So you may start by thinking you have made certain trade concessions in return for similar concessions from others—and then find that the obligations of your trade partners can be modified by a handful of judges, building up an independent body of law to which you have not, in those terms, actually consented.

In a different context, the proposed new International Criminal Court (ICC) (for which Australia has thus far expressed considerable support) would not likely assert itself against British or French suspects—much less Americans—because the ICC will have to rely on these powers to enforce its subpoenas and arrest warrants. Small countries like Australia would be much more plausible targets for its efforts to score points with suspicious audiences in the less developed world. And you face the prospect here, too, that the ICC judges drift from the terms of the actual ICC treaty and begin to incorporate into their reasonings the precedents developed by activist courts in larger countries, like Britain or France (or, it may be, the US).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Some analysts insist, for example, that despite all its efforts to develop common European policies, the European Union still tends to develop policies that cater to the priorities of the strongest states, whose governments view the European Union as a mechanism for extending their own national preferences on their partners. See, for example, Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> The Preamble to the ICC Statute admonishes that ‘it is the duty of every state to exercise its criminal jurisdiction over those responsible for international crimes’—without limiting the admonition to crimes defined in the Statute, itself. Moreover, the Statute provides that the defined crimes can be extended and amended by a two-thirds vote of the signatory states. And there is no shortage of suggestions for enlarging the reach of ‘international crimes’. It was recently suggested at a UN forum, for example, that manufacture and sale of tobacco products, given the health hazards they present, should be considered a ‘crime against humanity’.

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Finally, let me address the last category—what I have called ‘ceremonial’ or ‘constitutive’ agreements. Here we come to the issues most recently raised by the Australian government itself, when it announced its decision to limit future cooperation with UN human rights monitoring. I would say you have a stake in making clear that ceremonial institutions remain just that. And that is, in essence, what the Howard government has now done.

Human rights treaties are a classic example of ceremonial agreements pretending to be something larger. The UN has no means of enforcing the terms of these treaties, even on the signatories, and they are, as everyone knows, widely flouted or simply ignored by most signatories. They certainly do not establish contractual or reciprocal obligations which would give any other country clear incentive (let alone the legal warrant) to enforce these obligations on delinquents. Australia may or may not conform with all the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. But where Australia does conform, it is not going to renege on its current practice to punish Libya or Saudi Arabia—both now signatories, as well—for failing to conform. There is no real connection between the conduct of others in this area and your own conduct within your own territory. To pretend that such ceremonial agreements are a serious source of ‘international law’ is not only delusory but dangerous. And that, for at least three reasons.

First, if you take such agreements too seriously, you are at great risk of being played for suckers. The Howard government protested, with some justice, that the oversight committee under the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination was more critical of Australia than of Pakistan, China and other repressive regimes that had representatives on the committee. But this is not an isolated case. It is what you should expect. Unlike the policy-making organs of the EU, UN treaty structures have no credible enforcement machinery for their rulings or admonitions. Those states that do take these rulings seriously are often the very states that attract most attention from international monitors—precisely because they are soft targets.

You have had the same experience with a similar ceremonial treaty, the World Heritage Convention. Australia got in trouble when it sought to authorise uranium mining in the vicinity of Kakadu Park, a listed Heritage site. UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee, which oversees this list, warned that if mining plans went forward, this site might be removed from the World Heritage list, and many advocates in Australia insisted that the government here must halt the mining operation or else appear an international outlaw. But in the quarter century history of this program, no site has ever been removed from the list (except at the request of the host country). I believe that Australia got in trouble not only because local activists were eager to stop the mining there (for unrelated reasons) but also because the World Heritage Committee viewed Australia as unusually accommodating. To put strong pressure on a less accommodating country would risk exposing the whole scheme as an empty shell—because there is, fundamentally, no regulatory power in the hands of the

Heritage Committee and no serious sanction for ignoring its recommendations.<sup>9</sup> A famous site will not be less so because UNESCO fails to recognise it as such.

Things get more serious with treaties that seem on their face to be more ambitious. The wildly ambitious Kyoto Protocol ought to be recognised as a ceremonial venture, dressed up with impressive sounding ‘commitments’ and the suggestion of a supranational authority to enforce them. The evident truth is that few countries will achieve the targets they have pledged for reducing their emission of greenhouse gases by 2012, because this would require dramatic cut-backs in energy use in a period when all countries (outside the devastated economies of successor states to the former Soviet Union) have been increasing energy use. And even if some countries make more ambitious efforts, there is no serious mechanism to enforce such efforts on others. It is dangerous to treat an international affirmation of good intentions as if it were a serious commitment—as you may find you do not have much company when you start fulfilling those commitments.

It is also dangerous to treat ceremonial agreements as serious law for a second and rather different reason. You have some areas of international law where you do want rules to be honoured. The more you treat ceremonial affirmations as real law, the more you entangle real law with distractions and excuses, with complications and uncertainties. You make certain concessions in trade agreements in the expectation that others will respond in kind. Do you want these relatively hard agreements to be eroded by claims that other standards must be merged with them? You multiply the opportunities for others to evade their agreements with you and leave everyone more cynical and distrustful that anything is law in any real sense.

Finally, it is dangerous to pump up ceremonial agreements into supranational authorities, because this threatens your constitutional authority at home. That is serious, because the constitutional authority of your own government is the most reliable authority you have. To imply that your own government needs help from UN monitors suggests that it can’t quite be trusted otherwise. Perhaps it can’t be. Democratic governments do make mistakes and do sometimes perpetrate abuses. But even if you think outside governments or outside experts know better, is it plausible to think they care more about Australia than does the Australian government itself—or the Australian voters who hold their own government to account? If not, you should be clear about who has the final say on particular policy disputes and why.

Earlier this year, back in Britain, Prince Charles voiced some sharp criticism of genetically modified foods. But no one pretends that Australia must change its policies to conform to the Prince’s standards. That question—regarding the monarch’s authority—was settled in 1688. Pope John Paul II has made very emphatic appeals to prohibit all abortions, so your laws in Australia are in violation of papal teaching. Very few people say you are obliged to change your laws for that reason alone. In English-speaking countries, that question was settled much before 1688. Having

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<sup>9</sup> Ecuador asked the World Heritage Committee to provide international financial assistance for conservation efforts in the Galapagos Islands, a ‘World Heritage site’ under Ecuadorian control. The Ecuadorians conceded that they could not protect endangered species on the islands without help but asked that the site not be classified as ‘in danger’, lest this interfere with tourism. The World Heritage Committee readily complied with this request.

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insisted that government is not bound by monarchical or papal decrees, do you really want to say it is bound by UN Poo-Bahs?

Does this sound overwrought? I remind you that a previous federal cabinet secured federal legislation to nullify Tasmania's law on sexual morality on the grounds that it conflicted with the UN's Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This treaty was drafted in the 1950s and early 1960s and no one seriously claims that the drafters imagined it was securing rights to sexual autonomy. This interpretation was supplied by a ruling of the UN's Human Rights Committee and an Australian government conceived this ruling as sufficient reason to circumvent the regular distribution of powers between state and federal authorities, as set out in the Australian Constitution. A few more episodes of this kind and people will reasonably wonder whether the Australian Constitution does not, after all, contain a secret or invisible provision, which provides that, alongside the House of Representatives, the Senate and the High Court, certain powers are reserved for UN committees meeting in Geneva.

Of course, your government is in no real danger of being taken over by bureaucrats in Geneva. But with a few more of these episodes, voters may reasonably wonder if the government can be trusted to exercise the powers it is granted under the Constitution and at minimum, you may face a new round of constitutional reform initiatives that complicate your domestic politics.<sup>10</sup> Is it really worth risking new strains on your constitutional architecture, just to keep up the pretence that a ceremonial or consultative treaty scheme is a source of genuine legal obligations?

Before concluding, let me say a few words about where this vision of international law leaves other countries. If you acknowledge that human rights agreements are merely ceremonial or consultative, does that mean that you abandon other countries to their own devices? At some level, the answer must be yes—that is the price you pay for telling other countries (or international councils) to stay out of your own domestic affairs.

But you might recall that in an era of globalisation, all other countries—or at least, their elites—see and hear a lot about successful liberal democracies. Your example is powerful. People are rioting to get into Australia (or to be allowed to stay here). They are not rioting to get into neighbouring countries. And people understand, around the world, that investors feel more secure (and consequently invest more readily) in

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<sup>10</sup> Australian MP Andrew Thomson, Chair of the Joint Committee on Treaties, has proposed that serious consideration be given to amending the Australian Constitution to provide that treaties must be ratified by the Australian Senate before they are viewed as binding on Australia. Though the proposal seems to parallel the treaty provisions of the US Constitution, the United States actually has developed ways of binding itself without formal Senate ratification. So, for example, neither the North American Free Trade Agreement nor the global trade agreement establishing the World Trade Organisation were presented to the Senate as formal treaties (and did not, in fact, secure two-thirds majorities there, so they would not have been ratified if formulated as treaties). The United States has adopted alternate devices because trade agreements are difficult to negotiate with other countries if the US is known to have high barriers to ultimate ratification. Whether Australia would do well to impose a distinctively high barrier to negotiating or ratifying trade agreements is a question that deserves careful consideration. But it would be unfortunate if this consideration were distracted by popular resistance to unrelated treaties.

countries with reliable legal protection for individual rights. It does not require a UN treaty to make this point.

Around the world, people would like to emulate liberal democracies. But many countries have severe problems with ethnic and religious divisions, breeding murderous fanaticism. Many countries face extremes of poverty and vast economic disparities, breeding resentment and confusion. Many countries have little or no democratic tradition to fall back on when fanaticism or resentment explodes into civil strife. The best minds at ANU—or at Harvard or Stanford—do not agree on what Indonesia or China or Egypt or Russia ought to do now, to move toward stable democratic institutions. Let us acknowledge this and then recall that the delegates who preside over UN human rights forums are not quite our best minds.

The first duty of every national government is to take care of its own country. It is certainly in your country's interest—as it is in the interests of almost all countries—to have a more peaceful world, where relations between states are more orderly and predictable. But we will not secure a more peaceful and orderly world by pretending that our present world offers more opportunity for supranational authority or global governance than it actually does.

International law, insofar as it deserves to be considered a serious body of law, is a set of rules for the interactions of peoples who are foreign to each other and often indeed strangers to each other. In smaller communities, there is scope for common authority, so much greater sharing of burdens and benefits can be enforced by communal law. But in a world of foreigners and strangers, you cannot expect others to take care of you. Your first duty, as an independent country, is to look after yourselves. If you want to set a moral example, you might do so most effectively by standing up for your own national rights in a calm, clear and confident spirit—in a world that is too often confused about what international law actually can require or what it must allow.

Most of the world already respects Australia's achievements, especially its success in maintaining a prosperous and stable constitutional democracy. The world will not respect you any less if you display a greater degree of self-respect.



**Question** — In this part of the world, decolonisation left behind some rather small micro states which in some cases are becoming failed states or failing states. And in a sense that's their business under international law, they have the right to degenerate if they wish. But do we have no alternative other than to put up the shutters and put another lock on the door, if, for example, organised crime operates under national sovereignty in those places?

**Jeremy Rabkin** — I understand the question, and I think there's a real challenge there. If you think you can encourage them to co-operate in some scheme for controlling international crime, good luck. But I think you would probably do better by putting up the shutters—and I say this not out of cynicism or ideological bias.

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Here's the American counterpart: all over Latin America we have these people, *narco traficantes*—drug dealers. And some of them are heads of governments, and we sign agreements with them. There is so much money to be made from drug dealing, that our foreign assistance is not a real inducement for them to stop. It is very, very hard to stop them. There are a lot of people in America who want to keep going with this, and I don't begrudge the money we spend on it, and I don't even feel too bad about militarising our relations with Colombia and Peru—but I think everyone admits it has not been effective. Is it different if you're dealing with these islands in the Pacific? It would be nice if there were responsible, respectable, cooperating states.

An example which is a little bit different, but similar, is that we're going to boycott diamonds from people like Foday Sankoh or his friends in Sierra Leone who got control of a diamond mine and made themselves a state. So what the United States is doing, and what other countries around the world are doing, is saying, 'Wait a minute, we don't want you to be an off-shore haven for laundering money.' Money is easier to control than diamonds, because you can track the movement of money. Maybe you can have—and in fact we do have now—cooperative agreements to try to deal with money laundering, and the important thing is not that you get the Cayman Islands to agree, it's that you get the Swiss to agree. And maybe the Swiss won't really cooperate; they'll sign and they won't really do it. You could try, but in the end you have to decide how much it's worth to you—and if it's really important to you, you have your own controls at your own border. People underestimate how many things you can control at your own border.

**Question** — You say that a world government is fanciful, and that may be so, but I would ask you to comment on the fact that we already have a *de facto* commercial government, with some multinational corporations having budgets bigger than some national budgets. And could you comment on the dichotomy of capitalism's globalisation as opposed to what most western countries laud, free market theory, which supposedly follows Adam Smith's tenets, which are not being followed at all.

**Jeremy Rabkin** — Let me just say as a disclaimer that I do not work for a multinational corporation. I just work for a non-profit university, and they don't pay me that much. And I am not one of those people who are gung ho on more free trade. I think that national sovereignty is important because I think many countries want to have more controls, and they should be allowed to. I'm not saying we should have a free trade utopia or a libertarian utopia, but it seems the common sense of the matter is—and you can say it now more confidently than you could 30 years ago—the countries that have liberalised their economy and allowed more free exchange, have done better, domestically. That seems to be the consensus of most governments in the world, which I think tells you something.

The people who are afraid of being thrown out of office at an election or because of a revolution are going in that direction, because they think that is the way to make their countries more prosperous and therefore their citizens, their voters or their would-be revolutionaries more content. It just seems to be a fact that countries do better when they have freer markets.

Now, if you suggest that this is a system of global capitalism, I think you're caught in a Marxist time warp. There are a lot of different companies competing with each other, and it's just silly to lump them all together and say, 'they just look like different companies, but really they are global capital.' They are different companies, some of whom are making money and some who are losing money. They are competing. And what comes out of that may be better for some companies than others, and for some countries than others, but that's what a free economy is. If you free up trade across the world—and maybe you don't want to do it all the way—most people think the net result is that you will do better.

Even if you are sceptical of that, look at it from the other point of view: what is your alternative? Well, one alternative, which is perfectly legal, is to just say: 'This is a bunker, we're not trading with anyone, and that's the way we're going to get rich.' No one believes that. Australia's certainly not going to do that. So you want to have trade. Well, if you're going to have trade, then what's your alternative? You don't like the way trade is going, you want to try to have an international institution manage things? If you suggest that global capital is already managing it, you're giving yourself a really false analogy, because global capital is not organised to manage. But if you talk about what global capital is organised to manage, then it sounds plausible that—since global capital is organised—global labour should be organised, and global environmental advocacy should be organised, and on and on. Those things are really collective, they really have to be organised, and there is not that potential for collective organisation in the world, which is why trade and markets are flourishing, because they don't require as much organisation. You are talking about something that requires a lot of organisation, and I just ask you, is the world really in a position to sustain that? And finally, in the remote chance that it could actually be organised, do you really want to live there? Because if it is organised it's not going to be a democracy—and even if it is a democracy, it's not going to be a democracy in which Australia counts very much, because you are a very small part of the world's population. So why does that attract you? I don't get it.

**Question** — You have argued against global government largely on what I call 'pragmatic' reasons. What about philosophical reasons? Where should government reside? Both the United States and Australia are blessed with a federal system, but why should those lines on a map count somehow differently to the lines around other countries in a coloured-in map of the world? California is about the eighth biggest economy in the world—why should it be subsumed in something else?

**Jeremy Rabkin** — I'm very interested in this, though most people aren't. I read a lot of these classic treatises—what did they think in the Seventeenth Century when they were first talking about 'sovereignty'? I think it's pretty clear that nobody ever thought that there was a universal formula which you could lay down and say: 'You should be a country, and you shouldn't be a country.' It is pragmatic—or I would say circumstantial—that people who are able to function together as countries can be countries. People who can't function together, shouldn't try.

Australia's doing pretty well—compared to Canada, it's doing great. I would suggest that one reason for this is that you all speak English, which is a big advantage, and you have really the same accents as far as I can hear. You have a lot in common, so

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you have some level of trust in each other, which is important and is not something you should take for granted, as it is very valuable. When the government changes hands, which I'm sure it will in a few years, the people who voted for the Liberal Party or the National Party will then be confronted with the Labor Party—and they are not going to leave the country, and they are not going to plan a revolution. They will trust that, although it may not be their preference, they can live with it because they trust that the Labor Party would not do something really terrible to them.

**Question** — So if you *feel* you are a country, you *are* a country?

**Jeremy Rabkin** — I think it's more than that, you have to be able to make it stick. I think the Palestinians feel that they are a country—good luck, let's see how it works. I don't think Indonesia is likely to remain as one country. I don't know how many countries it will be eventually. Somebody previously mentioned these little Pacific islands—I wonder whether they will continue to be these isolated communities? It's silly to try to have an external rule that says who is allowed to be a country. I think the classic works on this had it right—it comes from the inside out, not from the outside in. You have got to be able to organise yourself to be a functioning country and then the rest of the world says: 'Well, okay, you seem to be a functioning country.'

**Question** — Regarding your European example, I would have thought that Europe in the late 1940s was the most impossible place for any trans-national unity to come about, because France and Germany had fought three wars in 70 years. And yet they worked something out which has been a very important development. Now we are faced with a situation like global warming. I can understand the reasons why you knock the attempts to do something about it, and yet if the reality is that we are facing these things, we've got to do something. If we can't get all countries on side, at least getting some is a start. Surely there are many different situations like that, where we have to say: 'Yes, there's a lot of pragmatic things that don't work, and yet we have to move towards a system which in certain situations has got to lead us to supra-national decisions.' How do we do it?

**Jeremy Rabkin** — Quite a lot of people have your view, and they agree that it is extremely difficult and that we won't get all the way there but we have to make a start. I will briefly tell you why I think that is wrong. Start with global warming and the people who think that we may not be able to do it all, but that we have to make a start. That's like trying to dam a river and saying: 'Well, we can't dam it all the way across, but we could dam it part of the way'. That's pointless.

You would need to get India and China and Brazil to agree, and I don't think you can. They are really poor countries that are struggling to feed everyone, and you can't try to tell them that in a hundred years there may be problems so they should sacrifice this generation for the sake of their great-grandchildren. They've heard enough of that—that's what Mao was saying. They don't want to do that again. They want to develop as fast as they can now. So you're not going to get them on board, and I'm pretty confident that you're not going to get the United States on board. So you'll be playing a game with the Europeans, and that would mean you're not even damming the river halfway across, you're damming it a quarter of the way across—and you're telling yourself: 'Well, at least it's a start.'

Global warming is very much in dispute—certainly people agree that surface temperatures are warmer, but question whether this is really based on greenhouse emissions, and if they were controlled whether that would make a difference. If you believe this is going to be a problem 50 years from now, you should be thinking about defensive measures. If you think sea levels are rising, you should think about building dykes. People in the audience are reacting to that, but you are proposing such a preposterous engineering project, suggesting that everyone in the world should get together to control the atmosphere of the Earth. That is so beyond us. You should be thinking about practical defensive measures that you can take for your own territory, if that's what you are worried about. If you are not really worried about it, let's not haggle about it.

On the European Union, I agree that it's rather remarkable, and I think part of the answer is in your premise. You say that these countries were at war so often, and they were. They were really shell-shocked and demoralised, and one of the things that always comes up whenever people need to be goaded into the next step of European integration is: 'You wouldn't want to be at war with Germany again, would you?' And the Germans are constantly told: 'You wouldn't want to be at war with our neighbours.' I think that's a little sad, because it is so irrelevant and preposterous. The idea that if they didn't have a common currency then they would be sending tanks across their borders is just insane. But the fact that it is said so often shows that in some psychological way they are really shell-shocked. They also have a lot of advantages that allow them to do this. Yes, they had all these historic enmities, but the fact is they're roughly comparable in size; at least the founding members were roughly comparable in wealth; and they do have, in spite of all these enmities, quite a lot of shared cultural background.

It's more feasible to do it in Europe, but let's see how well it works. There is a lot of resentment and resistance in Europe, particularly in Britain. European countries are also very rich and to some extent they pay other countries to go along. They pay a lot of money, billions and billions—I was going to say of dollars, but I should have said of deutschmarks—flow to Spain, Greece, Ireland to keep them happy. If they can't keep up that flow, you may hear more sovereignty talk in Europe, but I certainly wouldn't look at Europe as an example that could be replicated somewhere like Latin America, which is a somewhat similar situation. It's more promising in some ways than Europe, because they have a common language (if you put Brazil aside). They have shared culture, and all of that. But they have no disposition to do it.

North America, forget it. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is a bit controversial, and we're not going one step beyond NAFTA, and it is nothing like the EU. There is no North American parliament, no North American court, and we're not imitating them.

In your part of the world, if you want to join with New Zealand, go ahead. I didn't realise that back in 1900, people were trying to get New Zealand to join the federation. If you want to expand to include New Zealand, fine. But the idea that you're going to go beyond that to have a kind of 'regional federation' with Indonesia—I don't believe anyone would say that out loud in this country, it's so

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preposterous. So what are we talking about really? Do we want to encourage China to have this with its neighbours? I don't. I'm really glad the Chinese are talking about sovereignty. That's good: you stay in your boundaries—you're very big, stay there.

## **Distrustful, Disenchanted and Disengaged? Polled Opinion on Politics, Politicians and the Parties: an Historical Perspective\***

*Murray Goot*

We are living at a time, it is widely remarked, when voters are increasingly disengaged from politics, distrustful of politicians and the political process and disenchanted with the major parties. Politics, politicians and the political parties have never been particularly highly praised by the Australian public: reports of ‘widespread distrust’ go back a long way.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in the view of one political scientist, Dean

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<sup>1</sup> Around the time of federation, the New Zealand politician and author William Pember Reeves noted the ‘unpopularity’ of politicians, at least in Australia; W.P. Reeves, *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 1, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1902, p. 54. More recently, Peter Botsman has gone further and argued that distrust of politicians can be traced to federation itself when ‘the people’ were left out of the process; P. Botsman, *The Great Constitutional Swindle: a Citizen’s View of the Australian Constitution*, Pluto Press, Annandale, NSW, 2000, p. xii. After the Second World War, Stewart Howard, in the throes of moving from the office of the New South Wales Labor Premier, William McKell, to work for the federal Liberal leader, R.G. Menzies, observed ‘a widespread and expressed distrust, in some quarters despol of our politicians’; S. Howard, ‘State of Democracy’, *Australian Quarterly* vol. 18, no. 2, 1946, p. 17. And following a series of enquiries into parliamentary salaries in the 1950s—enquiries that generated letters, protests and representations opposing any increase—the low prestige of politicians as a class’ was noted once more; H. Mayer, P. Loveday and P. Westerway, ‘Images of Politics: an Analysis of Letters to the Press on the Richardson Report’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1960, pp. 153–75; S. Encel, ‘Power’, in P. Coleman, ed. *Australian Civilisation*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1962, pp. 209–10; also T.R. Reese, *Australia in the Twentieth Century: a Political History*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1964, p. 218.

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Jaensch, the ‘main component’ of Australian political culture has long been ‘a combination of apathy towards politics, and a scepticism, even a cynicism, towards its institutions and political actors’.<sup>2</sup>

But the present malaise, in which ‘healthy scepticism’ has turned into ‘bleak cynicism’, is presented as palpably new.<sup>3</sup> The distinguished journalist Paul Kelly laments that ‘[w]here people previously [in the 1960s] believed in at least some political leaders, today [1994] there is cynicism, mistrust or disgust with leaders and the political system itself.’<sup>4</sup> And the doyenne of the Canberra press gallery, Michelle Grattan, writes of ‘a growing distrust of and disillusionment with governments and governance’, and of a ‘crisis of cynicism’, as if the condition were so obvious that no specific evidence of it need be cited.<sup>5</sup> Conclusions of this kind are far from isolated. On the contrary, it is now the common wisdom of political commentary that interest in politics is waning, that the standing of politicians is woefully low, and that for the populace at large it no longer matters which of the major parties wins—a reality whose existence is merely masked by yet another self-serving device of the politicians, compulsory voting.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1998 federal election campaign, voters were widely characterised as indifferent to the electoral process, disdainful of politicians, and disillusioned with both sides of politics. On this, at least, both ends of the media were agreed: the *Daily Telegraph* emphasised that the election had come at a time when voters had ‘shed much of their respect for politicians and most of their attachment to political parties’, while the ABC’s *Background Briefing* averred that there was ‘no respect for our highest leaders’ any more ‘and little interest’ in what they had to say.<sup>7</sup> In a book about ‘Australia beyond 1998’, published after the election, Mark Westfield, the *Australian’s* business columnist, proffered the ‘electorate’s extreme cynicism towards politicians’ as an explanation for the success of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party.<sup>8</sup>

The rise of One Nation, and of minor party and independent candidates more generally, is certainly one reason why our public spaces have been awash in recent years with this sort of rhetoric. Economic and social reforms—economic rationalism, multiculturalism and so on—said to be driven by elites rather than demanded by the

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<sup>2</sup> D. Jaensch, *Election! How and Why Australia Votes*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1995, p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> S. Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, in D. Glover and G. Patmore, eds. *For the People: Labor Essays 2001*, Pluto Press, Annandale, NSW, 2000, p. 182.

<sup>4</sup> P. Kelly, *Paradise Divided: the Changes, the Challenges, the Choices for Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 2000, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> M. Grattan, ‘Editorial Independence: an Outdated Concept?’, *Australian Journalism Monographs*, No. 1, Department of Journalism, University of Queensland, 1998, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, F. Devine, ‘Freedom gets a vote of confidence’, *Australian*, 9 November, 2000. As with other remarks about the present condition of public opinion, there are much earlier occasions on which the same thing was said; see, for example, C.H. Grattan, *Introducing Australia*, The John Day Company, New York, 1942, p. 17. Compulsory voting has always been a misnomer: what is required of voters is that they turn out.

<sup>7</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, (Sydney) 13 August 1998.

<sup>8</sup> M. Westfield, ‘The Business of Balance’, in M. Waldren, ed. *Future Tense: Australia Beyond Election 1998*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 1999, p. 67.

public, are a second reason for the expression of such disquiet. And a sense that the major parties have converged—in terms of their policies, their (in)competence and the backgrounds of their front- and back-benchers—is a third reason for the spray.

On the standing of the parties, in particular, no voice of the people has been more eloquent than the country's most widely respected social researcher, Hugh Mackay. In his best-selling book, *Reinventing Australia*, Mackay insists that in the post-Whitlam years a party contest organised around differences in policy and philosophy came to be replaced by a politics of pragmatism and personality. Ignoring those who have argued that a transformation of this kind was precisely a characteristic of the rise of Whitlam,<sup>9</sup> Mackay goes on to argue that as a result of the post-Whitlam transformation there developed a growing sense among voters that the two-party system had 'lost its way, or, perhaps lost its point'; and that the electoral cynicism this engendered was 'now so high that it might well stimulate some demand for a redefinition of our political institutions.'<sup>10</sup> On this view, the success of Hanson might best be seen as the rising up of 'the people' against 'the politicians'. Prior to her success, '[n]o amount of complaint about the behaviour of politicians, no amount of bleating about the gulf between political discourse and the concerns of ordinary Australians, and no amount of "swinging", seemed to convince the major parties that they had lost contact with their constituency.'<sup>11</sup>

Much of the evidence Mackay marshals to sustain such claims derives from his own, quite particular, research method—a variant of focus group research (though he would reject this description), organised around small group discussions—in Mackay's case, groups of friends or workmates, meeting in familiar environments and discussing issues without anyone outside the group directing the conversation or asking any questions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, V. Braund, 'Timely Vibrations: Labor's Marketing Campaign', in H. Mayer, ed. *Labor To Power: Australia's 1972 Election*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973.

<sup>10</sup> H. Mackay, *Reinventing Australia: Australian Attitudes in the '90s*, Angus & Robertson, Pymble, NSW, 1993, p. 169. In Mackay's political novel, *The Spin*, the Labor candidate sees Hanson *mutatis mutandis* as Jung saw Hitler—as 'the loudspeaker which magnifies the inaudible whispers of the German soul until they can be heard by the German's unconscious ear'; H. Mackay, *The Spin*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1996, p. 11. For uncritical academic renderings of Mackay's general argument, see I. Marsh, *Beyond the Two Party System*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 131 note 41; J. Warhurst, *Politicians and Citizens: Roles and Responsibilities*, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, North Sydney, 1996, pp. 6–7; and J. Walter, 'Australian Democracy and the American Century', in H. Bolitho and C. Wallace-Crabbe, eds. *Approaching Australia: Papers from the Harvard Australian Studies Symposium*, Harvard University Committee on Australian Studies, Cambridge, Mass., 1998, p. 213. See also Paul Kelly, who in a 1994 speech argued that Mackay's account of the 'middle class', including its 'loss of faith in institutions', mapped 'superbly ... the psyche of 1990s Australia'; *Paradise Divided*, op. cit., pp. 113–14.

<sup>11</sup> H. Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians Choosing Their Future*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1999, p. 286. For a comprehensive analysis of the One Nation vote, based on the 1998 Australian election study, see M. Goot and I. Watson, 'One Nation's electoral support: where does it come from, what makes it different and how does it fit?', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2001. Among other things, this shows that dissatisfaction with the political process was not a distinctive characteristic of the One Nation vote (it was shared by those who voted for the Australian Democrats) and that what was distinctive about One Nation was its leverage of conservative values about Aborigines, immigration and the like.

<sup>12</sup> Mackay, *Reinventing Australia*, op. cit., p. 300ff.

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But evidence gathered in this way, while legitimate for some purposes, has fundamental limitations—limitations that go well beyond those that Mackay himself seems willing to acknowledge. First, it is difficult to generate reliable historical insights from such evidence, and impossible to show the extent to which the distribution of opinion has actually changed; the data gathered by this method are restricted to conversations in the present and, at best, untested recollections of the past. Second, it does not readily lend itself to generalisation; to do that typically requires some approximation to random sampling and much larger numbers. Although he insists that ‘each study incorporates the widest possible range of respondents within the practical limits of the project’,<sup>13</sup> the *Mackay Reports* are based on opinions drawn from ‘the upper-middle to the lower-middle socio-economic strata’, people in their ‘mid-twenties to their early-sixties’, sometimes resident in no more than a handful of suburbs in as few as three cities.<sup>14</sup> And third, while Mackay boasts of the greater explanatory depths plumbed through his research, the things he gleans by his methods are no more than possible explanations—just as they represent no more than possible historical shifts or possibly true generalisations about certain sorts of people—young people, city people, or Australians in general. At every turn, they need to be checked or validated by quite different methods—methods which Mackay not only does not use, but which he vigorously rejects; asking questions of respondents, one of the basic tools of most attitudinal research, being the technique to which Mackay takes strongest exception.

Each of these limitations is easily illustrated; one example will suffice. In *Reinventing Australia*, Mackay argues that ‘the retreat from commitment’, or (as he also puts it) the ‘level of cynicism about politics’, is ‘most starkly revealed in the attitudes of young Australians who are approaching the age when they will be entitled to vote.’ By the early 1990s, he argues, the ‘level of apathy about politics’ had become so great that the Australian Electoral Commission had resorted to advertising in an attempt to convince the young of the virtues of voting.<sup>15</sup> The first thing to say about this interpretation is that it is ahistorical: eighteen year-olds were the bane of electoral officials long before Bob Hawke and the ‘politics of personality’,<sup>16</sup> indeed, according to a Morgan poll conducted in the mid-1960s, before the voting age was lowered to 18, no less than two-thirds of respondents aged 14 to 21 did not want the voting age lowered.<sup>17</sup> Second, while Mackay may be right about apathy being a condition especially marked in the young, his findings do not allow him to show it; he is in no position to compare, with any degree of reliability, the level of apathy (or anything

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>14</sup> H. Mackay, *The Mackay Report: Keynote*, April 1992, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Mackay, *Reinventing Australia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 175, 177.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the survey of non-voters by the Australian Electoral Commission, ‘A Quantitative Analysis of Attitudes to Enrolment and Voting’, *Research Report*, Australian Electoral Office, 1983, or Mackay’s own study of young people in 1980, cited in H. Mackay, *The Mackay Report: Leaving School*, No. 96, March 2000, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> M. Goot, ‘Beyond the Generation Gap’, in H. Mayer, ed. *Australian Politics: A Second Reader*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1969, p. 160.

else) in young people with the level in any other age group.<sup>18</sup> And third, the explanation he offers to explain their apathy—the ‘innate idealism’ of the young turned to cynicism by the pragmatism of their politicians—is only one of a range of possible explanations, none of them testable within the constraints of his own method;<sup>19</sup> sample surveys, a more appropriate method, suggest that Generation X’ers (those born between 1965 and 1980) in the United States are less interested in politics and less informed than earlier generations ‘but *not* especially cynical about politics or critical of political leaders.’<sup>20</sup>

In this lecture, I want to move beyond both the punditry of journalists and the evidence pulled together from conversations in small groups to look at the findings of large-scale sample surveys—some, though all too few, stretching back 50 years; others, taking us back more than 30 years; the rest dating from the late 1980s or early 1990s. To be sure, the data from these sources also have their limitations: they register as views formed on the spot by respondents who may have no opinion or whose opinions are more ambivalent than their answers allow; they register views shaped by the language of the questions and, sometimes, the order in which they are asked; and they register views from respondents who may seek to present themselves as more politically engaged or less politically cynical than they are, especially where the surveys to which they are responding are sponsored by social scientists within the academy.<sup>21</sup> Properly understood, however, these limitations are far from fatal.<sup>22</sup> And since sample surveys draw responses in equal measure from almost all respondents, not just from those members of a group who choose to speak, they have the inestimable advantage of allowing us to generalise, to detect the presence (or absence) of trends and to test alternative explanations.

The data at our disposal offer only partial support for current concerns about voter disengagement, distrust and disenchantment. They raise questions about whether electoral cynicism explains electoral volatility, the growth in minor party support and the weakening grip of the major parties on the Senate. And they help solve the paradox of why, if the pundits and qualitative researchers are right, informal voting remains remarkably low and support for some political leaders stands remarkably high.

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<sup>18</sup> A 1989 survey, conducted in mainland state capitals by Wells Research Services, found respondents aged 18 to 24 *less* likely than those over 45 to be ‘very concerned’ that politicians were ‘more interested in re-election than running the country’; *The Silent Majority II*, Clemenger/BBDO, Sydney, 1989, pp. 9, 25.

<sup>19</sup> The only critiques of Mackay’s work that run to any length are by J. Docker, ‘*Mon Oncle* Hugh Mackay: guide, prophet, seer’, *Crossings*, No. 20, 1994, pp. 31–35 and R. Hall, ‘Debasing debate: the language of the bland’, *Australian Book Review*, no. 178, 1996, pp. 36–39. For an excellent defence of his work against Hall’s often uninformed criticisms, see H. Mackay, ‘Debasing debate: Hugh Mackay’s rebuttal of Richard Hall’, *Australian Book Review*, no. 179, 1996, pp. 20–23.

<sup>20</sup> R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000, p. 261; emphasis in the original.

<sup>21</sup> Some of these limitations are noted by Mackay, but without any acknowledgement that each of these problems, in a slightly different form, might constitute a limitation to his own approach; Mackay, *Reinventing Australia*, p. 300ff.

<sup>22</sup> J. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, esp. ch. 4 and 5.

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## Political Engagement

Let us start with evidence which bears in some way on engagement with the political process. Three types of survey data provide evidence over time: data on the level of interest in politics; data on the level of interest in election campaigns, including the use of newspapers, television and radio; and, more speculatively, data on the level of the turnout, were turnout to be no longer compulsory.<sup>23</sup>

All of these data come from academic surveys conducted, for the most part, between 1987 and 1999 after each of five national elections (1987-1998) and the referendum on the republic (1999). Since the data were collected in almost exactly the same way every time (via mail-out questionnaires to random samples drawn from the electoral rolls) whatever biases they contain are likely to be a constant;<sup>24</sup> that means any substantial changes in the pattern of response is unlikely to be an artefact of the survey. The vice of this virtue is that we cannot know what responses might have been elicited by differently worded questions, questions asked in a different way (for example, face-to-face), questions asked in a different order or questions asked by non-academic researchers. This is not to say that what these surveys measure is 'unreal'; rather that for many respondents, far from certain of their views on a wide range of issues and with conflicting information to draw upon, what they say depends on the circumstances.<sup>25</sup>

### *Interest in politics*

That the level of interest in politics declined in the years after Hawke came to office (in 1983) seems doubtful. Evidence from national surveys conducted between 1984 and 1999 suggests that levels of political interest remained remarkably steady. Asked to indicate 'how much interest' they 'usually' had 'in what's going on in politics', roughly a third of respondents (32 percent to 38 percent) in each of seven surveys said they took 'a good deal' of interest; a little under a half (between 44 percent and 47 percent) took 'some' interest; no more than a fifth (15 percent to 18 percent) indicated that they took 'not much' interest; and hardly any said 'none' (Table 1a). In only one survey did the figures fall outside this range and that may well have been because on that occasion (1988) the question on political interest followed a series of questions on citizenship; in those circumstances, not surprisingly, the reported level of political interest was elevated.

What is most meaningful about the numbers from each of the other surveys is not their absolute values; these may have been different had they, too, followed questions on citizenship, or been asked after a question about the political leaders, or been asked

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<sup>23</sup> Regrettably, data on political knowledge, arguably the most important variable of all, are only available in the 1996 and 1998 Australian Election Studies, and the 1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey. On the importance of political knowledge, see Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, op. cit., and V. Price and J. Zaller, 'Who gets the news? Alternative measures of news reception and their implications for research', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1993, pp. 133-64.

<sup>24</sup> This method itself may bias the sample towards the more politically interested, since the less politically interested may be less likely to respond; certainly the respondents are biased in favour of the better educated; M. Goot, 'More "Relaxed and Comfortable": public opinion on immigration under Howard', *People and Place*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2000, pp. 46-60.

<sup>25</sup> Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, op. cit., passim.

after some attempt to fathom respondents' political knowledge.<sup>26</sup> What is most meaningful is the constancy in the patterns of response.

**Table 1a Interest in Politics, 1984–1999 (percentages)**

	A good deal	Some	Not much	None	n
1984 -86*	32	46	21	na	(3012)
1987*	35	44	15	5	(1825)
1988*	42	36	17	5	(1399)
1990	36	46	15	3	(2020)
1993	38	44	15	3	(3023)
1996	32	47	18	4	(1795)
1998	36	44	15	3	(1897)
1999	35	46	16	3	(2311)

**Note:** Non-responses omitted; na = not asked; \* = 'Generally speaking' omitted from question  
**Question:** *Generally speaking, how much interest do you usually have in what's going on in politics?*  
**Sources:** National Social Science Survey 1984–86; Australian Election Study 1987–1998; Issues in Multicultural Australia, 1988; Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey, 1999.

If we think of 'political interest' somewhat less vaguely, as *talking* about politics, then again there is no evidence of decline; if all other things about the surveys had been equal, we might actually have argued that the evidence pointed to an increase. In the Australian Values Study of 1983, 11 percent of respondents said that when they got together with their friends they discussed political matters 'frequently'; in a parallel study, conducted in 1995, 16 percent said they discussed politics with their friends 'frequently' (Table 1b).

**Table 1b Participation in Political Discussions, 1983–1995 (percentages)**

	Frequently	Occasionally	Never	n
1983	11	56	34	(1228)
1995	16	55	30	(2048)

**Note:** Numbers add to more than 100 due to rounding; no response (less than 1 percent) omitted  
**Question:** *When you get together with your friends, would you say that you discuss political matters with your friends frequently, occasionally or never?*  
**Sources:** Australian Values Study Survey, 1983, Social Science Data Archives, Australian National University, Study No. 375; Australian World Values Survey, 1995, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Study No. I 2790.

Far from representing a decline from some not-so-distant golden age, the level of interest in politics at the end of the Twentieth Century may have been higher than it was a half a century earlier, around the beginning of R.G. Menzies' long period of rule. During 1951 and 1952, in one of the earliest excursions into academic survey research, an academic psychologist noted that only about one in ten (11 percent) of the industrial workers he interviewed in Melbourne thought that politics was important; most regarded politics in Australia as 'a self-contained field of doubtful

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, G.F. Bishop, R.W. Oldendick and A. Tuchfarber, 'What must my interest in politics be if I just told you "I don't know"?' , *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 2, 1984, pp. 510–19.

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honesty', bearing 'no relation at all to the interests or purposes of the ordinary citizen'.<sup>27</sup>

Again, in the early 1970s, before Whitlam came to office, just one in ten (11 percent) of those interviewed by Australian Nationwide Opinion Polls described themselves as 'very' interested in politics; another four in ten (38 percent) said they were 'quite' interested; exactly half the respondents said they had 'not very much' interest in politics or 'none at all'.<sup>28</sup> In the post-1984 surveys, a much lower proportion—no more than about one-in-five—described their level of interest as 'not much' or 'none'. How much of this difference might be attributable to differences in question wording, the order in which various questions were asked or the provenance of surveys, is impossible to say.

What is clear is that the difference is unlikely to reflect differences in the electoral cycle—the 1971 survey having been completed between elections and all but one of the subsequent surveys having been conducted after an election. A survey conducted by Don Aitkin in 1979, more than a year before the double dissolution election of 1980, produced consistently higher figures for political involvement than an earlier survey conducted in 1967, completed almost entirely six weeks ahead of a half Senate election.<sup>29</sup> In 1979, nearly half (45 percent) of those interviewed responded positively when asked whether they 'talk[ed] much about politics with other people'; in 1967 only a third (31 percent) did so. In 1979, too, more respondents (51 percent compared to 43 percent) followed 'news about politics much' in the paper they mentioned first as the one they would 'regularly' read; twice as many (32 percent compared to 17 percent) followed news about politics on radio; and about twice as many followed it on television (60 percent compared to 34 percent). On both occasions, the two sets of questions were placed at the start of the interviews.<sup>30</sup>

### *Interest in campaigns*

What about interest in election campaigns? In September 1998, a few weeks out from the election, AC Nielsen asked respondents how interested they were in the campaign.<sup>31</sup> Three-quarters said they were 'very interested' (26 percent) or at least 'interested' (50 percent); no more than a quarter said they were 'disinterested' [sic] (14 percent) or 'not at all interested' (9 percent).

These figures don't mean much on their own; again, they need to be understood historically. The way AC Nielsen chose to do this was to ask: 'Would you say you are more or less interested in this campaign than in previous campaigns?' It reported a fairly even split between those who thought they were 'more' interested in this campaign (43 percent) and those who thought their level of interest was the 'same'

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<sup>27</sup> P. Lafitte, *Social Structure and Personality in the Factory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958, p. 116.

<sup>28</sup> ANOP, *Australian Public Opinion Newsletter*, 1 (1), 1971, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> D. Aitkin, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*, 2nd edn, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, pp. 19, 27, 273, 277.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 361, 383.

<sup>31</sup> *Age* (Melbourne), 11 September, 1998.

(38 percent); relatively few (17 percent) rated their interest as ‘less’ than in previous campaigns.

Which ‘previous campaigns’ did respondents have in mind? Even if we assume that most would have understood the question in the same way (answering it, perhaps, in terms of the 1996 election), their recall may have been poor. A more reliable way of gauging changes in levels of voter interest is to use panel data (where the same respondents are interviewed at different times) or, failing that, to compare the results from different samples at different points in time. Data of the latter kind suggest that respondents were neither more interested nor less interested in the 1998 campaign than they had been in the 1996 one. Asked, in post-election surveys, ‘how much interest’ they had taken in the campaign ‘overall’, about a third of respondents in both 1998 (36 percent) and 1996 (34 percent) said they had taken a ‘good deal’; identical proportions (41 percent) said they had taken ‘some’ interest and similar proportions (21 percent in 1998; 25 percent in 1996) said they had taken ‘not much’ interest or ‘none’ (Table 2). A number of respondents no doubt did change, with some becoming more interested than they had been in 1996 and others less; but massive changes of the kind suggested by AC Nielsen’s poll—changes involving 60 percent of the sample—seem unlikely. Moreover, on the evidence of the surveys conducted after the two elections the movement of respondents in one direction should have been more or less cancelled out by the movement of respondents in the other. On the AC Nielsen data, however, cancelling each other out is one thing respondents did not do.

**Table 2 Interest in Political Campaigns, 1969-1999 (percentages)**

	A good deal	Some	Not much	None at all	No response	n
1969 Election	33	37	30	na	-	(1873)
1993 Election	49	35	14	2	1	(3023)
1996 Election	34	41	21	4	1	(1795)
1998 Election	36	41	17	4	1	(1897)
1999 Referendum	37	41	18	4	1	(2311)

**Questions:** *How much interest did you have in the election campaign? (1969)*

*And about how much interest did you take in the election campaign overall? (1993, 1996, 1998)*

*And how much interest would you say you took in the referendum campaign overall?(1999)*

**Sources:** Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, 2nd edn, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, p. 373, for 1969; Australian Election Study 1993–1998; and Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey, 1999.

Evidence from the academic surveys, documented in Table 2, also suggests that interest in election campaigns had not declined in the 1990s compared to the late 1960s; on the contrary, in 1993, the year in which *Reinventing Australia* was published, the level of interest in the campaign was markedly higher than it had been a quarter of a century earlier. In a survey conducted after the 1993 election (when the goods and services tax, along with health and industrial relations were important issues), roughly half (49 percent) of those interviewed said they had taken ‘a good deal’ of interest in the campaign. In 1969, after the election in which Whitlam enjoyed his greatest electoral surge, no more than a third (33 percent) of respondents expressed this level of interest.

To what extent these patterns are also reflected in changing media usage is unclear. The importance of newspapers has almost certainly not grown; in both absolute and

relative terms, newspaper sales since the 1960s have declined.<sup>32</sup> In 1969, 58 percent of respondents said they had ‘follow[ed] the election’ in at least one paper they read ‘regularly’. In 1987 and 1990 almost identical proportions (58 percent, in 1987; 57 percent, in 1990) said they had either ‘often’ or ‘sometimes followed election news’ through the newspapers; and after the last four campaigns, between 67 percent (1993, 1999) and 58 percent (1996) said they had paid ‘a good deal’ or at least ‘some’ attention, to ‘reports about the election campaign [referendum] in [the] newspapers’ (Table 3a). Since the response options in the 1969 survey (‘followed’ or ‘not followed’) may have been more stringent than in subsequent surveys (where respondents could categorise themselves under one of three heads, two of which count here as ‘following’ the election), newspaper usage may well have declined.

**Table 3a Use of Newspapers during Political Campaigns, 1987–1999**

	Often/ a good deal	Sometimes/ some	Rarely/ not much	Never/ none at all	No response	n
1987 Election	29	29	17	14	1	(1825)
1990 Election	26	31	22	16	6	(2020)
1993 Election	29	38	23	9	1	(3023)
1996 Election	18	40	21	12	-	(1795)
1998 Election	21	41	26	11	1	(1897)
1999 Referendum	24	43	25	8	1	(2311)

*Questions: And how about newspapers, did you follow the election news there? [Please circle one number in each column] (1987, 1990)*

*How much attention did you pay to reports about the election campaign in newspapers: good deal, some, not much, none at all? (1993, 1996, 1998)*

*In the weeks leading up to polling day, how much attention did you pay to reports about the referendum in the newspapers—a good deal, some, not much or none at all? (1999)*

Television usage after 1969 may have grown a little—partly as a result of the growth of households with two or more television sets and partly as a consequence of television’s relative advantage on things like clarity and credibility.<sup>33</sup> Again, however, changes in the survey question make exact comparisons difficult. In 1969, when almost nine out of ten Australian households (87 percent) had a television set,<sup>34</sup> nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of respondents said they had followed the election on television. After the 1987 and 1990 elections, four-fifths of those interviewed (81 percent, in 1987; 78 percent, in 1990) said they had ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ followed ‘election news on television’. After the last four campaigns between two-thirds (67 percent, in 1996) and three-quarters (76 percent, in 1993; 73 percent, in 1998) said they had paid ‘a good deal’ or at least ‘some’ attention to ‘reports about the election campaign’ or ‘referendum news’ on television (Table 3b). Of those who gave an answer in the referendum survey, a remarkably high number (27 percent) claimed to

<sup>32</sup> On newspaper sales to 1992, see *News & Fair Facts*, Report from the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Print Media, AGPS, Canberra, 1992, p. 134 and R. Tiffen, ‘Media Policy’, in J. Brett, J. Gillespie and M. Goot, eds. *Developments in Australian Politics*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1994, pp. 332–33. For more recent data, which indicate a slight rise in circulation and a higher pass on rate, see Grattan, ‘Editorial Independence’, pp. 16–17.

<sup>33</sup> Productivity Commission, *Broadcasting*, Report No. 11, AusInfo, Canberra, 2000, p. 61; J.S. Western and C.A. Hughes, *The Mass Media in Australia*, 2nd edn, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1983, p. 93.

<sup>34</sup> I. Ward, *Politics of the Media*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1995, p. 68.

have followed the ‘Deliberative Poll’ on ABC-TV, with almost as many (20 percent) saying they had seen the *60 Minutes* program on commercial TV. Nonetheless, the post-1993 pattern, if not the post-1987 pattern, points to a decline in the use of television.

**Table 3b Use of Television during Political Campaigns, 1987-1999**

	Often/ a good deal	Sometimes/ some	Rarely/ not much	Never/ none at all	No response	n
1987 Election	50	31	10	5	1	(1825)
1990 Election	42	36	14	6	2	(2020)
1993 Election	39	37	15	4	4	(3023)
1996 Election	29	38	23	7	3	(1795)
1998 Election	31	42	18	5	4	(1897)
1999 Referendum	26	42	20	6	6	(2311)

**Questions:** *During the election campaign, how often did you follow the election news on television, or did you not follow it at all? [Please circle one number in each column] (1987, 1990)*

*Did you follow the election campaign news on television a good deal, some, not much or none at all? (1993, 1996, 1998)*

*In the weeks leading up to polling day, did you follow the referendum news on television—a good deal, some, not much or none at all? (1999)*

The medium in which growth is likely to have been most marked is post-1969 radio. In Aitkin’s 1969 survey, fewer than one respondent in five (18 percent) said they had ‘follow[ed] the election’ on radio—a figure that may reflect the fact that the parties themselves, as well as other groups, made less use of this medium in the 1960s than they did not only in the late 1940s, when the longest and most lavish political campaign that Australians had experienced was organised for the Liberals around a radio series spear-headed by ‘John Henry Austral’, but in the 1951 referendum on communism and in 1972 when Labor used radio to help it wrest office back from the Coalition.<sup>35</sup> After the 1987 and 1990 elections about half of those interviewed (50 percent in 1987; 48 percent in 1990) reported that they had ‘followed election news’ on radio ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’; and after the 1993, 1996 and 1998 elections similar proportions (47 percent, 1993; 41 percent, 1996; and 45 percent, 1998) said that they had paid ‘a good deal’, or at least ‘some’, attention to ‘the election campaign news on radio’. For the 1999 referendum on the Constitution, the corresponding figure (47 percent) was about the same (Table 3c). While the problem of comparing the data from the 1969 survey with data from subsequent surveys remains real, the difference between the 1969 and subsequent results for radio is much larger than for either the press or TV.

<sup>35</sup> I. Ward, ‘The early uses of radio for political communications in Australia and Canada: John Henry Austral, Mr Sage and the man from Mars’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1999, pp. 311–29; L. Webb, *Communism and Democracy in Australia: A Survey of the 1951 Referendum*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1954, ch. 9; and L. Oakes and D. Solomon, *The Making of an Australian Prime Minister*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1973, ch. 7.

**Table 3c Use of Radio during Political Campaigns, 1987–1999**

Campaign	Often/ a good deal	Sometimes/ some	Rarely/ not much	Never/ none at all	No response	n
1987 Election	26	24	18	19	1	(1825)
1990 Election	21	27	23	22	6	(2020)
1993 Election	18	29	22	19	12	(3023)
1996 Election	13	28	28	22	9	(1795)
1998 Election	16	29	23	21	11	(1897)
1999 Referendum	16	31	25	19	10	(2311)

*Questions:* During the election campaign, how often did you follow the election news on ... radio? [Please circle one number in each column] (1987, 1990)

And did you follow the election campaign news on the radio a good deal, some, not much or none at all? (1993, 1996, 1998)

And did you follow the referendum campaign news on the radio? (1999)

*Sources:* Australian Election Study, 1987–1998; Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey, 1999.

A measure of more active involvement also suggests greater levels of interest in campaigns at the end of the 1990s than at the end of the 1960s. After the 1969 election, two-thirds of those interviewed for Aitkin's study said that they had 'talk[ed] to other people about the election'; in the 1990s, the proportion who indicated, through the Australian Election Study (AES) surveys, that they had 'discuss[ed] politics with others' during the various campaigns was markedly greater: 88 percent in 1993; 82 percent in 1996 and 84 percent in 1998. After the 1999 referendum, three-quarters of those who responded to the Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey said that 'over the last few weeks' of the campaign they had discussed the referendum 'a lot' (33 percent) or at least to 'some' extent (45 percent) with 'family, friends or others'.

#### *Electoral turnout*

We can also think about voter interest in terms of electoral turnout; or, in a system where turnout is compulsory, in terms of how many might have turned out had doing so not been compulsory. On this measure, too, it is difficult to discern any decline.

In 1955, the Australian Public Opinion Poll reported that three-quarters (77 percent) of those interviewed would have voted had voting (meaning turnout) not been compulsory.<sup>36</sup> More than 40 years later, post-election and post-referendum surveys reported very high proportions of respondents (85 percent, in 1996; 84 percent, in 1998; 86 percent, in 1999) indicating that they would 'definitely' or 'probably' have voted.<sup>37</sup> On each of these occasions, two-thirds of respondents said they would 'definitely' have voted; on no occasion did the proportion saying they would 'definitely not' have voted exceed nine percent. While variations in the response options—a binary choice in 1995; a multiple choice in 1996, 1998 and 1999—rule out any direct comparison, there is certainly no evidence here of growing disillusionment with the electoral process.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> For the 1996 and 1998 sources, see Table 1a.

## Politicians

Interest in politics may be a sign of trust in the political process, as many of those who worry about a lack of interest tend to assume; it may have nothing directly to do with trust in the political process, with people interested or uninterested regardless of their willingness to trust; or it may signify a lack of trust in the political process, even a 'bitter disengagement',<sup>38</sup> something that celebrants of political quiescence are inclined to assume.

Political trust, however, is not all of a piece. Claus Offe suggests that institutions may build trust in four distinct ways: by truth-telling and promise-keeping ('passive' and 'active' forms of a commitment to truth) and by the pursuit of fairness and what he calls solidarity ('passive' and 'active' forms of justice).<sup>39</sup> Institutions may build trust in one way—or build one sort of trust—without necessarily building it in another way. Thus, when Donald Horne observed, in *The Lucky Country*, that Australians 'both trust and despise' government, he appears to have been saying that while politicians are trusted to give everyone 'a fair go' they are despised for 'going into politics for reasons of self-interest.'<sup>40</sup>

Australian surveys furnish evidence that bears on each of Offe's categories: on the reputation of politicians, state and federal, for their honesty and ethics—the longest-running time-series we have; on the reputations of politicians for keeping their promises; on whether government is run in the interests of 'big groups' or in the interests of 'ordinary' people (one notion of fairness); and on whether politicians can be trusted not to further their own interests but to do 'the right thing' (a concept which may be indirectly, if not directly, related to Offe's idea of solidarity—of institutions acting to equalise life chances 'structurally imposed by unequal endowments and inescapable constraints').

### *Honesty and ethics*

In the study of Melbourne workers, undertaken in the early 1950s, half the sample expressed the view that 'all politicians are crooks', or some equivalent, 'without any favourable qualification at all'.<sup>41</sup> A quarter of a century later, following the dismissal of the Whitlam government, the Morgan Poll began asking respondents to rate (as 'very high', 'high', 'average', 'low', or 'very low') a wide range of occupations for their 'honesty and ethical standards'. Between 1976 and 1983 it repeated the question every two years; since then, it has asked the question every year. And in the period 1976 to 2000, the proportion prepared to rank politicians 'high' or 'very high' declined; for both state and federal politicians, the rate of decline was very similar (Figure 1).

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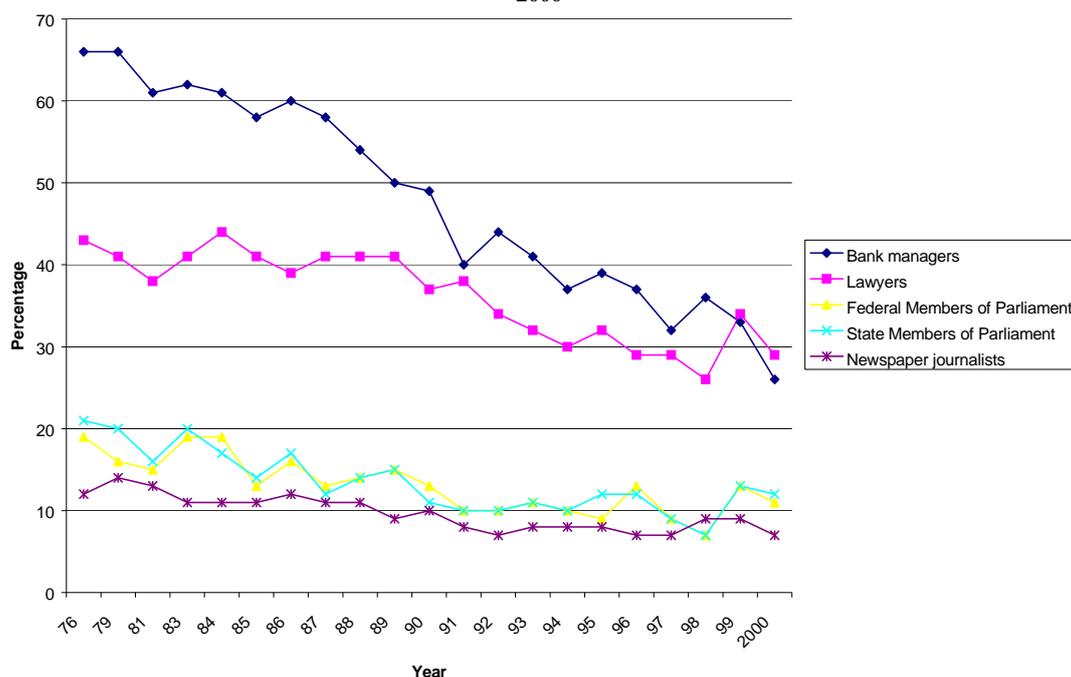
<sup>38</sup> M. Lyons and M. Stewart-Weeks, 'On the Edge: Civil Society in Transition', A Report Prepared for the Commonwealth Foundation, Centre for Australian Community Organisations and Management, University of Technology, Sydney, 1999, p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> C. Offe, 'How Can We Trust Our Fellow Citizens?', in M.E. Warren, ed. *Democracy and Trust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 73–75.

<sup>40</sup> D. Horne, *The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Vic., 1964, pp. 24–25.

<sup>41</sup> Lafitte, op. cit., p. 116.

Fig. 1 Ratings of Selected Occupations for High or Very High Ethics and Honesty, 1976-2000



Between 1976 and 1981, 19 percent of respondents (on average) rated state MPs ‘high’ or ‘very high’ for their ‘honesty and ethics’; through 1982–1987 and 1988–1993, the average slipped, first to 16 percent and then to 12 percent; between 1994 and 2000, the proportion rating politicians ‘high’ or ‘very high’ averaged 11 percent, essentially unchanged. Across the years, 1976–81, 17 percent of respondents (on average) rated federal MPs ‘high’ or ‘very high’ for their ‘ethics and honesty’; from 1982 to 1987 the average was 16 percent, virtually unchanged; but in the periods 1988–1993 and 1994–2000, the average dropped, first to 12 percent and then to 10 percent.<sup>42</sup>

Before we discuss this decline, three things should be noted. One is that ratings for honesty and ethics are not the same as ratings for occupational prestige as such; in a survey of occupational prestige, conducted in the late 1970s, parliamentarians were rated on a par with bank managers,<sup>43</sup> something one would not have predicted from the Morgan data on the honesty and ethics of the two professions. The second point is one that I have made before: the figures reported by polls depend on the question. Asked, in the 1987 AES, ‘Do you feel that quite a few of the people running the federal government are a little dishonest?’, only 44 percent of respondents said they did; the majority said that either ‘not very many’ (45 percent) or ‘hardly any at all’ (11 percent) were ‘a little dishonest’—a far cry from the 1987 Morgan poll in which only 12 percent or 13 percent rated state or federal MPs as ‘high’ or very high’ for their ‘ethics and honesty’. The third thing to emphasise is that the start of a data series should not be confused with the beginning of the phenomenon the series is designed

<sup>42</sup> Compare the claim that ‘it was during the Hawke-Keating years ... that attitudes to politicians changed most markedly’; Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, op. cit., p. 179.

<sup>43</sup> A. Daniel, *Power, Privilege and Prestige: Occupations in Australia*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1983, p. 64.

to measure: just because the surveys date from 1976 does not mean that the decline in the standing of politicians dates from 1976; for all we know, the decline may go back to Whitlam, McMahon, Holt, Menzies or beyond.

What can we say about the decline in the Morgan series itself? The first thing to say is that if the standing of politicians for ethics and honesty was some 40 percent lower at the end of the century than it had been 25 years earlier, the fall had not come off a very high base; a 40 percent decline, from (say) 75 percent to 45 percent would have been rather more dramatic than a decline of similar proportions from 21 percent to 12 percent (for state MPs) or from 19 percent to 11 percent (for federal MPs).

Second, a decline in ethical standing did not affect MPs alone. While not (*pace* Young)<sup>44</sup> part of a *general* decline in the ethical standing of occupations—the standing of doctors, for example, of school-teachers and of union leaders actually enjoyed a modest rise—MPs did have something in common (as Figure 1 makes clear) with bank managers, lawyers and journalists. Commenting on these data, Richard Eckersley argues that ‘for most of those who wield financial and political power and influence’ public trust fell ‘dramatically from an average of 31 percent [1976] to 17 percent [1997]’.<sup>45</sup> But to average the data across different occupations is to conceal as well as reveal. The rating of bank managers dropped by nearly two-thirds from 66 percent (1976) to 26 percent (2000); lawyers slid to much the same level (29 percent) but from a much more modest base (43 percent); while the standing of newspaper journalists slipped from 12 percent to 7 percent—a decline which, in proportionate terms, matched that of politicians.<sup>46</sup>

The third thing to say, therefore, is that the decline in the standing of politicians for ethics and honesty may have had part of its cause in things which affected the standing of these other professions, too. What the common factors might have been is quite unclear: changes to banking practices that brought into disrepute both bankers and politicians;<sup>47</sup> worries about lawyers getting criminals off, or getting them lighter sentences, and a political system that condoned it (the absence of judges from Morgan’s list is a pity); hostility to journalists, either because ‘like politicians’, they are ‘now frequently seen as self-promoting, venal and out of touch with ordinary people’<sup>48</sup> or, as appears to be the case in the United States, because they focus on the

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<sup>44</sup> Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, *op. cit.*, pp. 172–73.

<sup>45</sup> R. Eckersley, ‘Perspectives on Progress: Economic Growth, Quality of Life and Ecological Sustainability’, in R. Eckersley, ed. *Measuring Progress: Is Life Getting Better?* CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Vic., 1998, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Cox and Caldwell argue that ‘falling levels of trust in government since 1986’ are ‘only matched by loss of trust in banks’; E. Cox and P. Caldwell, ‘Making Social Policy’, in I. Winter, ed. *Social Capital and Public Policy in Australia*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, 2000, p. 67. However, it is far from clear that the decline in the standing of MPs for honesty and ethics does date from 1986; the figures for 1986 are lower than those for 1976 and (as we note above) the 1976 figures might also have represented a decline from some earlier period.

<sup>47</sup> J. Carroll, ‘Economic Rationalism and its Consequences’, in J. Carroll and R. Manne, eds. *Shutdown: the Failure of Economic Rationalism and How to Rescue Australia*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 25–26.

<sup>48</sup> C. Lumby, *Gotcha! Life in a Tabloid World*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1999, p. 154; also, Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, *op. cit.*, pp. 172–77.

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game plans rather than the goals of politicians?<sup>49</sup> All, and more, are possible candidates.

However, some of the factors that go towards explaining the decline in the standing of politicians are sure to be *sui generis*. The televising of the federal Parliament from 1991—more precisely, the inclusion in television news bulletins of excerpts from Question Time—is a possible cause; and although state parliaments have not been televised, there is nothing in the data to say that politicians at both levels might not have been tarred by the same brush. State-owned banks going broke and state-based inquiries into corruption (for example, the Queensland royal commissions in 1987–89 and the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption, operating since 1988) may have tarnished the reputations of politicians *tout court*. The publicity given to their superannuation benefits, the number of parliamentary sitting days and the growth of rorting and branch-stacking, may be part of the answer as well.

### *Promise-keeping*

Some time before the 1969 federal election, a sample of voters in Brisbane was asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposition that ‘the main political parties, if they get elected, try to honour their election promises’; no fewer than three-quarters (75 percent) of those surveyed agreed that politicians did.<sup>50</sup> Yet long before the 1996 federal budget, when the ABC’s Kerry O’Brien coined the famous distinction of ‘core’ and ‘other promises’ (subsequently dubbed ‘non-core’ promises),<sup>51</sup> the idea that the overwhelming majority of voters might credit politicians with making promises in good faith had become all but unthinkable.

In a 1978 Melbourne survey, conducted partly before and partly after a federal budget in which the Fraser government failed to deliver the tax cuts—a ‘fistful of dollars’—promised at the 1977 election, only a third (32 percent) of respondents said that politicians could be ‘trusted to keep their election promises’, though half as many again had ‘mixed’ feelings.<sup>52</sup> Given its timing, the survey should have shed some light on the claim that much of the cynicism of the late 1990s could be traced back to that budget; but it didn’t.<sup>53</sup> In 1990, a national survey, conducted by Irving Saulwick & Associates, reported a similar level of support (35 percent), to that recorded in 1978, for the view that ‘politicians make promises during election times which, on the

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<sup>49</sup> T.E. Patterson, *Out of Order*, Vintage Books, New York, 1993; and J.A. Cappella and K.H. Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: the Press and the Public Good*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997.

<sup>50</sup> J.S. Western and P.R. Wilson, ‘Politics, politicians and parties: sweet or sour?’, *Politics*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1970, p. 172; ‘Politics: Participation and Attitudes’, in H. Mayer and H. Nelson, eds. *Australian Politics: A Third Reader*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1973, p. 332.

<sup>51</sup> O’Brien was rephrasing Howard’s boast that the budget had delivered on ‘core commitments’ but not, it seemed, on other commitments; ABC *7.30 Report*, 21 August, 1996 and *AM*, 21 August, 1996. While Howard, himself, did not use these terms, he did not challenge them either. Running the gauntlet on the John Laws Program (Radio 2UE), he distinguished between those promises ‘the people really voted on in the election’ (the ‘core’ promises) and, by implication, those they did not (the ‘non-core’ promises); 21 August 1996.

<sup>52</sup> C. Chamberlain, *Class Consciousness in Australia*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983, p. 75.

<sup>53</sup> This is because the report of the survey does not distinguish pre-Budget from post-Budget responses; indeed, neither the election nor the Budget is mentioned. For the claim, see R. Gittins, ‘The great disappearing tax cut act’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 December, 1999.

whole, they do intend to keep'; and this time, unlike 1978, there was no middle option to deflate the figure.<sup>54</sup> Five years later, when the Morgan Poll sought a response to the proposition that 'Federal politicians can't be trusted to keep election promises' only half as many as in the Saulwick poll (17 percent) came to the defence of politicians.<sup>55</sup> But a 'positive' proposition, of the kind Saulwick put, may have elicited a less harsh response. Whether there has been a slide since 1978 or since 1990 remains, therefore, an open question.

*Looking after the many rather than the few*

If there has been a decline over the last 30 years in the proportion of respondents who believe politicians try to stick to their promises, there appears to have been no clear increase in the proportion who believe 'the government' is run in the interests of the 'big end of town' rather than in the interests of 'ordinary people' or of 'all the people' (Table 4). And this despite the idea, shared by many, that economic restructuring generated a loss of political faith in all the major parties and provided an opening for One Nation.

In 1969 and 1979, Aitkin asked whether 'the government in Canberra' gave 'everyone a fair go' or paid 'more attention to what the big interests want'. Faced with these alternatives, three-quarters (71 percent and 78 percent, respectively) of those interviewed thought the government favoured the 'big interests'. In the mid-1980s, a clumsier question, included in the National Social Science Survey, asked whether 'the government' [sic] was run 'pretty much by [sic] a few big interests' or whether it was 'run for the benefit of most of the people', generated a more benign response; little more than a half (53 percent) of the respondents thought 'the government' favoured big interests. For the 1987 and 1993 Australian Election Study two changes were made to the question, one for the better and one for the worse: was 'the federal government pretty much run by a few big groups looking out for themselves' (which may have been interpreted as a question about politicians rather than the interests they served) or was it 'run for the benefit of all of the people?' In 1987, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of those who returned the questionnaires endorsed the darker of the two options; in 1993, when respondents were given a chance to say 'it depends', only about half as many (35 percent) indicated that the federal government was 'run by a few big groups'.

In 1996, two-thirds of the respondents in Michael Pusey's Middle Australia Project (a project focused on a similar demographic to Hugh Mackay's) agreed that government was run 'pretty much by a few big interests', a response not dramatically different (even allowing for the urban bias of Pusey's sample) from that generated by a very similar question asked in 1984–86 as part of the National Social Science Survey when economic rationalism (on Pusey's reckoning) had not long been up and running.

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<sup>54</sup> *Age* (Melbourne), 19 March, 1990.

<sup>55</sup> *The Bulletin*, 12 September, 1995; also in Warhurst, *Politicians and Citizens*, op. cit., p. 24. In 1989, 56 percent of those interviewed for Clemenger (1989: 9) agreed that 'Politicians never keep their word'; Clemenger, *The Silent Majority II A*, Clemenger Report, Clemenger/BBDO, Sydney, 1989, p. 9. In the next Clemenger survey, conducted by Morgan, this rose to 67 percent; *The Silent Majority III A*, Clemenger Report, Clemenger/BBDO, Melbourne, 1997, p. 15. But whereas the 1989 sample was restricted to mainland capitals, thereby missing non-believers in rural and regional Australia, the 1997 sample was more broadly drawn. The difference in the two results may be an artefact of this.

**Table 4 Government for Big Interests or Government for the People (percentages)**

People in government work for ...	1969	1979	1984-86	1987	1993	1996*
Big interests	71	78	58	63	35	63
It depends	na	na	na	na	48	na
All or most of the people	20	16	43	34	14	37
Don't know	9	6	-	3	3	-
n	(1873)	(2016)	(3012)	(1825)	(3023)	(391)

**Note:** na = not asked; \* Respondents from the five mainland capital cities in Census Collectors Districts with average household incomes between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles

**Questions:** *Do you think that the people running the government in Canberra give everyone a fair go, whether they are important or just ordinary people, or do you think that some people in the government pay more attention to what the big interests want? (1969, 1979)*

*Would you say the government is run pretty much by a few big interests, looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of most of the people? (1984)*

*Would you say the federal government is pretty much run by a few big groups looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all of the people? (1987, 1993)*

*Would you say that government is run pretty much by a few big interests, looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all the people? Entirely for the big interests [9 percent], mostly for the big interests [54 percent], mostly for the benefit of all [37 percent], entirely for the benefit of all [0 percent] (1996)*

**Sources:** Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, pp. 379 (1969), 390–92 (1979); National Social Science Survey, 1984; Australian Election Study, 1987 and 1993; Middle Australia Project, 1996.

### *Doing the right thing*

A different set of questions can generate a quite different set of results. In Aitkin's 1969 study, conducted about two years into John Gorton's period in office, nearly half (47 percent) of the respondents said that 'people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves'; roughly the same proportion (46 percent) disagreed, saying that governments could 'be trusted to do the right thing nearly all of the time'. Two years into Malcolm Fraser's second term, the pendulum had swung heavily against the credibility of governments; two-thirds (67 percent) of respondents now endorsed the more sceptical view. A change of government, from Fraser to Hawke, saw a modest swing back; in the 1984-86 National Social Science Survey, just over half (54 percent) sided with the sceptics. After the 1993 election, Labor's fifth win on the trot, and its first under Paul Keating, two-thirds (65 percent) of respondents again took the view that people in government 'usually' or 'sometimes' are too interested in looking after themselves.<sup>56</sup> But as with Hawke, so with Howard: a change of government in 1996 seems to have produced a swing against the sceptics; in the post-election survey of 1996, half (51 percent) of the respondents—a proportion similar to the one recorded nearly 30 years earlier after Gorton's 1969 win—voiced their distrust of people in government. Within one term the sceptics were back for another turn in the driver's seat; in the wake of the 1998 election, two-thirds (66 percent) of respondents felt that people in government 'usually' or 'sometimes'

<sup>56</sup> Compare E. Cox, *A Truly Civil Society*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1995, p. 10; she takes the first and last of these surveys and misses those in between. A similar, but not directly comparable, question is included in an AGB: McNair survey for the Office of Multicultural Affairs; 'Issues in Multicultural Australia, 1988', Social Science Data Archives, Australian National University, Canberra, 1989, p. 224.

looked after themselves, a figure which a year after Howard’s re-election had barely changed (Table 5a).

**Table 5a**      **Whether Governments are Trustworthy or Look After Themselves, 1969-1999 (percentages)**

People in government	1969	1979	1984–86	1988	1993	1996	1998	1999
Can be trusted sometimes/usually/	46	28	37	29	34	45	33	37
Some do, some don’t	na	2	na	29	na	na	na	na
Look after themselves usually/sometimes	47	67	54	41	65	51	66	62
DK/No response	7	3	8	1	2	4	2	1
n	(1873)	(2016)	(3012)	(1552)	(3023)	(1795)	(1897)	(2311)

*Note:*      na = not asked or not coded

*Questions:* *In general, do you feel that the people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves or do you feel that they can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time? (1969, 1979, 1988)*

*In general, do you feel that the people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves or do you feel that they can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time? Usually look after themselves [43 percent, 1993; 29 percent, 1996; 44 percent, 1998; 41 percent, 1999]; sometimes look after themselves [23 percent, 1993; 22 percent, 1996; 22 percent, 1998; 21 percent, 1999]; sometimes can be trusted to do the right thing [25 percent, 1993; 31 percent, 1996; 23 percent, 1998; 27 percent, 1999]; usually can be trusted to do the right thing’ [9 percent, 1993; 14 percent, 1996; 10 percent, 1998; 10 percent, 1999]*

*In general, do you feel that people in government are only interested in looking after themselves, or do you feel they can be trusted to do the right thing?’ (1984)*

*Sources:* Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, 2nd edn, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, pp. 379 (1969), 390 (1979); National Social Science Survey, 1984; Australian Election Study, 1993-1998; Issues in Multicultural Australia, 1988; and Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey, 1999.

On the evidence presented in Table 5a, the judgments of respondents about the *bona fides* of politicians appear to be contingent not only on the wording of the question but on the options the questions offer. In 1988, given the opportunity to choose a ‘middle’ option, over a third of those who (on the evidence of the earlier and later surveys) might have given politicians the thumbs down, chose not to do so. McAllister argues, on the basis of this and the 1979 results—both of which produced the lowest scores for trust in governments ‘doing the right thing’—that ‘levels of trust in government’ among Australian voters are ‘low’.<sup>57</sup> But this conclusion can only be sustained if one ignores the other data in Table 5a available at the time he was writing; if one overlooks the results of a question in the 1987 Australian Election Study which found very few respondents (6 percent) prepared to say they did not trust Canberra ‘at all’—a finding not very different to that registered in 1996 by the Middle Australia Project (Table 5b), and if one is indifferent to the fact that of those who did not express their trust in the government in 1988, over a third did not express their distrust (which was their only other option in 1979) but chose instead to say that while some people in government could be trusted to do the right thing some people could not.

<sup>57</sup> I. McAllister, *Political Behaviour: Citizens, Parties and Elites in Australia*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1992, p. 45.

If, in 1988, trust in government ‘to do the right thing’ could reasonably be described as ‘low’, it seems odd that McAllister should find it unremarkable that in the 1987 Australian Election Study fewer than one in five respondents disagreed with the proposition that government was ‘best for promoting general interests in society’, or that there was a ‘duty to obey laws passed by parliament, no matter how unjust.’<sup>58</sup>

**Table 5b Trust in Government in Canberra, 1987 and 1996 (percentages)**

Government in Canberra can be trusted ...	1987	1996*
Almost always/just about always	3	1
Most of the time	37	31
Some of the time	53	51
Almost never	na	17
Never/not at all	6	na
n	(1825)	(391)

**Note:** Undecided omitted; na = not asked; \*Respondents from the five mainland capital cities in Census Collectors Districts with average household incomes between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles

**Questions:** *How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Canberra to do what is right? Just about always, most of the time, some of the time, not at all? (1987)*  
*How much do you trust the government in Canberra to do what is right? Do you trust it almost always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never? (1996)*

**Sources:** Australian Election Study, 1987 and 1990; Middle Australia Project, 1996.

Judgements about the trustworthiness of governments also appear to be a function of the life-cycle of governments:<sup>59</sup> those new to office are more likely to be trusted than those who have been around for a long time. However, this is a hypothesis that we can test only loosely in relation to federal governments since, while most respondents are likely to have thought about the questions primarily in terms of federal politicians,<sup>60</sup> none of the survey items in Table 5a to which they responded actually distinguished between people in government in Canberra and people in government in the states.

### *Confidence in Government*

Some support for the view that confidence in government is also a function of how long a government has been in office is provided by a series of surveys conducted annually, from 1993, by AMR-Quantum Harris (subsequently Quantum Australia).

<sup>58</sup> I. McAllister, ‘Political Behaviour’, in A. Parkin, J. Summers and D. Woodward, eds. *Government, Politics, Power and Policy in Australia*, 5th edn, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 202–203.

<sup>59</sup> Note that the evidence from 1969 counts in favour of the hypothesis provided we classify the government of the day as the first Gorton government rather than the ninth successive Coalition government; the commonly used phrase for the period 1949–1966, ‘the Menzies era’, together with early reactions to Gorton and the fact that our assumption sits well with the other data in Table 4, provide some warrant for classifying the Gorton government in this way. On early reactions, see M. Goot and R.W. Connell, ‘Presidential politics in Australia?’, *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 2, 1972, pp. 28–33.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Historians have not yet provided us with the most important date in Australian history’, observed Alan Davies, long before any of these surveys were conducted, ‘the date when state politics became of less interest than federal politics’; A.F. Davies, ‘Victorian Government and Politics’, in G.W. Leeper, ed. *Introducing Victoria*, Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, Melbourne, 1955, p. 286.

While the absolute levels of confidence it reports are quite different from those in the academic surveys, the pattern of shifts is broadly the same with a sharp decline in the proportion expressing ‘little or no’ confidence in the federal government shortly after the change of government in 1996 (Table 6a).

**Table 6a Confidence in Federal Government, 1993-1999 (percentages)**

Year	Great Deal	Some	Little/None	n
1993	4	48	48	(2000)
1994/95	6	48	46	(1204)
1995/96	6	47	47	(2037)
1996	6	59	35	(2017)
1997	7	46	47	(2009)
1998	7	52	41	(2000)
1999	6	56	38	(1900)

**Question:** *How much confidence do you have in each of the following? Would you say you had a great deal of confidence, some confidence or little or no confidence in the federal government?*

**Sources:** AMR–Quantum Harris ‘AustraliaSCAN 1995’ (conducted Dec 1994–Feb 1995), AustraliaSCAN 1996’ (conducted Dec 1995–Feb 1996), ‘AustraliaSCAN 1997’ (conducted July–Sept 1996), ‘AustraliaSCAN 1998’ (conducted July–Sept 1997), ‘AustraliaSCAN 1999’ (conducted July–Sept 1998); and Quantum Australia ‘AustraliaSCAN 1999’ (conducted July–Sept 1999).

Our hypothesis about the life-cycle of governments may help explain the reported decline, between 1983 and 1995, in the level of confidence in the federal government. In the Australian Values Study of 1983, more than half (56 percent) of the respondents expressed either ‘a good deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the federal government. Twelve years later, in the World Values Survey, less than half that number (26 percent) did so—a drop of 30 percentage points. The 1983 survey was conducted just a few months after the election of the Hawke Government; the subsequent survey was conducted after 12 years of Labor in office variously dominated by Hawke and by Keating.<sup>61</sup>

Between 1983 and 1995, the federal government was not the only institution to be marked down by respondents; less confidence was also expressed in the legal system, the public service, the armed forces, the church, the police, trade unions and the press. In 1983, the proportion of respondents who expressed ‘a good deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the federal government (56 percent) was not very different to the proportion who expressed this sort of confidence in their state government (52 percent) or local government (49 percent).<sup>62</sup> What figures a similar survey would have thrown up in 1995 in relation to state and local government can only be guessed.

Whatever their numeric values, however, these figures almost certainly would have been similar to the figures for the federal government; not only is this consonant with

<sup>61</sup> Here we assume, on the basis of Keating’s prominence in the Hawke Government, that it makes more sense to talk of 12 years of Labor in 1995 rather than just four years of Keating. By contrast, Gorton (note 59), came to the prime ministership as almost a complete unknown.

<sup>62</sup> See E. Papadakis, ‘Constituents of confidence and mistrust in Australian institutions’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1999, p. 76, for the 1983 and 1995 data.

the 1983 survey, it is what other surveys reveal.<sup>63</sup> In the Quantum surveys, conducted from 1993 to 1999, there is little to separate confidence in one tier of government from attitudes to any other—save that the level of confidence in both federal and state governments (Table 6b) remained rather higher than the level of confidence in local government (Table 6c).

**Table 6b Confidence in State Government, 1993-1999 (percentages)**

Year	Great Deal	Some	Little/None	n
1993	4	56	40	(2000)
1994/95	3	56	41	(1204)
1995/96	4	53	43	(2037)
1996	3	58	39	(2017)
1997	4	50	46	(2009)
1998	5	55	40	(2000)
1999	4	58	38	(1900)

**Question:** *How much confidence do you have in each of the following? Would you say you had a great deal of confidence, some confidence or little or no confidence in the state government?*

**Sources:** As for Table 6a

**Table 6c Confidence in Local Government, 1993-1999 (percentages)**

Year	Great Deal	Some	Little/None	n
1993	6	59	35	(2000)
1994/95	4	61	35	(1204)
1995/96	4	60	36	(2037)
1996	4	60	36	(2017)
1997	5	57	38	(2009)
1998	5	57	38	(2000)
1999	5	58	37	(1900)

**Question:** *How much confidence do you have in each of the following? Would you say you had a great deal of confidence, some confidence or little or no confidence in local government?*

**Sources:** As for Table 6a

The same pattern is evident in a related series on dissatisfaction with government. Between 1997 and 1999, on Quantum's figures, as confidence in the national government rose, dissatisfaction with it fell (from 67 percent to 52 percent); as confidence in state governments rose, dissatisfaction fell, (from 66 percent to 53 percent); and though confidence in local government remained steady, dissatisfaction fell (from 54 percent to 47 percent).<sup>64</sup> What may surprise is that on both measures—confidence and dissatisfaction—local government comes off best. But given the importance of federal and state government compared with local government, given differences in voters' expectations and given the publicity each level of government attracts, these findings perhaps should not surprise.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, B. Headey, 'The Quality of Life in Australia', *Social Research Indicators* 9, 1981, pp. 155–81.

<sup>64</sup> 'AustraliaSCAN 2000 Management Report'.

In the absence of data on other levels of government (or data on banks or journalism), the most striking parallel with the fall in the level of confidence in the federal government between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s is the decline in the level of confidence in the legal system. In 1983, 61 percent expressed ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the law; in 1995 only 35 percent did so. As with the parallel decline in the reputation of MPs and lawyers for honesty and ethics, the slide in confidence in the federal government and the legal system may or may not share a common cause.

### **Social Capital and Life Satisfaction**

What of the possibility that attitudes to politicians have less to do with what politicians do or deliver and more to do with a decline in what the American political scientist Robert Putnam calls ‘social capital’—a decline he attributes to generational change but also to growing work pressures, suburbanisation and the attraction of television;<sup>65</sup> or with a decline in what another American political scientist, Robert Lane, describes as a change for the worse in how people feel about themselves—a change caused, as the dustwrapper of his book puts it, by the ‘erosion of family solidarity and community integration’?

The extent to which there has been a decline in social capital in Australia—a decline in those ‘features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’<sup>66</sup> —is unknown; compared to the massive documentation of the thesis for the United States, the best known Australian work is thin.<sup>67</sup> In Western Europe, if not in the USA, social trust appears to have risen since the 1970s. But even if Australia has experienced a decline in social trust, this may not tell us much about political trust; perversely, for the Putnam thesis, ‘political capital’ may affect social capital rather than the other way around.<sup>68</sup>

Lane, sceptical of the argument from social capital, argues that ‘political negativity’ is a more recent phenomenon than the replacement of the pre-war ‘civic generation’ by ‘their less involved children and grandchildren’ or the introduction of television.<sup>69</sup> Instead, he associates it with the post-1966 period, ‘about the same period as ... the epidemic of depressive symptoms in America and, it seems, in most advanced

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<sup>65</sup> R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, op. cit., pp. 283–84.

<sup>66</sup> R.D. Putnam, ‘Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital’, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1995, p. 67.

<sup>67</sup> For the United States, see especially Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. The best known Australian work is Eva Cox, *A Truly Civil Society*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1995, and ‘Measuring Social Capital as Part of Progress and Well-being’, in R. Eckersley, ed. *Measuring Progress: Is Life Getting Better?* CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Vic., 1998. Australian work which takes us further includes V. Hughes, ‘Between individual and state’, *IPA Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1995, pp. 32–38, M. Latham, ‘The Search for Social Capital’, in A. Norton, et al., *Social Capital: the Individual, Civil Society and the State*, Centre For Independent Studies, St. Leonards, NSW, 1997 and several of the contributions to I. Winter, ed., *Social Capital and Public Policy in Australia*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, 2000.

<sup>68</sup> K. Newton, ‘Social and Political Trust in Established Democracies’, in P. Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, pp. 179–86.

<sup>69</sup> R.E. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, p. 334.

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countries'. In an attempt to explain what he calls *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, he suggests that it is 'life satisfaction' that 'drives political satisfaction—and not the other way around.'<sup>70</sup> However, if this is true for Australia, research in the late 1970s and in the mid-1980s found no sign of it; levels of satisfaction with federal, state and local government were almost entirely unrelated to self-reported levels of psychological well-being,<sup>71</sup> while satisfaction with 'the way democracy works in Australia' showed almost no correlation at all with overall life satisfaction.<sup>72</sup>

## Parties

Has the decline in the standing of politicians for ethics and honesty, or even an increased scepticism about the willingness of politicians to keep promises, been matched by a decline in the importance voters attach to election outcomes; an increase in the proportion of voters who believe that the parties are ideologically indistinct or that the differences between the two sides of politics have largely disappeared; a decline in the level of voters' 'party identification'; or a reduction in the ability of the major parties to shape popular attitudes to public policy issues?

### *Caring which party wins and believing in party differences*

Hugh Mackay is not alone in arguing that 'real' policy differences between the parties are now a thing of the past. Among political observers, the idea that in recent years the major parties have converged is now par for the course. There is no agreement about when this happened—towards the end of the Whitlam government, after Whitlam (as Mackay asserts), or under Hawke. There is no agreement about why it happened—the forces of globalisation, the power of Canberra's econocrats inspired by the theories of economic rationalism, or the rise and rise of poll-driven politics. But the view that it has happened is widely shared. Thus, James Walter, who dates the change from the end of the Whitlam years, writes of '[p]olitics' having been 'driven off the agenda', by Bill Hayden's 1975 budget (influenced by P.P. McGuinness and Helen Hughes), leaving politics 'devoid ... of issues or principles' and devoted to nothing more than 'a battle for power'.<sup>73</sup> By contrast, Dean Jaensch insists that it was a Hawke-Keating 'hijack' that turned Labor into a party like the Liberals—a 'catch-all' party which was "'Labor" in name only'; Peter Beilharz describes Labor, post-1983, as a party 'without any purpose beyond holding the fort'; while Graham

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 197, 214.

<sup>71</sup> Headey, 'The Quality of Life in Australia', *op. cit.*, p. 166; also in B. Headey and A.J. Wearing, *Australians' Priorities, Satisfaction and Well-Being*, Monograph in Public Policy Studies No. 4, University of Melbourne and Department of Community Welfare Services, Victoria, 1981, p. 46; and A.J. Wearing and B. Headey, 'Incomes, Standards of Living and Quality of Life', in R. Eckersley, ed., *Measuring Progress*, pp. 178–79.

<sup>72</sup> B. Headey, 'The Life Satisfaction and Priorities of Australians', in J. Kelley and C. Bean, eds. *Australian Attitudes: Social and Political Analyses From the National Social Science Survey*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988, p. 172.

<sup>73</sup> J. Walter, *Tunnel Vision: the Failure of Political Imagination*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 1996, p. xiii.

Maddox writes of the period under Hawke as nothing less than a ‘retreat from two-party politics’ itself.<sup>74</sup>

But ‘party convergence’ was a by-word of political analysis long before this. Soon after the the Second World War, Ross Gollan, the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* Canberra correspondent, explained to an American audience that if ‘a running narrative of Australian political history’ contained ‘little reference to clash between rival parties over essential principle’ that was because ‘there has been little such clash.’<sup>75</sup> Others, however, have argued that the thesis was at ‘its most persuasive’ only from around the time Gollan was writing.<sup>76</sup> In the mid-1950s, Leicester Webb declared that ‘the parties are in the main what the two-party system makes them ... a system which leaves party debate almost devoid of content and [which] at times results in a two-party conspiracy to avoid the real issues of national policy.’<sup>77</sup> Towards the end of the Menzies years, Trevor Reese observed that ‘[h]owever much the political parties might cultivate the notion that they represented conflicting ideologies, it was difficult to discern much practical difference between their policies.’<sup>78</sup> At the end of the 1960s, Heinz Arndt argued that ‘for some decades ... the role of the government in the economy was a central issue in Australian politics’, but that ‘this phase’ was ‘virtually over’.<sup>79</sup> And at the end of the Whitlam years, Ken Turner, like Webb, noted that ‘[p]arties in two-sided competition find ‘me-tooism’ irresistible’, a phenomenon he highlighted in the contemporary context by noting references to ‘Gortlam’ or ‘Gill Sneddlam’ policies or to Snedden’s 1974 program as ‘Whitlamism at half pace.’<sup>80</sup>

What is striking about these conclusions is: first, the alacrity with which many of their authors jump from claims about particular aspects of public policy to totalising claims about ‘party difference’ as such; second, that few of the claims are based on a systematic analysis of either the programmatic statements of the parties or the policies implemented by governments, much less an analysis with clearly specified criteria of difference, replicable measures and relevant dates; and third, that those systematic analyses that have been done, though limited, either do not support claims about convergence, uphold them in relation to one broad policy area policy but not another,

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<sup>74</sup> D. Jaensch, *The Hawke-Keating Hijack: the ALP in Transition*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p. 154; P. Beilharz, *Transforming Labor: Labour Tradition and the Labor Decade in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 4; G. Maddox, *The Hawke Government and Labor Tradition*, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic., 1989, ch. 5.

<sup>75</sup> R. Gollan, ‘Australian Party Politics’, in C.H. Grattan, ed., *Australia*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1947, p. 115.

<sup>76</sup> B. Head and A. Patience, ‘Labor and Liberal: How Different Are They?’, in A. Patience and B. Head, eds., *From Whitlam To Fraser: Reform and Reaction in Australian Politics*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> L. Webb, ‘The Australian Party System’, in S.R. Davis, et al., *The Australian Political Party System*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1954, p. 117.

<sup>78</sup> Reese, *Australia in the Twentieth Century*, op. cit., p. 217.

<sup>79</sup> H.W. Arndt, *A Small Rich Industrial Country: Studies in Australian Development, Aid and Trade*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1968, p. 6; see also J. Rydon, ‘Parliaments and Parties’, in C. Osborne ed., *Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific: a Handbook*, Anthony Blond, London, 1970, p. 40.

<sup>80</sup> K. Turner, ‘The Party Contest in the 1970s’, in H. Mayer and H. Nelson, eds., *Australian Politics: a Fourth Reader*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1976, p. 463.

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or show that they hold good for some periods and not for others. Thus, Gruen shows that for the period 1970–71 to 1984–85, Labor’s patterns of expenditure and its changes to the tax system were quite different to those of the Coalition’s; McAllister and Moore, looking at policy speeches delivered between 1946 and 1990, map quite different patterns of convergence and divergence for the parties’ social goals and economic goals—patterns which suggest less bi-partisanship on economic matters post-Whitlam than pre-Whitlam; while a more recent investigation of the period 1946 to 1987, by an international team, confirms that Labor and the Liberals had ‘fairly distinct ideological stances’ (having only converged, and then briefly, ‘in the prosperous 1960s’), produced different policy emphases in some areas when in government (especially around welfare, where Labor was the ‘driving force’) and were differentially committed to some of their programs (on education, ‘Labor is the only party whose programs count.’)<sup>81</sup>

For their part, respondents in national surveys do not report any narrowing in the ideological differences between the parties—at least, since the election of the Hawke government—and they continue to affirm that whichever party wins does matter.

On the question of ideological difference, respondents in the 1987, 1996 and 1998 Australian Election Surveys placed the Liberal and National parties on the right of the ideological spectrum, and Labor on the left, and judged that the gap between them had not changed (Table 7a). Asked, after the 1987 election, to place the major parties on a ten-point scale (running from 1 on the left to 10 on the right) with a mid-point of 5.5, the median respondents put Labor left of centre (4.4) and the Liberal (6.8) and National (6.7) parties to the right; looking back to 1984, the median respondents thought each of the parties had been slightly further to the left, but the distance between them remained virtually the same—2.3 or 2.4 points still separated Labor from the Liberals and Labor from the Nationals. In 1996 and again in 1998, when the AES shifted to an eleven-point scale (running from 0 to 10, with a mid-point of 5), the median position was little changed: Labor was clearly on the left (3.8, 1996; 3.9, 1998); the Liberals (6.2, 6.5) and the Nationals (6.2, 6.4) equally clearly on the right; and the gap between the two sides, even allowing for the change of scale, remained almost the same (2.4, 2.6).

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<sup>81</sup> F. Gruen, ‘The Federal Budget: how much difference do elections make?’, *Australian Economic Review*, no. 71, 1985, pp. 36–49; I. McAllister and R. Moore eds., *Party Strategy and Change: Australian Electoral Speeches Since 1946*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, p. 1ff; H.D. Klingemann, R.I. Hofferbert and I. Budge, *Parties, Policies and Democracy*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1994, ch. 5.

**Table 7a**      **How Median Respondents Positioned the Parties, and Themselves, Left-Right Scale, 1984–1998**

	1984#	1987	1996	1998
One Nation	na	na	na	6.6 (1369)
National	6.5 (1310)	6.7 (1360)	6.2 (1346)	6.4 (1379)
Liberal	6.4 (1392)	6.8 (1445)	6.2 (1438)	6.5 (1492)
Democrats	na	na	4.3 (1335)	4.3 (1369)
Labor	4.1 (1477)	4.4 (1523)	3.8 (1332)	3.9 (1360)
Greens	na	na	3.5 (1332)	3.3 (1360)
Self	5.1 (1532)	5.2 (1666)	4.7 (1548)	4.7 (1598)
scale	1-10	1-10	0-10	0-10
mid-point	5.5	5.5	5.0	5.0
Total sample	(1825)	(1825)	(1795)	(1897)

**Note:** # = Respondents' 1987 recall; na = not available; numbers in brackets = respondents.

**Questions:** *In political matters, people talk about the “left” and the “right”. Generally speaking, where would you place your views on the scale? And where would you place the political parties [Liberal, Labor, National] on the left-right scale? (1987)*

*Now thinking back to the last Federal election in 1984, when Labor was led by Mr Hawke and the Liberals by Mr Peacock, where would you have placed your views on the left right scale in that election? And where would you have placed the political parties [Liberal, Labor, National] on the scale in the 1984 election? (1984)*

*In politics, people sometimes talk about the ‘left’ and the ‘right’. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right? Using the same scale, where would you place each of the federal political parties [Liberal Party, Labor Party (ALP), National Party, Australian Democrats, One Nation (1998 only), Greens]? (1996, 1998)*

**Sources:** Australian Election Study, 1987, 1996, 1998

Whatever understandings they bring to the question of ideological self-placement, median respondents placed themselves slightly to the left of centre. Across each of the surveys, therefore, the median respondent’s own position remained closer to her or his view of Labor than to his or her view of the Coalition. As Table 7b shows, this was just as evident when Labor was in government (1984, 1987) as it was when Labor was in opposition (1996, 1998).

**Table 7b**      **Differences Between the Parties’ Positions and the Position of the Median Respondent, Left–Right Scale, 1984–1998**

	1984#	1987	1996	1998
Labor—Liberal/National	2.3	2.4	2.4	2.6
Self—Labor	1.0	0.8	0.9	0.8
Self—LNP	1.3	1.6	1.5	1.8

**Note:** # = Respondents' 1987 recall

**Source:** Table 7a

On the question of whether it matters which party wins, far from the proportion falling after the 1960s, it actually increased. In Aitkin’s 1967 and 1969 surveys, nearly two-thirds of respondents (59 percent in 1967; 65 percent in 1969) said they ‘usually’ (1967) cared ‘a good deal’ which party won a general election, or ‘cared a great deal’ (1969) which party would win the election. ANOP figures suggest that the outcome of the ‘It’s Time’ campaign was even more widely anticipated: three-quarters (75 percent) of its respondents said they cared ‘a great deal’ or at least ‘quite a lot’ about

which party won in 1972. In no subsequent election for which we have data (1987, 1993, 1996 and 1998) has the proportion of respondents caring a ‘good deal’ fallen significantly below that (Table 8).

**Table 8**                      **How Much Respondents Care Which Party Wins, 1967–1998**  
(percentages)

	A good deal	Not very much	Not at all	No response	n
1967	59	39	na	2	(2054)
1969	65	35	na	1	(1873)
1972	75*	21	3	1	(na)
1987	77	21	na	2	(1825)
1993	82	15	2	1	(3023)
1996	74	21	4	1	(1795)
1998	73	22	4	1	(1897)

**Note:** \*Includes ‘a great deal’ (44 percent) and ‘quite a lot’ (31 percent); na = not asked

**Questions:** *Would you say you usually care a good deal which party wins a general election or that you don’t care very much? (1967)*

*How much do you personally care which party wins the federal election on December 2?*

*Do you care a great deal, quite a lot, not very much or not at all? (1972)*

*Would you say you cared a good deal which party won the Federal election or that you did not care very much which party won? (1969, 1987, 1993, 1996, 1998)*

**Sources:** Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, 2nd edn, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, p. 388 (1967), p. 379 (1969); ANOP *Australian Public Opinion Newsletter* 2 (4), 1972, p. 17; Australian Election Study, 1987–1998.

If voters think it matters who wins, one might expect them to think of the parties as importantly different rather than essentially the same. And, indeed, this appears to be the case. The proportion of respondents who think it matters a ‘good deal’ which party wins is not very different to the proportion who think there are at least ‘some’ party differences.

But voters are discerning. Across those periods for which we have records—the second half of 1940s, the second half of the 1960s, most of the 1970s and the 1990s—the proportion of respondents who report a ‘good deal’ of difference between the parties increases or diminishes with the issues at hand.<sup>82</sup> The records suggest two high points: 1948, when bank nationalisation was prominently positioned on the Government’s agenda; and 1993, when there were well publicised differences between the parties over industrial relations, health care and a goods and services tax. The low points are almost as widely scattered: 1967, 1972, 1973, 1996 and 1998 (Table 9).

<sup>82</sup> Head and Patience, who insist on averaging the 1967 and 1969 data, note that ‘only’ 34 percent of voters saw a ‘good deal’ of difference between the parties, at a time when the debate over Vietnam was at its height. But it is not clear what proportion of respondents might reasonably be expected to see a ‘good deal’ of difference between the parties when, according to the authors themselves, there was little else to distinguish them; Head and Patience, ‘Labor and Liberal: How Different Are They?’, op. cit., pp. 1, 8.

**Table 9** Differences Between the Parties, 1946-1998 (percentages)

	Good deal	Some	Not much	No difference	DK/No response	n
1946	46	na	na	na	9	(2000)
1948	46	na	26	22	8	(na)
1967	30	21	38	na	11	(2054)
1969	38	27	30	na	5	(1873)
1972*	29	31	17	21	2	(1000)
1973	30	40	na	22	8	(na)
1979	38	26	32	na	4	(2016)
1993	43	39	15	2	1	(3023)
1996	30	44	22	3	1	(1795)
1998	29	46	21	3	1	(1897)

**Note:** \* Melbourne and Sydney only; na = not asked.

**Questions:** *Do you think it makes a great deal of difference or only a little difference which political party is in power in Australia? (1946)*

*What difference do you think it makes which party governs this country—do you think it makes a great deal of difference, a little difference or no difference? (1948)*

*In general, would you say there was a good deal of difference between the parties, some difference or not much difference? (1967, 1969, 1979)*

*Some people say that a change of government, that is, from Liberal to Labor, would make a big difference to the way the country is run. Others say it will make very little difference.*

*In your opinion, would a change of government from Liberal to Labor make a big difference, some difference, a little difference, or not really any difference at all to the way the country is run? (1972)*

*Thinking of the previous Liberal-Country Party government, how different do you think present Labor Party policies are? Do you think they are very different, quite different, or essentially the same? (1973)*

*Considering everything the Labor Party and the Liberal Party stand for, would you say there is a good deal of difference between the parties, some differences between the parties, not much difference between the parties, no difference between the parties? (1993, 1996, 1998)*

**Sources:** Australian Public Opinion Polls Nos. 375–381, Sept–Oct 1946 and 548–558, Oct–Nov 1948; Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, 2nd edn, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, pp. 361, 373, 384; Irving Saulwick and Associates for the Age (Melbourne), 4 July 1972; ANOP *Australian Public Opinion Newsletter* vol. 3, no. 3, 1973, p. 11; Australian Election Study 1993–1998.

To infer from the most recent data that voters ‘no longer see any great differences between the parties’<sup>83</sup> is ahistorical and misleading. At the same time, the findings clearly confound the periodisation for party convergence argued by Mackay.

### *Party identification*

Asked in 1996, and again after the 1998 election, whether they thought political parties were ‘doing a very good job, neither a good nor a bad job, a bad job or a very bad job’, only one in five of those who filled out a questionnaire for the Australian Election Study said that the parties were doing a ‘bad job’ (13 percent in 1996; 16 percent in 1998) or a ‘very bad job’ (6 percent in 1996 and in 1998). A figure of around one in five is unlikely to be much higher, if higher at all, than the sort of figure that would have been recorded had the same sort of survey been conducted in the 1960s.

<sup>83</sup> Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, op. cit., p. 179.

Nonetheless, the level of party identification (the extent to which voters are prepared to classify themselves as generally Liberal, Labor, and so on) was lower in the late 1990s than it was in the second half of the 1960s, when it was first measured. And the proportion of respondents who considered themselves to be supporters of none of the parties roughly doubled, though from a low base. If we take this last group of respondents plus the much greater proportion who described their party attachments as ‘not very strong’, we can say that at the end of the 1990s the proportion of weak identifiers or non-identifiers was about half as great again as it had been a generation earlier.

A corresponding decline was recorded in the proportion of respondents who felt a ‘very strong’ or even ‘fairly strong’ identification with any of the parties. This decline, as Table 10 makes clear, dates not from the late 1960s, or even the mid-1970s (as Mackay’s account might lead us to expect), but from the mid-1980s; Rodney Smith suggests that it was only then that the inability of both sides of politics ‘to deal effectively with major economic crises’ became ‘sufficiently clear’.<sup>84</sup> From a high point in 1979, when three-quarters (74 percent) of respondents reported that they were ‘strong’ or ‘fairly strong’ identifiers, the proportion dropped to about a half (53 percent) in 1996 before staging an apparent recovery in 1998 (59 percent). This increase of six percentage points may have been due, in part, to formerly weak identifiers aligning themselves more strongly with Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party; in 1999, however, the proportion of ‘very strong’ or ‘fairly strong’ identifiers had slipped again.

**Table 10**                    **Strength of Party Identification, 1967-1999 (percentages)**

	Very strong	Fairly strong	Not very strong	None
1967	30	40	21	8
1979	31	43	17	8
1984-86	26	40	23	10
1987	19	45	31	5
1990	17	44	33	6
1993	17	43	28	12
1996	16	37	30	17
1998	16	43	27	14
1999	15	41	29	14

**Sources:** Rodney Smith, ‘Australia: an Old Order Manages Change’, in J.K. White and P.J. Davies, eds. *Political Parties and the Collapse of the Old Orders*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998, p. 123; Australian Election Study 1998; and Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey, 1999.

### *Being persuaded by the parties*

The answer to our question about changes in the capacity of the parties to shape the views of voters themselves doesn’t provide much solace for the Mackay thesis either. In the run-up to the 1993 election, for example, the positions adopted by Labor and Liberal respondents on the GST were in large measure the same as the positions taken by the Labor and Liberal parties on the GST. And they corresponded precisely because of the positions taken by the parties. Anyone who doubts this need only look at the massive turnaround in opinion in 1991 after the Leader of the Opposition, Dr

<sup>84</sup> R. Smith, ‘Australia: an Old Order Manages Change’, in J.K. White and P.J. Davies, eds. *Political Parties and the Collapse of the Old Orders*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998, p. 128.

Hewson, announced his Fightback! package. Before the announcement, nearly half the Coalition's voters, according to the polls, were opposed to a consumption tax; after his announcement, three out of every five Coalition respondents favoured it. On the Labor side the reaction was roughly equal—and opposite. Before the announcement Coalition respondents had been 18 percentage points more likely than Labor respondents to support the initiative; after the announcement they were 45 to 48 percentage points more likely to support it.<sup>85</sup> Labor and the Coalition respondents were every bit as polarised on the GST as they had been half a century earlier on the question of the banks.<sup>86</sup> The *Mackay Report* completely missed this polarisation—and with it any chance of noting the historical parallel.<sup>87</sup>

One reason why parties continue to matter is that party leaders continue to attract; the notion that the attitude of Australians towards 'political leadership and significant elites' has typically been 'one of distrust'—noted by Emy after the Coalition had enjoyed 23 years in office—is, in at least one important sense, mistaken.<sup>88</sup> Favourable leadership evaluations appear to enhance trust. And attractive leaders, especially where the attraction is based on a sense of their competence and integrity, strengthen party support.<sup>89</sup>

For much of his time in office, from 1983 to 1991, Bob Hawke rated well in the polls; on the figures generated by the Morgan poll, he rated better than Whitlam (Labor's 'charismatic' leader in the 1960s) or indeed any other party leader since Roy Morgan started to asking about leaders on a regular basis more than 30 years ago.<sup>90</sup> In the early 1990s, John Hewson, as Leader of the Opposition, also rated well; while he never threatened Hawke's record, from April 1990 to April 1992 his approval ratings were in the 40s if not 50s. In 1998, both John Howard and Kim Beazley went into the election with approval ratings of over 40 percent.<sup>91</sup> Several leaders in New Zealand, Canada or Japan—some with ratings close to zero—would have killed for such

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<sup>85</sup> M. Goot, 'Fightback in the polls', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 1, 1992, p. 170.

<sup>86</sup> M. Goot, *Policies and Partisans: Australian Electoral Opinion 1941 to 1968*, Occasional Monograph No. 1, Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Sydney, 1969, p. 27.

<sup>87</sup> H. Mackay, *The Mackay Report: Keynote*, April 1992.

<sup>88</sup> H. Emy, 'The roots of Australian politics: a critique of a culture', *Politics*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1972, p. 28.

<sup>89</sup> B. Graetz, and I. McAllister, 'Popular Evaluations of Party Leaders in the Anglo-American Democracies', in H.D. Clarke and M.M. Czudnowski, eds. *Political Elites in Anglo-American Democracies*, Northern Illinois University Press, Dekalb, 1987, p. 55; C. Bean and A. Mughan, 'Leadership effects in parliamentary elections in Australia and Britain', *American Political Science Review*, 83, 1989, p. 1176; C. Bean, 'The electoral influence of party leader images in Australia and New Zealand', *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1993, pp. 111–32.

<sup>90</sup> The most accessible guide to these data, to the end of 1995, is in I. McAllister, M. Mackerras and C.B. Boldiston, *Australian Political Facts*, 2nd edn, Macmillan Education Australia, South Melbourne, 1997, pp. 282–89. Among other things, the figures suggest that Whitlam's support declined markedly between 1969, his most successful campaign, and his winning office in 1972; Goot and Connell, 'Presidential Politics in Australia?', p. 31.

<sup>91</sup> According to the final AC Nielsen poll, 52 percent approved the performance of Howard and 53 percent the performance of Beazley; *Age* (Melbourne), 3 October, 1998. Newspoll put them at 44 and 52 percent, respectively; *Weekend Australian*, 3–4 October, 1998. The only other national poll with an interest in the leaders, Australasian Research Strategies, scored it 49 percent for Howard and 52 percent for Beazley; ARS, Media Release, 2 October 1998.

figures. In state politics, where the stakes are rather lower, Kerry Chikarovski (NSW), Denis Napthine (Victoria), and Rob Borbidge (Queensland) would probably not kill for ratings like Bob Carr's (NSW), Steve Bracks' (Victoria) or Peter Beattie's (Queensland); but they almost certainly would be tempted to stab the odd colleague in the back.<sup>92</sup>

*Shifts in the major parties vote*

What, then, should be said about the unparalleled period of electoral volatility that some commentators imagine we have been living through; the rise of minor party voting, most notably in the form of support for Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, and the weakening grip of the major parties in the Senate?

Electoral volatility (defined here as the net—not gross—change in party support from one election to the next) was higher in the 1990s than it was in the 1980s (Table 11). But in the 1980s, the level of volatility was lower than it was in the 1970s—the decade in which the Australian Democrats made an initial splash that was bigger than the one made by One Nation 21 years later. And in the 1970s, electoral volatility, especially in House of Representatives elections, was lower than in the 1940s. Indeed, in the House, the net movement in party support was *lower* in the 1980s than in any decade since the formation of the modern party system in 1910.<sup>93</sup> There is not much joy here for those who think that a decline in the ethical status of politicians holds the key to political transformations—that *apres* Whitlam *la deluge*.

**Table 11 Average Vote for the Major Parties, and Net Volatility, House of Representatives and Senate, 1940s-1990s (percentages)**

	Average vote for the major parties		Net volatility*	
	House of Reps	Senate	House of Reps	Senate
1940s	88.1	95.3	12.5	10.0
1950s	94.2	92.0	4.6	5.3
1960s	90.5	88.3	5.7	3.3
1970s	92.4	86.7	6.4	9.1
1980s	92.2	84.4	3.8	6.4
1990s	84.4	80.5	8.4	7.0

**Note:** \*Half the sum of the differences, across sequential elections, in the vote for the ALP, Liberal Party (UAP), National (Country) Party, (LNP in the Senate), New South Wales or Lang Labor (1937–49), DLP (1955–75), Australian Democrats (1977–), and other parties and independents (taken as one group).

**Sources:** Scott Bennett, 'The Decline in Support for the Major Parties and the Prospect of Minority Government', *Research Paper*, No. 10, 1998–99, Information and Research Services, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 1999, pp. 2, 4, for the figures on average vote; Murray Goot, 'Class Voting, Issue Voting and Electoral Volatility', in J. Brett, et al., eds., *Developments in Australian Politics*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1994, p. 177 for data on volatility to 1993; and Gerard Newman, 'Federal Election Results 1949–1998', *Research Paper*, No. 8, 1998–99, Information and Research Services, Department of Parliamentary Library, for data post-1993.

<sup>92</sup> In New South Wales, according to a Newspoll survey, 59 percent of respondents were 'satisfied' with Carr's performance, 29 percent with Chikarovski's; *Australian*, 13 November 2000. In Victoria, according to AC Nielsen, Brack's performance was 'approved' by 74 percent of those interviewed, Napthine's by 24 percent; *Age* (Melbourne), 13 November 2000. In Queensland, Newspoll reported 61 percent 'satisfied' with Beattie's performance and 37 percent with Borbidge's; *Australian*, 21 September 2000.

<sup>93</sup> M. Goot, 'Class Voting, Issue Voting and Electoral Volatility', in J. Brett, et al., eds. *Developments in Australian Politics*, op. cit., p. 177.

It is true that in 1998 the minor party vote in the House of Representatives jumped to its highest level since the War; with the combined weight of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, the Australian Democrats and the Greens, the minor parties and Independents managed to win just over 20 percent of the vote. But this may have had less to do with increases in the proportion who distrust the major parties or who are cynical about the political process and more to do with the mobilisation of pre-existing attitudes to politics and increasing concerns about particular political positions that the major parties have failed to represent.

Finally, the vote for the Senate. It is a pity that students of electoral behaviour pay so little attention to this chamber. For it is here, not in the House of Representatives, that the major party vote has been steadily eaten away. The siege of the Senate dates not from the sacking of Whitlam in the 1970s but from the decision to introduce a system of proportional representation in the 1940s. Since then the combined support for Labor and the Coalition has dropped, by an average of 2.8 percentage points, each and every decade. Contrary to the implication of Mackay's work, this decline was just as steady pre-Whitlam as it has been in the quarter of a century since.

### **Conclusion**

One problem with Jaensch's view about the apathy of Australians being of very long-standing, is the way it constructs apathy as a quality rather than a relationship, as a timeless essence rather than as something shaped by political circumstance.<sup>94</sup> The rise and fall of electoral turnout, and the ways in which this varied across states, prior to the introduction of compulsory voting, offers one window on to this;<sup>95</sup> changes in the patterns of party competition and in the ability of parties to attract voters—at the end of the 1890s, in 1910, in the mid-1940s, in the mid-1950s, in the late 1970s, in the mid-1980s and in the late 1990s—offers another.<sup>96</sup>

This review of the most recent period, based on the best evidence we have—nationally conducted, time series, survey-based research—provides only limited support for what Grattan has called 'the crisis of cynicism that seems to be enveloping' democracies like Australia.<sup>97</sup> Voters are no more disengaged from politics now than they were in the years before Whitlam, when, in an overview of the academic research, voter 'disinterest' [sic] was said to be 'qualified by a fatalistic scepticism' and the 'denigration of politicians' was regarded as a commonplace.<sup>98</sup> If anything, the level of political interest recorded by the polls has been greater since the 1960s. Certainly, the belief in compulsory voting has been no less.

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<sup>94</sup> Jaensch, *Election! How and Why Australia Votes*, op. cit., p. 146

<sup>95</sup> M. Goot, 'Electoral Systems', in D. Aitkin, ed. *Surveys of Australian Political Science*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, pp. 193–94.

<sup>96</sup> Goot, 'Class Voting, Issue Voting and Electoral Volatility', op. cit., pp. 177–79.

<sup>97</sup> Grattan, 'Editorial Independence: An Outdated Concept?', op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>98</sup> Emy, 'The Roots of Australian Politics: A Critique of a Culture', op. cit., p. 27; S. Encel, *Equality and Authority: a Case Study of Class, Status and Power in Australia*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1970, p. 222.

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The data do point to a decline in the reputation of politicians for ethics and honesty, they suggest an increase in electoral cynicism around the credibility of election promises and they document a weakening of attachment to party—things which Jaensch’s view either doesn’t allow or cannot treat. But the idea that an ‘inevitable consequence of massive structural change in Australia’s economy has been a serious erosion of public confidence in the democratic and representative institutions built into the framework of society’<sup>99</sup> is difficult to sustain. As much as they ever have in the post-war years, voters continue to think that elections matter, they continue to think of the two major parties as different, and they continue to be influenced by the parties in their judgments of political issues—on the big issues of the day, just as dramatically as they were fifty years ago—whether they realise it or not. Mackay’s conclusions on this point may faithfully reflect the conversations to which he is privy; but this in itself doesn’t make his conclusions valid. The conclusion reached by the Constitutional Centenary Foundation, that Australians are unlikely to take an interest in constitutional debate unless they get ‘reliable information, detached from party politics’, however fashionable, is profoundly mistaken.<sup>100</sup>

It is one thing to ask ‘ordinary Australians’, ‘middle Australia’ or anyone else about politicians, members of parliament, ‘people in government’, *en masse*; to ask about local members, individual politicians, or cabinet ministers, may be quite another.<sup>101</sup> Attitudes to the leaders underline this point: in recent years the approval ratings of a number of party leaders, some in office for more than one term, have been much higher than would have been predicted by the ‘crisis of cynicism’ thesis. Support for the parties has also stood up relatively well: in the House of Representatives (though not the Senate) volatility was clearly greater in the 1990s than in the 1980s, but in neither chamber was the movement in party support as marked as it was in the 1970s, 1940s or 1910s. And, in an electorate which is said to find politics on the nose, informal voting remains remarkably low; it was lower throughout the 1990s than it was in 1984 or 1987.<sup>102</sup>

In the absence of compulsory voting, a number of things would change—support for compulsory voting among them. But it is misleading to think of compulsory voting as masking our discontents. This is partly because the extent of the discontent has been exaggerated and decontextualised; partly because certain forms of discontent are clear, notwithstanding the ‘mask’; and partly because compulsory voting itself may have helped sustain interest in politics and a belief in the political system.

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<sup>99</sup> L. Tanner, *Open Australia*, Pluto Press, Annandale, NSW, 1999, p. 192.

<sup>100</sup> *Report on a Decade of Experience*, Constitutional Centenary Foundation, [Carlton, Vic.], 2000, p. 21. Research conducted during the 1999 constitutional referendum confirms the point: the voices which respondents thought most important were those of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition; G. Gray, ‘Campaigns and Elections’, *Sydney Papers*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2000.

<sup>101</sup> On attitudes to local members, see Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, op. cit., pp. 367–68 and 390; on attitudes to individual politicians, see Lyons and Stewart-Weeks, ‘On the Edge’, op. cit., p. 10; and on attitudes to cabinet ministers, Daniel, *Power, Privilege and Prestige*, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>102</sup> McAllister, *et al.*, *Australian Political Facts*, pp. 81–82; *Electoral Pocket Book*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, 1999, p. 45.



**Question** — What do you think of the notion that declining turnout in places that don't have compulsory voting is an index of declining interest in politics, etcetera? And secondly, what do you think of Putnam's thesis about decline of social capital?

**Murray Goot** — Decline in turnout elsewhere may have to do with decline in interest, but it may also—as Hugh Mackay suggests—have to do with frustration amongst those who have ideals and are worried that their vote counts for nought, or that the choices are very narrow. There are several possible explanations for decline in turnout, of which decline in interest is just one.

The Putnam thesis concerns social capital, by which he means the connectedness that we have, largely through voluntary organisations. The famous article he wrote was called *Bowling Alone*. His concern was that, increasingly in America, people were not joining groups, working in neighbourhoods or associating with friends as much as they used to. People had become individualised, isolated and withdrawn from the political process, and that increasingly people who were moderate in their political positions would withdraw from politics and leave politics to people who were very interested but who represented the extremes—whether they be right or left, feminist or anti-feminist or whatever. This seemed to him to be a worry.

The immediate question is, to what extent (a) has the phenomenon which he identifies in the United States happened in Australia, and (b) if it has happened, to what extent does it really explain anything very much? Compulsory voting is obviously one of the things which would make a considerable difference in seeing any political consequence in Australia of the *Bowling Alone* phenomenon.

If people in Australia were less interested in politics just because they were less interested in community matters—whether it be scouting or Rotary or, indeed, tenpin bowling—they would still find themselves on election day having to vote. And they would find themselves, certainly these days, with a wide range of choice, as we saw in 1998. Eighty percent of them voted for the major parties, and in almost every seat (bar nine) they could have voted One Nation, and in the Senate they could have voted One Nation or Democrat. And even in those circumstances the minor party and Independent vote only got up to 25 percent.

They could also have voted informally and spoilt their ballot paper—and it is remarkable how few people do this. Obviously part of the explanation is that people do think that compulsory voting means that they have to actually indicate some clear, formal vote. But there are enough people out there, I suspect, who think that they can get away with not filling out the ballot paper or writing some rude comment. Some people no doubt vote *and* write a rude comment—the rude comment is ignored and the vote is counted. What I'm impressed by is how little informal voting there is.

The vote for Hanson and for the Democrats was inflated in a way. On the best evidence we have (the 1998 Australian Election Study), they both represent protest votes and disenchantment with the democratic process. But of course at that point they depart. The Hanson vote is very much a vote against the sort of politics that Paul

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Keating represented, in terms of what's often called 'new class values', most obviously to do with immigration and multiculturalism and the like, but also a wider set of values to do with capital punishment, homosexuality, and issues of that kind. One Nation voters are overwhelmingly opposed to the rights of homosexuals to have any role in public life, or to teach. They are very strongly in favour of capital punishment. They stand out on all those sorts of issues, and I suspect that if Hanson herself had not been the leader of the party, they would have stood out on anti-feminist issues as well.

The Democrat vote is a very different vote. The people that were mobilised in the election campaign on the basis of discontent with the economic system, globalisation and protection, declining terms of trade in the rural area, did not vote One Nation—they voted Labor. And the relationship between feeling good about your economic circumstance and voting Labor or Liberal is extraordinarily high. People who feel very good about interest rates, their own circumstance and so on are very likely to vote for the Coalition—at the moment at least, because they're in government. People who feel discontented about interest rates, costs of living, their own employment prospects, and so on, are overwhelmingly likely to vote Labor. The curves in the 1998 election data are just beautiful to behold.

If you look at the One Nation vote and plot respondents according to their increasing economic discontent or pressure or insecurity, the vote for One Nation remains absolutely flat. The vote for One Nation goes up as people indicate that they don't like government policy on Aborigines, they don't like multiculturalism or immigration, and they don't like the way democracy works. And I think this is code for saying they think the politicians no longer represent, for this particular group of One Nation voters, the good old values that they stand for.

**Question** — Regarding your comment on the similarity in the votes for the minor parties in the 1970s and the 1990s, looking at One Nation versus the Democrats, my concern was that a lot of the vote for the Democrats in the 1970s reflected a split, and they actually took a large chunk of the major party constituency with them. Whereas the One Nation phenomenon was less of a split within the existing parliamentary parties, and more of a new protest movement.

**Murray Goot** —There are similarities actually, more striking than you perhaps concede, between the origins of the Democrats and the origins of One Nation. Chipp and Hanson were both members of the Liberal Party. If you go back and look at those early Chipp speeches there is this feeling that both parties are 'on the nose', and that what he's trying to do is establish a constituency for people that don't like either side. Now, he took Liberal and Coalition supporters (more than Labor supporters) and Hanson, contrary to early expectations, did the same.

There were a lot of people in 1996 saying that the rise of Hanson was very bad news for Labor. You'll recall that the seat that she won was a Labor seat—Bill Hayden's former seat of Ipswich. Gary Morgan, who did some very early polling work on this, predicted that what Hanson would represent was a re-run of Labor's nightmare of the 1950s. That basically this was a new split in the making, and that she would take with her the blue collar Labor vote that was disenchanted with the 'Paul Keating agenda'

which represented the professional middle-class in the cities, to put it crudely. And that they would pay a terrible price as people gathered to Hanson around these issues.

That judgement proved to be dead wrong, although it was also predicted by at least one analyst who looked at the 1996 election study and thought that Labor was very vulnerable on questions of Aborigines and immigration. Well this turned out to be quite wrong.

The Hanson vote has been dogged in a way that the Chipp vote or the Democrat vote wasn't. That is to say, there was more coherence within the Democrats, less of the *Fuhrer prinzip*, and that was very evident in One Nation—whatever the leader said, went. The Democrats organised in a much more democratic way—and they still are in many ways the most internally democratic of all the parties. Now this was *verboten* in the One Nation Party from the very beginning. It was run by highly authoritarian people in a very 'top down' manner and the party organisation was crypto-fascist. This is quite different from the Democrats. And of course the sort of people that rallied to the Democrat flag from within the Liberal Party ranks were, in socio-economic terms, very different from the One Nation people. The One Nation people came from the Liberal Party, but most especially they came from the National Party—the party most damaged by One Nation.

**Question** — Is there any data on the religious affiliation of One Nation voters?

**Murray Goot** — Yes, I think they're not churchgoers, on the whole. This surprised me, because I thought of that constituency as partly picking up the old Bjelke-Petersen constituency in Queensland. But it also relates to the earlier question about Putnam, because church attendance and affiliation with church groups is one of the things that Putnam talks about as building social capital. And if you find these people are below average in their church attendance, that would be grist for the mill that in fact these people are in some ways alienated from social groups.

This was a very fashionable thesis in political sociology in the 1950s, after fascism and after Nazi Germany in particular—the notion of isolated individuals who were there to be mobilised, the importance of secondary groups as a bulwark in a liberal democratic state, and that if you didn't have people owing allegiance and being involved with secondary groups, what you got was a condition in which a demagogue could mobilise people. The Putnam thing is a bit of a re-run of that, although he doesn't talk about that sort of literature, which was very fashionable in the 1950s and 1960s.

**Question** — You seem to have found that there is widespread voter disenchantment with politicians' honesty and ethics. Is that reflected in people's voting intentions or in political pressure between elections? Do voters punish politicians for that?

**Murray Goot** — If you think all politicians are pretty terrible and you have to vote for one of them, it doesn't help to distinguish between those who are worth supporting and those who aren't, except when you have someone coming from outside the system. That was one of the attractions of Hanson—although she had some relationship to the Liberal Party, it was pretty marginal. People ask the question: 'Why wasn't Graeme Campbell able to mobilise this vote?' Of course, he was very

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frustrated that although he stood for a lot of the things that Hanson stood for, he couldn't get the support of the voters.

I think there were a couple of reasons: the fact that Hanson was a woman and generated a certain sort of sexual electricity was one thing—which was quite important given the sort of people she attracted. And secondly, although she did have some association with the Liberal Party, it was pretty marginal, certainly compared to someone like Graeme Campbell, who'd been in Parliament for much too long to attract this sort of constituency. So she came along and was available to people disenchanted with the system. But so, traditionally, were the Democrats. And if you look at the data you'll see that both the Democrats and One Nation pull these sort of voters—people who think that democracy doesn't work very well, and that the parties are pretty terrible. They're pretty disillusioned. But of course these are very different voters, the ones who vote Democrat and One Nation.

So yes, if you have someone from outside the system, this is the way to mobilise the vote. And Hanson, in my view, would have done rather better to have pushed this sort of thing and to have pushed her opposition to class values, than to have got on to things like tax. The problem with her tax policy was that; (a) it was silly—voters aren't that stupid and they realised it was implausible; and (b) they weren't interested in tax. If they were, they'd vote Labor if they weren't going to vote Liberal.

**Question** — Could you comment on the relationship between the two phenomena of the Putnam thesis: the decline in social capital, and the loss of rating by such a large number of professions which previously have been among the 'pillars of society', people to whom society in general have traditionally looked up to? It seems that there might be a relationship between these two things.

**Murray Goot** — Some of the professions have not changed a lot, like judges and so on. Others, like lawyers and bankers, have changed. We can all think of particular reasons that don't seem to have to do with social capital. Banking is the most obvious profession to think about, in terms of the deregulation of the banking system, withdrawal of banking services, the increase of user-pays within banks, and enormous bank profits. Of course, the banks would say these profits are a miserly return on the capital invested, but for most people these are huge profits, and I suspect that's part of it, with banks.

Lawyers are a bit more puzzling. It could be a sense that increasingly lawyers are paid out of the public purse to no great end, at great cost. In many instances—in terms of inquiries and so on—it's now commonly said that the only people who will benefit through public inquiries are the lawyers who turn up in their serried ranks to represent the various parties involved. In New South Wales we have just completed an extraordinary inquiry into the Mt Kosciusko disaster, which went on for five years at huge public expense. If each of the families of the people killed had been given half a million dollars and sent on their way the state would no doubt have saved a lot of money.

So you can think about particular professions without actually thinking in terms of the Putnam thesis about social capital. That's not to say that there's nothing in the social

capital thesis, but it's not the most obvious explanatory framework in which to think of these declining ratings.

**Question** — Do you have any information about whether journalists have become more cynical over the years, and whether this drives our attitude to tall poppies in general? I have a feeling that journalists are more cynical and there has been more deep investigative journalism, where they pursue parliamentarians to the last degree. Do you think there might be some connection?

**Murray Goot** — There is an argument, particularly in America, that journalists have moved more into 'campaign mode', and that political journalism is full of analysis in terms of seeing policies as manoeuvres in the game for political advantage between the various parties (or, in the United States, between potential presidential candidates). They don't focus on the policies themselves and their merits, or telling readers about what is being proposed and what the strengths and weaknesses are. The argument is that people are not particularly interested in this, and they are being turned off, and they don't think much of journalists for this. They then lose interest in politics, because what they really want to know about is the merits of the policies.

There is also a feeling that journalists have moved into much more personality-based writing about politics and pursuing politicians' private lives, and have moved way from talking about public policy issues. So there is a disenchantment with American journalists, and a feeling that the public aren't learning things, as they ought to be. This in turn turns them off politics.

**Question** — Can you comment on the voting on the referendum issue, and the fact that the rural area was obviously conservative but that was also possibly a protest vote, and the blue collar workers were another group that seemed to vote against the referendum.

**Murray Goot** — I haven't looked closely at the referendum. I never thought it would pass, and went on the record on this in 1994. In my view it was never going to pass because the necessary pre-conditions were never established. One pre-condition is bipartisanship, and I always thought that what would happen on the pro-change side was that there would be a split between those that wanted a direct election and those who wanted something else.

I thought that people like Donald Horne—back in the days of *The Lucky Country* and subsequently as a founder of the republican movement—had always misunderstood the issue, and we've now come full circle on this. Horne had argued that what you needed to do was simply have a referendum on the republic, and the question of what *sort* of republic would be a secondary matter. This is now a thing that Beazley and other people are running with, and I think it is utterly mistaken. I said at the time that to think that the form of republic was a secondary issue, and that what really mattered was whether you became a republic or stayed as a constitutional monarchy, was profoundly mistaken. So I never saw the republican movement as likely to succeed.

In terms of the pattern of voting that you identify, the most obvious explanation is that it's a case of new class values writ large—that there were a lot of people that saw this particular model as a model represented by the 'new class elites'. But there were also

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a lot of people that were strongly pro-monarchy. The Hanson vote is a strongly conservative, anti-republican vote. There are others of course who would simply prefer the monarchy if they can't have direct election—the last thing they want is the republican model that was put up. So, it didn't surprise me. The patterns of voting, the strongly class-based patterns, is a bit more surprising, but I think this does have to do with wider terms of new class values and a protest against those.

**Question** — We've seen quite a bit in the media about where the one million One Nation voters are going to go. Based on your work, can you make any kind of prediction about where they will go in the next election?

**Murray Goot** — I never make predictions. I'd say that they are a vote that can still be mobilised on the same sort of basis as 1998 in terms of public policy, which is along immigration and Aboriginal lines. That's much more likely to be done by the Coalition. Their values correspond much more closely with Liberal and National Party values than with Labor values.

If you look at the Australian electorate in terms of where people stand on Aboriginal and immigration issues, as you get progressively more sympathetic to immigration and Aboriginal issues in particular, more people are likely to vote Labor and less likely to vote Liberal.

So Liberals are in a better position, as they were in 1996, to mobilise this sort of vote—and indeed Howard did mobilise this sort of vote. The slogan 'for all of us' was clearly related to research done by the Liberal Party and/or Howard's own instincts on these matters—not happy with multiculturalism, not happy with the 'privilege' of Aboriginal people. Howard in 1996 won the constituency largely that subsequently became the Hanson constituency. And the challenge and the opportunity there is for him to hold on to it or win it by going back to some of those issues.

I think for Labor the chances of winning the Hanson vote would be greater if they could convince the Hanson voters that what really needs to be leveraged amongst their values are questions of economic disadvantage and those sorts of issues—race, immigration, Aboriginal matters—things that Labor would steer away from in trying to attract the Hanson votes. But these issues would still play well, I think, for the Coalition in that constituency.

**Question** — Would you mind clarifying your comments on the republic referendum? I gathered that back in 1994 you were convinced that the referendum would fail. Since the model that was developed was not known until 1998, what was the basis for your decision in 1994 that any referendum would fail? The question that Mr Beazley is proposing has never been tested, so I'm unclear on how you can reach the conclusion you did.

**Murray Goot** — The question that Beazley proposes is tested, and is widely supported. That is to say, most people want a republic. But in the course of a campaign, the issue would not be whether we want a republic or not, it would automatically become 'What sort of a republic do we want?' And the fundamental mistake made by people who think it's only a matter of a republic, is to think that a republic is an issue like taxation, where people prefer none to a lot, and if they can't

have none, they'll settle for a little. The republic issue is not like that. People who want a direct election will not necessarily vote for an indirect model just because it's the next closest option. This is what was demonstrated in the referendum.

So I was very confident in 1994 that the republicans would split on this issue—whatever model they came up with. I was sure that while you had a Liberal leader that would not support a model with the Labor side, that that also would count strongly against it. We've never had a referendum in Australia passed in which both sides have not agreed. It's not sufficient, but it's certainly necessary, and I didn't think the republican vote would be an exception.

I took the view that the republic issue is not an ordinary issue. It's a bit like the issue of Telstra, where some people think that Telstra should be either totally privately owned or totally publicly owned, and that the worst possible thing would be for it to be in-between. So there are people who think it should either be a monarchy or their own form of republic, but the worst possible thing would be a form of republic that wasn't *their* thing, and they'd much rather vote for a monarchy than to vote for what they would regard as a 'second best' republic.

My view is that in the course of the campaign, whoever runs on this as a plebiscite will be under enormous pressure to clarify what they stand for, and therefore will create a split. But even if the referendum or plebiscite were to get up, we would still be back to *exactly* the situation we were in in 1999. What is a model that will carry the key players, and in turn might carry the electorate? I said in 1994 that before the referendum carries the people, it has to carry the Parliament. So there has to be a proposition to which both sides are committed. If we've got a proposition to which both sides are *not* committed, the referendum is almost certainly doomed, in my view. And if we have a plebiscite in which most people do put up their hand for a republic and the politicians have got away with not saying what sort of republic they want, we would be *exactly* back to square one: that is, what sort of republic? And when that goes up to referendum, people will almost certainly only be able to vote for one thing in the end—our tradition is that we vote for one thing. Whatever that one thing is, it has to be something agreed, because if it is not agreed, a lot of those people will vote for the status quo.

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## **Confidence in Public Institutions: Restoring Pride to Politics\***

*David Zussman*

I stand before you, Australia's most important public institution, with a somewhat daunting invitation—to talk about the decline in confidence in public institutions across the world.

Canada and Australia are among the oldest of the Westminster democracies, and I am particularly pleased to be here in this chamber as you celebrate one hundred years of nationhood. But our countries share much more than a proud political tradition. Both countries are physically vast, geographically and climatically diverse, rich in natural and human resources and populated by mosaics of—in order of historical priority—aboriginal peoples, European settlers and immigrants drawn from every part of the world. We are very fortunate indeed to be considering the issue of confidence in government institutions against such a backdrop of abundance.

First, however, I'd like to tell you how I came to be here today. I'm the President of the Public Policy Forum; an independent, non-profit, non-partisan organisation dedicated to improving the quality of public policy and public sector management in Canada. The Forum was created in 1987 at a time when tensions between the public and private sectors were running high. Its founders, from both government and business, recognised that there was a need for open, research-based dialogue among

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leaders from all sectors, to ensure that Canada achieved the quality of government it requires to succeed in a globalised economy.

The Public Policy Forum is unique in Canada. It is not an advocacy or lobbying organisation. Its 150 members are drawn from government, business, labour and the voluntary sector. The Forum truly is one of the few venues where leaders from all sectors can have a frank, open and off-the-record discussion of major policy challenges. Our goal is not to advocate a particular stand on an issue, rather we strive to ensure that all points of view are heard and, when possible, achieve a consensus. In addition to tackling policy issues, our private sector members have been particularly supportive of the public sector's efforts to improve public sector management practices and adapt to the information age, thereby acknowledging the importance of good government in our society.

Greg Wood, who has provided strong representation for Australia as your High Commissioner in Canada for the past several years, became interested in the Forum's work and has participated in a number of our roundtables and seminars. I understand that there is no similar organisation in Australia. So, as a consequence, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade invited me to visit your country to meet with business, academic and government leaders to discuss our approach to public policy development. And while I am here basking in your summer sunshine, Greg is back in Ottawa, where Australia is the major sponsor of our major winter festival this year, called Winterlude. Ottawa is the world's coldest capital, but we make the best of it by celebrating winter on a frozen eight kilometre long canal that runs through the heart of the city—now dotted with kangaroo ice sculptures.

Today I will be addressing the issue of confidence in government. What do we mean by confidence? And what do we mean when we say there has been a decline in confidence? It's easy enough to identify those who feel there has been a decline. We're talking about the 'general public', the people who live and work and vote and answer surveys in Canada and Australia and around the world. But what is it that they're losing confidence in? And how do we know?

The conventional wisdom is that the general public has lost confidence in the capacity of governments regardless of political stripe, to manage their affairs efficiently, prudently and effectively—and to act in the public interest.

I will therefore begin my presentation with a brief overview of what we know about declining public trust and confidence in the institutions of government, something I've been following as an academic and a policy adviser for the last 15 years.

First, I'll discuss some of the data. Then I'll talk about what may have led us into this situation, and what the implications are both now and in the foreseeable future; about why we should be concerned; and then I'll talk about some solutions—some of which are practical, while others are not.

But as we think about going forward, we must recognise that the world is changing in powerful ways that affect the meaning of 'government', and I would like to spend a few minutes talking briefly about some of them.

As you would expect, the first of these changes is globalisation, a term that is losing currency from excessive use. But there is no denying the phenomenon it describes. Globalisation means—for the purposes of this discussion—that the power of the nation-state is being challenged by many emerging forces, including the development of transnational organisations, both public and private. A study just issued by the Institute for Policy Studies reported that 51 of the 100 largest economies in the world are now corporations, not countries.

As fewer and fewer countries are able to match the economic power of the largest corporations, and autonomy is surrendered through regional and global arrangements like the North America Free Trade Agreement, APEC, the G-20, ASFAN and the European Union, the challenge to individual governments becomes clear—show your relevance. Show that you make a positive difference in our lives. Show that you deserve our confidence.

Technology, one of the drivers of global economic integration, also merits mention on its own. For governments, technology—faster, higher capacity communication networks—is a two-edged sword. The protests that captured world attention in Seattle on the occasion of the World Trade Organisation Conference last year would not have happened without the Internet as an organising tool. Electronic media are widely considered to have played an important role in bringing down regimes from the Philippines to the former Soviet Union. So technology allows citizens the opportunity to challenge their governments in very dramatic ways.

At the same time, technology links citizens to government in a one-to-one relationship that is unique and full of potential.

A third factor is that societies in the developed world have grown accustomed to growth and affluence over the past 20 years. And the deference to authority associated with societies of scarcity has given way to the more demanding attitudes of people who are better educated and more confident.

Given the context I've just described, it's obvious that governments' relations to citizens have been significantly redefined. I think it's pretty clear that there is no possibility of returning to the old days of high confidence by resorting to the old ways. Government can't spend its way back into public confidence.

So let's look at the current situation in a little more detail, and decide where we can go from here.

In the 1981 World Values Survey, 39 percent of European respondents expressed 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' of support and confidence for public institutions. By 1990 that had fallen to 25 percent. In 1981, 50 percent of Americans expressed high support for public institutions. This fell to 32 percent by 1990, and 21 percent by 1999. In 1981, 37 percent of Canadians expressed high support for public institutions, a figure which fell to 29 percent by 1990, and to 22 percent by 1998.

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A survey in July 2000 found that 92 percent of Canadians expressed trust in our friends and families. More than 70 percent of us trust voluntary organisations and the police. Around 40 percent of Canadians trust the legal system and, as individuals, public servants. More than 30 percent trust business, union and student leaders. Twenty-nine percent trust ‘the government’—one percent less than the media, and exactly the same as special interest groups. And politicians? They are trusted by 12 percent of Canadians. Only car dealers are less trusted than politicians.

In the 1960s, 80 percent of Canadians trusted governments to ‘do the right thing’. Today this level of support has fallen to 30 percent.

Americans are most inclined to trust the military and the medical profession. In India, high levels of trust are placed in the military, the supreme court and the police. In a study of the new democracies of Eastern Europe, trust for governments or parliamentarians was the lowest among all the options.

Australians’ trust in state and federal MPs alike has fallen over the last 30 years, although not as steadily as their trust in bankers and lawyers. Last year this address was given by Professor Murray Goot of Macquarie University. He talked about how Australian public opinion on politics, politicians and parties has changed, as well as the very significant extent to which it has remained the same. Professor Goot associated Australian fluctuations in confidence with domestic issues, events and personalities. He found Australian voters ‘no more disengaged from politics now than they were in the years before Whitlam.’

Explanations describing the decline in confidence in public institutions as the result of unique circumstances within particular countries appear much less persuasive to me when we consider this as a global phenomenon. The decline in confidence in public institutions seems, in fact, to be well documented everywhere except in Australia.

I will not try to explain this difference. I will talk to you about the part of the world I know best, where the loss of trust in public institutions has been most significant.

Before we propose any remedies, we need to look very closely, to try to identify the causes of these recent changes in attitude. Too many people have jumped to conclusions about solutions without first identifying the sources of the problems.

One factor may be that, for the greater part of the Twentieth Century, most industrialised countries experienced relentless growth of the state. In the last quarter century however, these industrialised countries have had to dig their way out of huge deficits and debts resulting from their efforts to fund the cost of these ambitious government programs. Today, most western governments have just completed reducing the size of the state and withdrawing from many traditional public sector initiatives.

In addition, globalisation and the information technology explosion have rendered traditional approaches to policymaking and regulation less effective than previously, as the role of the government became more focused and smaller, and markets began to play a greater role in allocating global resources.

So part of the reason for the loss of trust and confidence is clear—governments do not have the fiscal capacity or the economic reach to deliver in the changed environment, and as a consequence, many have had difficulty defining new roles for themselves in this challenging context.

This analysis is further complicated by something that is at first glance counterintuitive—while confidence in public institutions appears to be falling, interest in them is not. For each of the dozen North American and European countries in the World Values Surveys, there has been a distinct and sometimes impressive increase in the percentage of respondents who express an interest in politics and government. In Canada, the proportion claiming to be ‘very interested’ in the work of political leaders nearly tripled between 1981 and 1990.

This growing interest in politics and politicians may be a very significant factor in explaining some of the decline in confidence. As more attention is paid to politics by a better educated, informed and interested electorate, and as the media bring us into ever more intimate contact with politicians and other leaders, politicians cease to be ‘larger than life’. A growing interest in politics has, ironically, been accompanied by a tendency to distrust political authority and big government. Citizens are less deferential than they were in the past.

The news media has played a role in this as well. The eight-second spot, the quotable quote, the sound-bite and live television in the House of Commons have all helped to turn Canada’s political process into a public spectacle. The economics of the news media—concentrated ownership and a high level of competition—encourages sensationalised reporting. Saying ‘Hey, the government isn’t as bad as it looks’ is not likely to sell many newspapers. The mistakes and misdeeds of politicians at every level of government—however trivial—tend to be trumpeted and exaggerated.

Citizens’ attitudes—especially on issues of trust—toward each other form the glue that holds a society together.

Social cohesion is, in essence, the ability of people in a society to work together in groups. It is based on shared norms dealing with issues like truthfulness, honesty and reliability. It is the foundation of the sort of trust that makes a society work. It is what Dr Francis Fukuyama describes as the ‘art of association’. It’s been suggested that with the weakening of that trust, the loss of that social capital, North Americans particularly are becoming as individualistic as they were always believed to be.

The erosion of social capital can be seen as both cause and effect of changes in the way citizens relate to their families, their employers and their communities. A generation ago there was a lot of discussion of how television was changing our family life. Families didn’t talk any more. They just sat together and passively absorbed whatever was on the television screen. Who could have predicted then the potentially far more isolating impact of the new technologies of video games and the Internet?

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Employers were once much more paternalistic towards their employees than they are today. People could work for the same company for 30 or 40 years. In the face of globalisation, deregulation and increased competition, careers for life have become a thing of the past. Now we tell our young people to expect to change jobs and employers many times during their working lives. We teach them that loyalty is something that they should neither expect from nor offer to an employer.

The recent trend to individualism in North America is not, for the most part, based on a great philosophical movement. The writings of Ayn Rand and Milton Friedman have not taken on a new popularity. The driver here is simply self-preservation. People are electing to take care of their own interests because they do not believe anyone else will. The necessity of self-help has, in fact, been compounded by cuts in public spending, in areas where citizens really care. As a consequence, people are also losing confidence in those programs that help define their quality of life, such as health and education programs.

This has prompted people such as Canadian union leader Buzz Hargrove to comment recently that if governments don't demonstrate the importance of their programs and services to the quality of life, Canadians will conclude 'more from frustration than from mean-spiritedness' that they want their money back.

Confidence in the system may also be eroded by the failure of past governments to deliver on their promises. Sadly, we have pretty low expectations of truthfulness on the part of politicians, especially during election campaigns. There has been a great increase in cynicism about politics and politicians. In 1984, Brian Mulroney became Prime Minister of Canada with the biggest majority in Canada's history. Shortly after he left office nine years later, his party was reduced to only two seats in the House of Commons—a decline of more than 150 seats in four years. A lesson to all about the danger of promising the sky and failing to deliver.

Another important development in Canada and elsewhere has been the introduction of various kinds of charters of rights and freedoms. These charters, empower individuals by allowing them to challenge for their rights in court at the expense of Parliament. The frequent overturning of legislation has further undermined the legitimacy of government.

Why should we care about loss of confidence in public institutions?

We should care—we should worry—because that confidence is an essential part of our social capital. Its erosion will undermine not only those public institutions, but also civil society in general. Some have argued that this decline in trust is a positive development—the result of the attention of a better informed, better educated public. And were this simply the result of more light being cast upon the deeds and words of politicians and public servants, I would agree. But it is not simply a matter of more being seen—the problem is the more cynical eye with which government is being seen.

Government is now more complex and perhaps more important than at any time in history. And we need a realistic view of government—of all its strengths, of all its

weaknesses. Within the next five years, about 75 percent of the executive category in Canada's public service will be retiring. I suspect the same is true in Australia. We will need to attract a new wave of equally capable, equally committed people to replace them. An inappropriately negative view of government and of elected officials will drive away the very best of the people we need, both as public servants and as political leaders. Public service must be seen as a worthwhile and honourable vocation, not as the oldest profession.

We must begin by remembering that public trust has been eroded in all sectors of society, but especially our public ones. Restoring that trust will be difficult—some would tell you it's impossible. But if we're a little flexible, a little creative and if we don't waste our time searching for that one magic bullet—if we recognise that the solution will come in many small pieces—then we have a real chance of restoring public confidence in our public institutions.

Here is how I think we might approach the project.

I am a psychologist by training, so it should come as no surprise that I'm proposing what is more or less a social psychological approach. First, it's worth noting that totally efficient and totally open and totally honest government would be the ideal. That is not a realistic expectation, but we could we have government that is more efficient, more open and more honest.

The way in which we measure legitimacy is by comparing what we see with our expectations, and we have to moderate our expectations by being honest about what governments can do. Our present Prime Minister, Jean Chretien, is exceptionally good at that. He has a very modest, self-effacing style—'understated' would be an understatement. Is it genuine? Yes. It's certainly quite a contrast to our earlier Prime Minister, Mr Mulroney, who had a fondness for grand and even reckless metaphor. Bragging to reporters, for example, about how he had 'rolled the dice' in constitutional negotiations with the provinces. It's largely a question of understanding that our judgement of performance is a function of our expectations.

And expectations tend to escalate. A politician who promises the moon makes it a virtual certainty that his or her opponents will promise the planets or the stars. Such escalation makes it inevitable that both sides will end up promising the impossible, making promises that cannot be honoured. And once we have toned down the rhetoric and moderated expectations, let's deliver good government.

If I made that sound a bit too simple, let me break it into five prescriptive areas: parliament, the behaviour of political leaders, the educational system, the role of journalists and, finally, the role of technology.

## **1. Parliament**

We need to rebuild the legitimacy of our institutions. A large part of that will be to find less confrontational ways of holding government to account. While occasionally entertaining, Question Period (at least the Canadian version) is an increasingly ineffective tool for enforcing accountability. And nothing that happens there has much effect on government decision-making. Our most

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prominent tool for holding government to account for its actions has virtually no effect on our quest for ‘good government’.

I see important work to be done with regard to parliament in at least four areas:

- i) Make the idea of serving in parliament more appealing to those who are interested in public service. Members of Parliament can begin this process by treating each other with the respect the institution deserves.
- ii) Deal with the allegation that members of Parliament have limited roles by loosening the bonds of party discipline, and by involving individual members of Parliament outside the Cabinet—government backbenchers and members of the opposition alike—in the governing of the country.
- iii) Parliament must become more responsive to the public will. I’m not proposing that parliamentarians abandon their consciences and try simply to mirror the views of their electors, but they must recognise that the input and views of citizens are not irrelevant.
- iv) Develop new approaches to holding governments to account and possibly limiting the Question Period if it can’t be made a more effective instrument.

Overall, we need to engage citizens in the process of government in ways more meaningful than simply voting every few years. This will require creativity and openness to innovation, particularly in the use of technology to transform government, perhaps using it to solicit views on an ongoing basis.

## **2. Behaviour of political leaders**

It goes without saying that it is not enough for the behaviour of a politician to be within the law. The legitimacy of the system requires that they meet a higher standard, a more rigorous code of behaviour. The use of ethics commissioners or counsellors in Canada has already proven most helpful with respect to cabinet ministers. Howard Wilson, Ethics Counsellor to Canada’s Prime Minister, spoke to your Senate two years ago. He said then, and I agree, that often all that is needed to keep ministers from placing themselves in compromising positions is some well-considered advice, to stop them from doing things which, while legal, would be seen by most members of the public as ‘wrong’.

The ground I have covered today has some overlap with Mr Wilson’s presentation. Some of the ethical problems that he discussed are important factors in the decline in confidence in and support for our public institutions.

Conflict of interest remains a large problem with respect to Canada’s upper House, which most senators consider a part-time job. And senators who rarely leave the boardroom or (in one well-known case) the beach to earn their Senate salaries have given the Senate a bad reputation.

In order to avoid either the appearance or the reality of conflict of interest, public servants and ministers are subject to strict prohibitions on making representations in their own interests or as agents, for one and two years respectively, after leaving the public service. Senators and backbench members of Parliament are not, however, covered by these rules at present.

The point of conflict of interest rules and post-employment codes is to encourage a standard of behaviour that *is* above reproach, and that *appears* to be above reproach. Citizens have the right to expect that their elected officials always work in the public interest. Any appearance to the contrary erodes confidence in the system.

### **3. The educational system**

Our school systems do a poor job of developing political literacy and knowledge of civics. This is not a question of purely academic interest. If an appreciation of the role of government in our society is not developed in young people, it's certainly not going to be found in adults. I am therefore interested in a new policy of the Province of Ontario, for instance, that requires young people to perform a certain number of hours of community service as a condition of graduating from high school. I support this for the same reason I support education in civics. In particular, we need to provide our young people with a better understanding of the role of the member of Parliament.

We cannot continue to assume that young people will gain an adequate understanding of the institutions of civil society from what they absorb from their family, their friends, and the media.

### **4. The media**

Journalists have an important role to play here—or at least they could. I understand that I am treading on dangerous ground. Freedom of the press is an important and fundamental right. It exists because it is considered instrumental for the functioning of—here's that phrase again—civil society.

I think journalists too often react in a knee-jerk way to any suggestion that they could better serve society than by automatically mocking or minimising every accomplishment of a government or politician. I think there is room for a useful discussion of journalists' instrumental role in serving the public interest—of where to strike the balance between freedom of the press and social responsibility.

Our journalists need to dig deeper—to move the focus from the sensational to the important. As I mentioned earlier, people are becoming better educated and better informed—they can handle more in-depth analysis of policy issues.

### **5. Technology**

We've already talked about the two-edged sword of technology. It has contributed to the problem, and it could be part of the solution

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Information technology can be a tool to build trust and confidence in public institutions by making government more open and accessible to citizens on their own terms, by building transparency. For example, by 2004 Canada's federal government plans to establish an electronic portal that will provide citizens with a 'single-window' for information about and transactions with federal, provincial and municipal governments.

Credibility is tied to accountability. New technologies can be used to better hold governments accountable for their actions, and competing sources of information can help to make government more transparent. There are three cornerstones to this transparency:

- i) *Access to information.* This gives the opportunity to dispel some of the distrust of governments by providing citizens with direct, unfiltered access to information on what their governments are doing with their money. Remove the information barrier and we can build trust. Access to information within appropriate limits can make government transparent and therefore more accountable.
- ii) *Privacy.* The big—and not unjustified—fear with regard to access to information is, quite naturally, that some information that should remain private will become public. There is a related question of what information governments should appropriately be gathering on their citizens, but that genie is out of the bottle. The question of whether or not this sort of information should have been gathered is not irrelevant—it can be destroyed—but the first question to deal with is whether people's privacy is being respected and protected.

Striking that balance between public access to information and citizens' right to privacy is one of the most difficult challenges facing government. The ease with which technology allows us to share information complicates it enormously.

- iii) *Accountability.* Technology also gives us the ability to track and measure performance and hold governments accountable in ways never before thought possible. But we have to take great care in selecting performance indicators. Technology gives us the ability to measure the wrong thing with great ease. We still need to do the hard work of developing good indicators.

Citizens of every country expect—from government *and* from the private sector—good service. If they don't get good service from the private sector, they can usually take their business elsewhere. With government, while they may not be able to take their business elsewhere, citizens have a right to expect high levels of attentive service. In the public sector, there is a higher duty to learn from mistakes and, to the extent possible, to get things right the first time.

Finally, I will say again that there is no magic bullet. The job of rebuilding people's confidence in government will be a long and hard one. The solutions will take time, but if we succeed it will have been worth all the effort—so of course we must try.



**Question** — In regard to the point you made about the need for the public service to try harder, a lot of things that have happened in Australia in recent times seem to be aimed at trying to transfer the culture of the private sector to the public sector. That would seem to be counterproductive. Can you tell us your views on that?

**David Zussman** — We have been going through the same sort of exercise in Canada for the last decade or so, and I think we have learned a lot on the voyage. After initially embracing most private sector principles, we began to realise that, although there are many things in common between the public and private sectors, there are still many things that differentiate the two. We have now gone back to a more balanced point of view. I think, frankly, that the greatest contributions from the private sector come in the area of service. In my mind there is absolutely no reason why the public sector cannot benchmark itself against the best of the private sector in terms of being able to provide levels of service. There is some degree of departure, from a management point of view, given the huge differences in management structures between the types of institutions. But I am quite unrelenting on the service issue. It is totally appropriate for the public service—particularly now with the use of technology—to offer a level of service to its citizens that you would expect from a bank or a pharmaceutical company.

**Question** — Your talk sets out some issues that are very pertinent to Australia. Public attitudes, expectations, and an understanding of government require something which clearly sets out the role of government in the changes that are occurring in the world today—particularly against the background of globalisation and economic drivers which are linked to technology. You mentioned a number of roles for various other groups and sectors in the economy, but skirted around the role of government and tended to describe it in terms of transparency, accountability and so on. In Canada, has that issue been picked up head on by your Committee, and can you add anything about the role of government?

**David Zussman** — I deliberately skirted the role of government because I think that is very much where political parties should function. My expectation for any general election is for the parties to articulate the very role of government, because that is the essence of what parties are seeking when they seek election. They are in fact defining for the citizenry the role which the government might play.

As citizens we make choices among the various options which array themselves along a continuum. Some political parties see a much more activist role for government; some see a minimalist role. And that is the ultimate, real choice you are going to make. All of the other things I talked about apply to any government, regardless of where it sits on the political spectrum.

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So, as we've seen in recent elections, when you go into the ballot box and put numbers next to names, at the heart of this decision, which is one of the more important decisions you make on a regular basis, you are defining the extent to which you are giving a government its role, and the breadth of that role. And it's the collectivity of that, and the result of all the citizens making their choice, that you end up with a government which, hopefully, will have spelled out to you in advance what they see their appropriate role to be.

One of the great innovations in Canada in the last ten years—which I understand has been going on in Australia for a long time—is that our political parties now actually publish a platform in advance of an election. In the good old days, the platforms were about three pages long and they all said more or less the same thing. We have now become quite insistent towards our political parties as they seek our vote and are saying to them: 'Tell us more—much more.'

So in the 1993 Canadian election, for instance, which was a landmark election, one of the parties had a 115-page document, which outlined in great detail—with costings—what they were going to do for us. And for three or four years they then, relentlessly, checked off each of those promises as they completed them. That government was rewarded with a majority in 1997, and just got another majority in November last year, using pretty much the same argument. Many people said: 'You know, I don't really particularly like these guys, but by and large I'm comfortable with what they want to do and they run an honest government, so I'll vote for them again.' And they came back with a much larger majority in 2000 than they did in 1993, which—as all of us know—is pretty hard to do in modern politics.

So, in answer to your question, I think the parties have to articulate their positions.

**Question** — And perhaps by politicians lowering expectations themselves?

**David Zussman** — When you have a document out there which says 'this is what I'm going to do', it does tend to moderate some of the rhetoric.

**Question** — I don't think you covered the question of attitudes in the public service. After 25 years in the service, I would say that there's probably been a trend in the way public servants see their own work. In 1980 perhaps it would have been easy to have people subscribe to the view that their work was honourable and was something which was a career and so on. They would be people with a degree of professionalism and, hopefully, some judgement about these matters.

In the last few years I think it has been harder to get people subscribing to that sort of view, and these are obviously the people who work in the political sphere. We've probably had ten or fifteen years of internal 'staff attitude' surveys within departments which, to some degree, reflect on the view of the integrity in the system and senior management in the public service. So it should be possible to track some of the trends in that way, but it doesn't go back to that earlier time that I would call, perhaps, the 'high water'. Do you have indicators from inside those sorts of areas?

**David Zussman** — One of the most interesting pieces of research I did was in the 1980s, on a number of occasions, where I surveyed senior public servants and senior executives in the private sector. I asked pretty much the same questions of both populations—about 2000 in each group. One of the things I found, which surprised a lot of people, is that each side characterised the other as being ‘lazier’. On the question of who’s more efficient, everyone said the private sector. When it came to the question of whose job was more interesting, the public servants always had higher numbers. The public servants have always felt that they make a real contribution through their job. They may not be paid as well, but the job is interesting. So in fact, inherently, there is a good reason for many people to find employment in that sector.

We’ve done surveys of university students in the last few years, and we find that young people would not consider a career in the public service. It remains an enormous challenge therefore, to find good people and to make them to appreciate the value of an interesting career working in the public interest. The challenge will come, as I mentioned earlier, because so many of the executives will be leaving—as they will in Australia in the next five years. People are not attracted to public service for a number of reasons, some of which are the more obvious ones, like compensation.

But I don’t think compensation is really at the heart of it. I think at the heart of it is the notion that governments don’t matter much. There is an attitude of ‘Why would I spend my life doing that sort of silly stuff, when I could do something important, like working in a private sector organisation?’ Because I’ve been quite bothered by this, I’ve been working on a project that has not yet been launched, but I have in fact secured the agreement from five or six major CEOs of companies who used to work in the public sector, asking them to make some public statements in the coming months to explain how valuable it is for people to consider careers in the public sector.

I am very bothered because government, as I argued earlier, is no less relevant than it was when you joined the public service. And if we don’t have first class people, as we’ve traditionally had, trying to work on these very intractable, difficult problems, we’re not going to have the best policy advice going to ministers. As you know, the public service does provide the bulk of the advice to political leaders, and they really deserve the best and most contemporary thinking possible.

**Question** — As you noted, there are many difficult and intractable problems in the public sector, and many of those require long term solutions, whilst much public decision making seems to be on the basis of short term political interest. How can you get over that problem?

**David Zussman** — Well we’re never going to be able to do that. I think we just have to recognise that we have to find better processes. One of the things we argue at the Public Policy Forum—and in fact it’s pretty much our mantra—is that most real big public policy issues cannot be solved by government alone. Whether it’s one level or three levels of government, that sector can’t solve all of our problems. We have a better chance of succeeding, I think, if we can engage all the other sectors of society—the not-for-profit, labour, academia, the private sector—to engage or to

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challenge them to contribute to the solution. To do that, though, requires governments to actually allow them to participate in the formulation of the response.

This is a learning process, and I can't say we have had huge successes at doing that.

For a long time, we've fooled ourselves by saying: 'Well I consulted with those people, I don't know why they're so angry, we did tell them what we were going to do, and they told us it wasn't a good idea and we did it anyway, and now they're angry, and what are they angry about?' That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about a situation—and we're working on this quite actively in a number of different areas in our own organisation—by saying, 'Look we have a problem—we don't know the answer—but maybe together we can fashion a solution. We'll work the finances out later on, because the finances may frankly be equally shared.'

That may be the way in which one runs modern government and governance. It's a model that we've been pushing for ten or fifteen years, and we're about to engage.

As an example, we were asked just last week by the minister responsible for employment what jobs are going to look like ten years down the road, and how to prepare a workforce for these new jobs. We don't know the answer to that—we don't even know what those jobs are going to look like. We don't know what the training is going to be. But we *do* know that if we don't do anything, then no one will be prepared. So we're now going to start very active and real dialogue with all the major stakeholders in the country: with the CEOs of the large corporations, asking what they need; with the universities, asking what they are going to do for us to provide the skill set that is necessary; with high schools, asking what the school counsellors will be telling kids about the future, and what are the curricula going to look like?

That's going to be a major effort of ours, and I can't tell you if we're going to succeed, frankly, at this stage. But I don't think there is any other way to do it. If we are even halfway successful in getting an engaged debate going, where citizens can begin to see that something is emerging and where government is saying: 'We don't know the answer, we're not going to fool you by saying one billion dollars is going to get us the answer—all we're saying is that we're going to start a dialogue and we're going to see where we end up.' It took an enormous amount of courage on behalf of the minister to do that. Now that's a minister looking down the road. This is not a minister looking at the short-term solution. She knows that she may not succeed, but she will be way out front by telling all the citizens she's going to try it and that it may not work out that well. But I think citizens will give her credit for trying. As I said earlier, I don't think citizens have the level of expectation they did. We are now too well informed about how difficult it is to do good things in a multifaceted and very complex society.

So that's what we're trying to do, and I'll report back in a couple of years if you like.

**Question** — I think it is still part of the political culture here that to be a successful politician you have to pretend that you know all the answers to every question. And to say that you don't know the answer to some problem would be a fatal concession, which would doom you. That seems to be the prevailing culture.

**David Zussman** — I'm a parent, I try that with my kids. I used to say that I knew all the answers—and they said: 'No, you don't.' Now I say that I don't know all the answers and ask them how we're going to solve it together. I think sometimes that the politicians are way behind citizens on this issue, actually. I don't think citizens have that expectation—they do not expect the politicians to know all the answers. It may take some courage for some of them at the outset, but I think it's frankly a pretty easy transformation.

**Question** — I don't want to draw you into a debate that perhaps is raging only in Australia, however when you mentioned the role of the press, you didn't seem to be offering a solution to the issues you raised. Would you care to comment on public broadcasting in Canada?

**David Zussman** — I don't have any solutions because I have failed miserably in getting the media involved in this discussion. I have on four occasions invited the media to a round table with senior public servants to talk about their reporting of Parliament and their reporting on the public service in general. Although well intentioned, we have never actually been able to schedule it, and this is because the media feel awkward about it. They know exactly what's going on. And they know exactly the awkward position they find themselves in. Private conversations always validate this point: 'I have editors and publishers who demand that I write stories that we can sell.'

One very good anecdote concerns a good friend who works for a national newspaper. He got a call from an editor in Toronto saying: 'Our competitor, the other major newspaper, has done a story on this, why didn't you run a story on this yourself?' At which point the journalist said, 'Because it's not true.' The publisher then said: 'I don't care.' There's a tremendous conflict within that story.

Journalism schools are debating this issue among themselves—they don't know where they want to end up on this. That is because, in large part, newspapers and the media are businesses, and reporting 'truthfully' and getting the right answer is not necessarily the primary objective.

The question of where public broadcasting fits into this is one that we are grappling with in Canada today. Over the last ten years in Canada, spending on our public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, has been reduced by 500 million dollars a year. So we've gone from a budget of 1.2 billion dollars to about 700 million dollars a year. In a speech last week from the Prime Minister it was announced that more money would now be added to the CBC budget. Why is that? Because we suddenly recognised that there is something that goes beyond the need for commercial media—and that is a media that is really not preoccupied by sales or share ratings, but is more preoccupied with quality and getting the story. I was very surprised, to be perfectly honest, that the government decided, after seven years of severe cutting, that they had gone too far. While it was probably not an efficient organisation seven years ago, and for various reasons had allowed itself to lose its discipline—which is easy to do when you get annual appropriations which are not really scrutinised—there came a

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point at which the commercial broadcasters will not take on the type of programming that public broadcasting can do. So there's now more money going back.

In large part, by the way, I think this was prompted by a television series that's still running, on the history of Canada. There is no commercial value in this, they couldn't find any advertisers for it. Yet, ironically, they're getting about two million people a week watching it. So we've had a change in thinking in Canada in the last couple of years, in large part because the quality offered by our public broadcasting is just unmatched commercially, and that continues to be the case. I can't comment at all on Australia's situation.

**Question** — You glossed over outsourcing. In Australia, the government's policy in recent years has been to outsource enormous amounts of work and to severely cut the numbers of staff in public service. Many of us feel that the loss of career structure in the public service has resulted in loss of corporate knowledge gained by longevity in the service, loss of confidentiality, loss of loyalty and many other factors. We know that there is lip service to community consultation, but we've also learned to our cost that this is often *only* lip service, because it is so short term that the community cannot respond effectively. Has Canada tended to move away from outsourcing and downsizing its public service, or are they staying with that policy, which we have been following?

**David Zussman** — In 1995 I was in the federal government. I was Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, for something called 'program review', where we undertook a fundamental review of all the government's expenditures. To make a very long story short, 22 percent of the public service left at the end of the exercise.

By the way, this review was driven largely by fiscal reasons—we were running a huge deficit of 42 billion dollars a year, and at moments it looked like it was going to get worse.

We're now in a surplus situation and have had a chance to look back at some of the things we did. You're absolutely right about a number of things you mention. We lost corporate memory to a great degree—and in fact we're buying it all back now. We're buying back the same people who left, because no one is going to remember exactly why we did what we did.

I don't know if we were totally enamoured of the private sector model, which was the question you asked at the outset. But we introduced some notions of competition in the delivery of services. And I think we've discovered now, after some experimentation, that the public service can often deliver services more cheaply than the private sector can—all costs and all factors in.

So in fact, while there has not been significant growth in the public service in Canada, it is certainly not getting any smaller. And the government has made it abundantly clear that the downsizing efforts are over, and that it was entirely driven by fiscal reasons—it was not ideological in the sense that the private sector could do it better than the public sector. The Prime Minister was very reluctant to go through this exercise, and felt that he had really no choice.

There have in fact been some small innovations. What we have done is create what we call 'agencies', which are public service operations, placed somewhat at arms-length from the government, to be less controlled by our central agencies, and to give them more discretion in the way that they conduct business, contract work and enter into agreements and partnerships.

Our most significant example of that is our revenue agency, our tax collection agency, which is now no longer a government department, but a separate agency, with its own logo and its own advisory board to advise on management. It's been in existence for only two years, and in fact my organisation is just now completing a case study on the creation of the agency, and I hope in a few years to go back and take a look at its effectiveness, or otherwise.

So we have had some innovations, but certainly not any linked to downsizing, and certainly the downsizing was not ideologically driven.

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## **What is Australia? Perception versus Reality\***

*Phillip Knightley*

The quotation in the flyer for this lecture about Australia being a ‘cultural desert populated by poisonous spiders’ comes from a British columnist who writes for the *Sunday Times*. The full quote goes:

We must thank God for the South of France. He did really well there. But we mustn’t let Him forget Australia—a wide cultural desert populated by man-eating sharks, poisonous snakes, spiders and men in shorts.

I was thinking, when preparing for this lecture, how I would pour scorn on this outrageous statement of such a misinformed portrait. Then suddenly I read in the paper that sharks had eaten two people off the coast of Western (actually South) Australia and attacked a third person in Sydney; a man had died of snakebite in northern New South Wales; and hordes of funnel web spiders had invaded North Sydney. So, bang! That one went out the window.

Never mind, I thought I’d concentrated instead on the ‘cultural desert’ then, and show how sophisticated and worldly-wise Australia is now. Then I heard that someone in Melbourne had launched a new boutique beer called ‘Piss’, with the slogan ‘*Taking the Piss*’.

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I was recovering from that when, reading the Australia Day honours list, my eye was caught by a medal of the Order of Australia—awarded to Joan Bradshaw of Peshurst—for ‘fundraising by the Australian Order of Old Bastards’. I’m sure it’s quite a worthy organisation, but couldn’t we think of a better name for it? You can’t quite see it in the London *Times*, can you? ‘Her Majesty the Queen is pleased to confer a CBE on Mrs Jane Eggleton for fundraising for the Honourable Order of Pommy Bastards.’ It just wouldn’t work there. It doesn’t sing.

At the bottom of the same page as the honours list, as published in the *Australian*, was a list of honours awarded to the dogs of year, in the Great Australian Dog of the Year list. Now I know we all love animals, but how can you explain a dog called ‘Commando’ getting an award for ‘contributions to anthropology and reconciliation in the Northern Territory’? What did he *do*, that little dog? Dig up some bones? And then another one called ‘Coke’ got an award for ‘services to the New South Wales building industry’. I worked out what that was—he’s that blue kelpie that sits in the back of the ute guarding the building supplies while the boys are away having a beer.

As I was leaving for Australia, a friend of mine said: ‘I suppose you’ll be writing something about their state elections and that woman who runs that party up in Queensland—what’s her name? I suppose she’ll be back again?’ I said, ‘No, you can forget about her, that’s all over!’ And of course, as soon as I arrived in Sydney and picked up the papers, there’s Pauline Hanson smiling out of the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

I think that’s the problem in trying to decipher Australia. Just when you think you’ve grasped what it’s all about, it suddenly slips away again and you realise that it is a very different place from what you imagine when you’re looking at it from abroad. This is not ‘Britain Down Under’. It’s not a slice of Europe or Asia. It’s not a branch office of America. It is a very different place.

I thought about the possibility that perhaps the English language is to blame—that because we speak English, Americans speak English and the British speak English, then anybody coming here will immediately understand what everything is all about. Wrong.

In London in the 1950s I knew a journalist called Rex Lopez. He was born in Gibraltar, but brought up and educated in Britain. He worked in the London bureau of a group of Australian newspapers. He had worked with Australians all his adult life, had married an Australian girl, and had kids who went to Australian schools when he emigrated here.

Then he went to work for the Sydney *Daily Mirror*, and the tough news editor said, ‘Rex, do you think you’ll be able to handle the news tips telephone? You sit at the phone over there, and people ring you with news tips, then you pass it on to us and we send somebody to cover the story.’ Rex said ‘Yeah, of course I can.’ The editor said, ‘You realise there are a lot of slang words and strange places ...’ Rex said he could handle it easily.

When the phone rang, he picked it up and somebody shouted down the phone: ‘Willy willy at Woy Woy!’, and hung up.

Poor old Rex Lopez’s confidence that he understood Australia was shattered and he never recovered it.

The British actor Stephen Fry told of finding himself—after a long day in Hollywood dealing with tough producers, and feeling low, tired and depressed—in the Polo Lounge at the Beverley Hills Hotel. He said he then heard the sound of a familiar voice. He said: ‘A healing wave of homesickness swept over me like a moist mountain wind—I forgot America and it’s billion-dollar entertainment industry and I suddenly knew I was English and I could never be anything else.’ Well, the familiar voice, of course, turned out to be Rolf Harris. But he says that when you’re alone in the Polo Lounge, the fluting tones of one of Australia’s greatest sons beckon you home like a lighthouse.

So let’s us examine some current views held by foreigners about Australia, test their validity, compare them to the reality—and then decide whether it matters or not.

Let’s take Britain and the United States first, because I feel they should know better. It’s OK for the French to spell it S-i-d-n-e-y, and for the Russians to believe that there are kangaroos in the streets, but the British and the Americans *should* know better.

During the Olympics the *New York Times* had a large team of sports reporters over here, but they had some general reporters as well. One was a business reporter, and he went around asking local journalists for story ideas about Australian business. Each time they put forward an idea, the business reporter would look puzzled and say: ‘But how can I work Tom Keneally into that story?’ And they’d say, ‘Why do you want to work Tom Keneally into it?’ He said, ‘Well, my editor back in New York knows Tom Keneally—the only Australian name he’s ever heard of—and he knows about *Schindler’s List*, and if we can work Tom Keneally and *Schindler’s List* into a business story, they’re more likely to use as it will be in the editor’s comfort zone.’

An edition of the *New York Times* about federation had a headline: ‘Australia honours its founders, but can’t remember their names.’ And they took delight in pointing out that our own official book on federation said that Australians know more about George Washington than about Edmund Barton. That’s probably a justified criticism.

Another headline in the same *New York Times* ran: ‘No worries for an ancient nation.’ The story itself said: ‘Australians say “no worries” all the time because they’re so incredibly insecure.’

Jeremy Clarkson, the journalist who made the remark about Australia being a cultural desert populated by men in shorts, later realised, while the Games were going on, that there *are* intelligent Australians—they’re to be found in the bars around Earls Court.

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And the London *Observer*—who you'd think might know better—wrote:

In January 1999 a group of British MPs—the Commons Culture Committee—travelled all the way out to Australia to find out why Australians were so much better at sport than we are. At the time of writing, Australia, with a population of nineteen million, are world cricket champions, world rugby union champions, world tennis champions, world netball champions, world women's hockey champions and world men's and women's surfing champions.

The MPs' trip to discover why all this was so gave them a chance to air a double stereotype. The answer is that wonderful weather. It keeps children outdoors all day doing sporty things. Our weather keeps us indoors. That's why their cultural achievements are on a par with our sporting triumphs—few and far between. Perhaps their Cultural Committee will fly over here to London to investigate why the finest flower of Australian TV is *Neighbours*.

But the reality is startlingly different. We don't spend all our time playing sport. Here's just a list of a few things that Australia has managed to do in the past hundred years. Some of them came as a great surprise to me.

- we invented a xerox photocopying process as long ago as 1907
- we discovered an anthrax vaccine in 1918
- we invented the black box flight recorder, that all aircraft are now fitted with
- Qantas invented the inflatable escape slide for aircraft
- we pioneered microsurgery
- we invented the bionic ear
- we invented *in vitro* fertilisation
- we invented plastic banknotes
- we developed the first multi-focal contact lens
- and we invented the Olympic torch that can burn in rain, hail or shine.

From that list I have left out other great Australian inventions like Vegemite, Minties, Iced Vo-Vos—the important things of life.

Here is a quick list of Australian high achievers on the international stage. I'll skip the obvious ones like Sir Les Patterson, Kylie Minogue and Clive James, in favour of some unknown to many Australians.

- Mark Newsome, leading British designer
- Harry Kewell, leading British soccer player for Leeds United
- Geoffrey Crawford, who runs the Royal household
- the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government of the UK is an Australian, Sir Robert May
- the Principal Ballerina in the Royal Ballet is Leanne Benjamin
- Yvonne Kenny is a well-known opera singer
- Professor Peter Morris is a surgeon scientist

- Kate Blanchett, the actress
- The Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University is an Australian, Sir Alex Groves
- Patricia Hewitt is in the House of Commons
- the Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords is an Australia, Baroness Gardiner of Parkes
- Geoffrey Robertson QC, the civil rights lawyer
- Michael Blakemore, film and theatre critic, and producer
- John Williams, world famous classical guitarist
- Robert O'Neal, the Water Story boy
- Peter Porter the poet
- Sir Kip McMahon, the banker.

We could go on an on. The only time the *New York Times* managed to slightly redeem itself in Australian eyes was in reviewing *Homesickness* by Murray Bail, when it said that he ranked as one of the three indisputably world-class Australian novelists currently practicing. Now three world-class novelists from a population of 19 million would put Australia ahead of Britain and probably the United States on a per capita basis, in the cultural stakes (novelist division), if one was so crass as to make such a comparison.

A lucky country, then. A lucky country where the high standard of living has come about not by the efforts of its people but from its commodities and natural resources? That is an outdated view. True, in 1900 wool was king. A hundred years later, Australia made about six times more money from tourism than from wool. So successful was its manufacturing export business that, despite removing most tariff protection, it had a trade surplus for most years of the last decade of the century.

Australia ranks sixteenth in the list of the world's top industrial nations. It survived the Asian economic crisis intact. On average, its economy is growing faster than that of the United States, and most of the economies of Western Europe. Its savings rate is higher than that of Britain, the United States, or Canada, and only slightly lower than France or Germany. Its tax rate is lower than Europe, and only a little higher than the United States. Government debt was lower than that in the United States, Japan and most of Western Europe, and its low inflation rate is the best of the world's advanced economies.

Leading market economist John Edwards says: 'Compared to the United States, Japan, France, Germany or New Zealand, the place is actually quite well run.' Then he says: 'The harder story to tell is of Australia's success.'

Racism? Well, the fastest growing classification in Australia today is one where people describe themselves as being of 'ethnic mix'. Everyone, even that most racist of communities, the Chinese, is now marrying out. Padraic McGuinness—not the most tolerant of commentators—has said that Australia is the most successful high immigration society and the most successful, tolerant, multicultural society in the world today.

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I am aware of those refugee camps scattered around the far distant parts of the Australian coastline, but I'm confident that when more is known about them, Australians will cease to tolerate them.

The country where nothing ever happens? Think about that when you're overseas and you're desperately trying to find out what's happening in Australia from reading the local papers or watching television—nothing! But it doesn't seem like that when you live here, it seems all go, go, go to me. And even if it were true—so what? Would you rather live in Australia, with 'nothing happening', or live in the Middle East, Iraq or the Balkans? Plenty happening there.

I think that some people are just not happy unless they're suffering. The Russian writer Vitali Vitalio migrated to Australia, but went back to the northern hemisphere after only two years, complaining of 'spiritual heartburn'. He said that life in Australia was too good, and the people are too happy.

My own view about how we got to this situation is that 200 or so years ago, Australia embarked on a major economic and sociological experiment—one that's still going on. That was the free-market society, where the government takes care of the young and the sick and the old and the poor and where the worker gets a fair go. The reasoning of idealistic Australians back in the 1800s was simple—Australia appears to be a country of limitless potential (although that's now being challenged by some environmental writers).

If we're genuine in our wish to create a new society, to leave behind the class division of the old world, to avoid servility and poverty, then we should divide everything in a fair and reasonable manner. So 'fair and reasonable' became the touchstone of the Australian way of life—'Give us a fair go, mate'; 'Fair crack of the whip, sport'; 'Give us a fair suck of the sav'. And it's been repeated incessantly in pleas and judicial decisions, trade union conferences and parliamentary debates, because it appeals to a vital human need.

Matt Ridley, in *The Origins of Virtue*, explains how citizens of early hunter-gatherer societies evolved a strong sense of fairness so as to ensure that all of them would commit themselves to communal enterprise. This placed an obligation on the powerful to treat their peers and their underlings decently, and a duty on those underlings and peers to *demand* decent treatment. Our sense of fairness is therefore inherited, a natural human emotion that some of us may feel is threatened by a *laissez-faire* capitalism.

Other Australian characteristics flow from their commitment to a fair and reasonable social system. Australians hate officiousness and authority, especially when embodied in military officers and policemen. Because in their experience, both are unlikely to give you a fair go. Australians are suspicious of discipline, and have great wariness about elites (except perhaps in sport), because those imposing the discipline are unlikely to be reasonable and elites are often reluctant to extend the fair go beyond their own members.

D.H. Lawrence—who wrote one of the best books about Australia, *Kangaroo*—saw all this as a recipe for anarchy. In Australia, nobody’s supposed to rule, and nobody *does* rule. The proletariat appoints men to administer the law, not to rule. These ministers are not really responsible, any more than a housemaid is responsible. The proletariat is all the time responsible—the only source of authority. The will of the people. Now Lawrence accepted that this was real democracy, but he didn’t like it, because he was an Englishman, with an Englishman’s instinct for authority. And in Australia, authority was a dead letter.

It is certainly difficult to exercise authority in an egalitarian society. Lawrence found himself longing for the certainty of India—and this phrase sticks in my mind—for ‘the responsibility of command and the pleasure of obedience’. Now it might work in India, but it wouldn’t work here. In Australian society—long before Manning Clark gave the young historian Geoffrey Searle the following advice on how to behave in Britain: ‘Call no biped Lord or Sir and touch your hat to no man’—Australians had extended the original egalitarian idea to: no-one can tell me what to do. And as Lawrence writes: ‘There was no giving of orders here, or, if orders were given, they wouldn’t be received as such. A man in one position might make a *suggestion* to a man in another position, and this latter might or might not accept the suggestion according to his disposition.’

That attitude was confirmed for me the other day as I watched the Australian Navy rehearsing for Navy Day. The officer commanding the parade explained to the sailors before he gave an order the reason why he was going to give this order—with the view no doubt that if they understood why he was going to do it, they were more likely to follow it to the letter. Otherwise they might not. It went a bit like this: ‘Now I want you to stand at ease now, because we’ve got about three minutes before the band comes up, so stand at ease.’ So they knew what they were doing.

But Lawrence wondered how a country could run like this. He wondered if all that stood between Australia and anarchy was the shadow of British authority reaching out over thousands of miles of sea. Britain, Empire, the King, the Governor-General. But the country did run and—in a manner unprecedented anywhere in the world—passed law after law to improve the welfare of its citizens. It introduced votes for women 18 years ahead of the United States, 16 years ahead of Britain, and 70 years ahead of Switzerland. The secret ballot, free and compulsory education for all, old age and invalid pensions, safety at work, fixed working hours, minimum wages, legal arbitration system, and even as early as 1908—of some personal interest to me—there was a pension of one pound a week for distressed authors.

The benefits were quickly reflected in the wellbeing of white Australians. The country soon had one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world, and it would have been hard to name any other country that looked after its aged as well as Australia. Both factors are indications of a decent, caring society. In 1999, despite economic rationalism, Australia was still spending 54 cents of every government dollar on health and welfare. This was a greater amount, for example, than the United States spent on defence in the Second World War. And that welfare spending goes up every year regardless of which party is in power. It is not a party political issue.

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Australia runs a more democratic democracy than, say, that paragon of the free world, the United States. To start with, most Americans don't vote at all, as we've seen recently. They stay away from the polls in their millions. Next, although we read a lot about political funding scandals in America, most Americans—93 percent—have never given a single cent to any political party. Yet only a very rich man or a professional politician with access to millions of dollars stands a chance of running for President, and the four-yearly national election campaign lasts a whole year and costs billions of dollars to run.

In contrast, Australian prime ministers have included an engine driver (Ben Chifley), a trade union official (Bob Hawke) and a one-time bottle washer (Billy Hughes). The Australian election campaign every three years lasts about a month and costs less than a single Senate race in California.

Finally, most American citizens have never met their elected official at any level, not even their local councillor. In Australia, television has lately taken away some of the personal contact between candidate and voter, but before that—and I remember it well—every candidate was expected to turn up at a hall in their constituency (or in the street if they were brave enough), and submit themselves to questions and the odd rotten tomato or two. In small-town Australia, many are on hand-shaking terms with the mayor and most of the councillors.

So yes, foreign perceptions of Australia can be stereotypes, and are sometime wrong. Should we do anything about it? At first I thought we should. I had grandiose ideas of trying to persuade the government to put up some money to bring prominent foreign journalists out here on two or three year scholarships, to show them around Australia so they could go back and at least write on some of the good things about the place. But I'm not so sure any more. In this media-dominated age, Australia's image in Britain has been largely in the hands of Germaine Greer, Clive James, Rolf Harris and Sir Les Patterson. The first two can hold their intellectual and cultural own in any company, and in fact often set the agenda for debate in Britain about British matters. No-one cracks crude, anti-Australian jokes in their presence. For his part, Rolf Harris has become the caring face of Australia—the modern, gentle post-feminist man. 'If all Australian men are like him', an English woman friend told me recently, 'then no wonder so few Australian girls come to London these days.'

So perceptions of Australia are already changing, rendered clearer and sharper by the Sydney Olympics—'the greatest seventeen days of sport in the history of the planet', as spectators decided. And the brighter British sports writers looked beyond the Games and saw a new Australia. 'My salute to the Games is also a salute to Australia', wrote Simon Barnes of the *Times*, '... this most aspirational of cultures, seeking to discover itself so eagerly, without the baggage of history—that nightmare from which we are trying to awake—and to the envy of Australia that invariably stirs in the breasts of visiting English.'

Yet stale jokes and misconceptions about Australia will hang around. But one mark of an adult nation has got to be the ability to laugh at itself, and not be too concerned about what others think of it. So I suppose in a funny way, Sir Les *is* Australia's Cultural Attaché, embodying as he does one of the better characteristics of

Australians, so envied by the rest of the world—he shows deference to no-one. His influence pops up in the most unlikely places. When the history of republicanism in Australia comes to be written, one incident should figure prominently, and that is that day in 1992 when Prime Minister Paul Keating put his arm around the Queen—a Les Patterson moment, if ever there was one.

Contrary to tabloid reports in Britain at the time—'Hands Off, Cobber!'—most British were envious. Keating had done something that the Queen's own subjects dare not do. 'Never touch the Royal Family unless they touch you first', advised Monty Python.

Keating's gesture was not seen as a lack of manners or sophistication, but a genuine Australian desire to embrace a fellow human being. The British looked at Keating and saw a Twenty-first Century Australian. One with no sense of class. They envied Australia for it, and from that day onward, neither the Royal Family nor their relationship with Australia, have been the same.

So if Barry Humphries eventually decides that perhaps Les Patterson has had his day because he no longer reflects the new Australia, I don't think we should forget him. Let's try to keep a little of Les's most endearing and essentially Australian characteristics—his confidence in who he is, his certainty about where he's going, and the fact that he doesn't give a stuff what others think about him.

From this long and educational journey, writing about the land in which I was born, if I were asked to make a decision on one quality about Australians that stood out, I'd nominate their sense of collectivism. Although it has faltered at times, the predominant Australian characteristic, I think, is the feeling that whatever may be, come the crunch, they're in it together. One for all, and all for one.

'Since they excel at sports, Australians rule the world', said the *Guardian*. 'Australia is the greatest sporting nation on earth', said the *Spectator*. I turn to cricket to make my point. When Mark Taylor played his fiftieth test match as captain of his country, Steven Fay, a writer more English than whom it would be hard to imagine, wrote a long newspaper profile of Taylor. Most of it was about cricket, one of Fay's passions (he's the editor of the *Wisden Cricketing Monthly*.) And when he had exhausted the topic of cricket, he switched off his tape recorder, and both interviewer and interviewee relaxed. Then suddenly Taylor began to muse about the Australian character, and Fay switched on his recorder again. Taylor said:

Competition is a part of life, but it's about losing too. I'm trying to teach my six-year-old this. He loves winning, but the bottom line is, there are times when you'll have a bad run and you'll need to call on your inner strength and become a better person. That's what I like so much about team sports. In England last year, and before that, I hadn't played any worse throughout my entire career, and yet I was still a winner. I was a loser personally, but the team was winning. What better lesson can you get for living than that? That—although you may not be doing too well yourself—if you just hang in there, and play your part, you too can be a winner.

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When he'd reported this very Australian philosophy of life, the Englishman Steven Fay added his own comment: 'Australia's lucky to have Mark Taylor, but then it was Australia that made him.'



**Question** — I'm a first-generation Australian, and I love it here—I wouldn't live anywhere else. You made a very import point in your talk about how the Olympics have improved our image overseas and how we can build on that. Do you have any idea how we can do that?

**Phillip Knightley** — I think it's going to happen no matter what we do. So many people went back with such wonderful impressions after the Games that it will spread. I think that is already being reflected in the number of tourists that are coming to Australia. As for how the Games actually changed things, I can give you a very quick example: in a review of my book that appeared before the Olympic Games, the headline said '*A Nation Australia, a nation that thrives on mateship and camping*'. Camping? But after the book had been published, the headlines and the attitude changed, and this one now says 'All mates in a place of marvels'.

**Question** — You said a great deal about the Australian interest in fairness. I subscribe to that; I once wrote a book called *Fair Go*. But I'd like you to give a few instances of lack of fairness—for example, towards refugees; and can you give an example of fairness towards Aborigines? How can you find examples of this sense of fairness, and how is it working out?

**Phillip Knightley** — Well I don't think anybody ever said it was going to be easy to change Australia in the course of 70 years, or even less. But the changes are remarkable and they continue to occur. If you'd told my mother 40 years ago that there would be a mosque in Lakemba, or that there'd be a statue of Buddha in the main street of Hobart, she wouldn't have believed it. And the way that multicultural Australia has formed itself shows progress.

Nobody ever said it was going to be easy to find some form of reconciliation with the Aborigines, but things are being done and things are happening. It's a slow process but I think it will accelerate as the younger generation comes to the fore. Young Australians are all for multiculturalism, lack of racism, and fairness to the Aboriginal people. Otherwise you wouldn't have got 250 000 young Australians marching over the Sydney Harbour Bridge last year, to say sorry. But it's not going to be easy, and if it were too easy, then it wouldn't be worthwhile. It's going to be hard and tough, but it is happening and there is progress.

**Question** — If Australia's so great, why did you move to London to work, and why do you not spend the whole year here? You spend time in London and Bombay, and you worked for the *Sunday Times* for 20 years in London. Surely perhaps there's more excitement and opportunity elsewhere?

**Phillip Knightley** — I left because it seemed a good idea at the time. I've thought since that I might have made a mistake—that, if I'd stayed, I might have had a chance to have played some small part in these wonderful changes that have occurred in this country. But I'd already committed myself.

I don't consider myself an expatriate. The world is such a small place now and air travel is relatively inexpensive, I could be home tomorrow if I had to be. So I don't think you need to say you're an expatriate. I'm an Australian who lives part of the year in London and a Londoner who lives part of the year in Australia. I married an Indian woman, so I also spend part of the time in India. But my kids are Londoners, even though they spend a lot of time in Australia. I think those old national divisions are going out the window.

**Question** — Certain commentators in this country explain everything that ever happens in terms of an alleged great divide between the capital cities and the bush. Would you like to comment on that?

**Phillip Knightley** — I tried not to do that, by spending a lot of time in outback Australia. I deliberately spent more time in the west, because I thought Western Australia got a rather bad deal in the eastern press. I thought it a shame that more Australians didn't spend time visiting the wonderful scenic tours of Western Australia, rather than going to Fiji or New Zealand. I had hoped that I managed to gather from that some idea of how country people feel. But that too is not easy. Just as you feel you've got a grasp on the 'real' Australia, it slips away from you. So I don't consider the book by any means finished—I'm busy working on the next edition already, and I hope to take into account all the criticisms that the book has attracted, and the blank areas in my research that have now become apparent to me.

**Question** — When do you think that Australia might become a republic?

**Phillip Knightley** — Within my lifetime. I would think it would happen very rapidly. Depending on the results of the next federal election, I would think within the next three years.

**Question** — What would be the effect of this change in Australia, on England? Will that change the monarchy in any way, by helping the British think that maybe the monarchy is costing them more than it should?

**Phillip Knightley** — My worry as an Australian living in Britain was that Britain would become a republic before Australia did. Some people say that Tony Blair is actually an Australian, because of the way that he's trying to run Britain. He is not in awe of history, he changes things that need to be changed, and he doesn't defer to the Queen in the manner that other British leaders have done.

I think the Queen is quite happy to go. There are various indications—and the Queen never tells anyone anything directly—that have leaked out from Buckingham Palace that she would be quite happy if Australia were suddenly to announce that it was a republic tomorrow. Because the links will remain, and it has been reported that the Queen has said that if the difficulty in Australia is in calling it a republic, they should

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just become an independent Commonwealth. They should just keep the phrase ‘the independent Commonwealth’ and they could get on with it a lot faster than they are.

**Question** — How is it that Canada, which federated in 1867 and is divided between French and British government, has had changes made but has never considered in its constitution becoming a republic, and yet it became a Commonwealth 37 years before Australia?

**Phillip Knightley** — I suspect that, once Australia leads the way, Canada will not be far behind.

**Question** — During the course of your talk I thought on occasion you were about to mention compulsory voting, but you backed off. I wondered why you did that? And how do you see that sitting in your vision of Australia given that, in that part of the world (which is most of it these days) which professes to be democratic, Australia almost uniquely still marches its citizens to the electoral booths?

**Phillip Knightley** — I think compulsory voting is an excellent idea. It makes you think. You don’t *have* to vote—you can go there and tear up the ballot paper or write rude words on it, but you have to think about it. The fine is not a large one if you don’t vote, but it does make you think, and it makes you interested in the politics of your country.

I think the other people around the world fighting for the right to vote would agree that it is a privilege hard won and often bought at the cost of bloodshed, and it should not be lightly regarded. But when I tell Americans this, they say that you can’t compel people to vote. The result is that millions of Americans don’t vote at all.

**Question** — You alluded earlier on to ‘Aussie bashing’ in England. You referred earlier to Simon Barnes saying a few kind words about us, but it must have been the only time because he delights in criticism of Australian rugby. Another example is when you read about young kids arriving at the airport only to be put on the first plane back, for no other rational reason other than that they’re Australian. From the British point of view, is there a reason for this attitude, or do the Poms just not like us?

**Phillip Knightley** — I don’t think it’s that they don’t like you. It was very embarrassing when John Howard and four or five ex-Prime Ministers were actually in the House of Commons celebrating the centenary of federation, and outside people were buying copies of the *Evening Standard*, which reported the story of an 18-year-old Australian student who had arrived at Heathrow airport that afternoon on a tourist visa, and because the immigration officer searching her baggage had found a copy of her CV, he said that was *prima facie* evidence that she was looking for work. So he put her on the first plane back to Australia. Outrageous.

There were others, apart from Simon Barnes, who looked at the Games and saw wonderful things, but there was one reporter from the *Guardian* (who has not been seen around Fleet Street since last September) who, in the *Guardian’s* guide to the Olympics, wrote as follows: ‘Sydney is about to host the most scandal-ridden, self-serving, nepotistic and muddled Olympics in the whole history of the Games.’

**Question** — You are fairly critical of the way foreign media report on Australia, but are we any better when reporting on Britain? When you come here and see British scandals reported, do you see a difference in the way they are reported and the attitude of Australian journalists?

**Phillip Knightley** — I think that the major Australian newspapers' foreign news is quiet good. I read it all, including its coverage of Britain and its general coverage of the rest of the world. You get a fairly good idea of what's going on—much more so than you would get from reading a British paper about Australia. I can't think of anything that I've read in the last week or so that hasn't given me a reasonably accurate and objective picture of what's occurring in Britain. But a lot of it, of course, does come under syndication rules from British papers to begin with. Mr Murdoch doesn't see why he should pay to have foreign correspondents abroad when he already has a paper there and he can just lift what he wants out of it.

**Question** — I was grateful for your list of influential Australians. They occur in very interesting places. I would ask you to consider adding Jim Wolfenson, the President of the World Bank.

**Phillip Knightley** — I should also have mentioned the great success of Australian winemakers, and Australian chefs abroad. In South America Sir James Goldsmith had one of the most luxurious holiday resorts in the world, and when he died it was taken over by the Orient Express Company. They turned it into what they claim will be the most luxurious, expensive hotel that has ever been seen in the hemisphere. And they chose an Australian-trained chef.

Australian red wines are now starting to really and seriously hurt French red wines. When two Australian wines won gold medals at a recent event that had also been entered by the French, the secretary of the French Winemakers' Association (a bad loser) said afterwards, 'We have been making wines for 400 years and if people are attracted by these new young wines, why should we even bother to compete any more?' He then announced that they weren't even going to compete. A case of 'If you won't let me win, I'm going home.'

**Question** — Could you comment on the position of women in Australian society, compared with the rest of the world? As a Dutchman living here, it seems that it is much harder for Australian women to reach the top positions in society than it is in western European countries. Particularly in politics, it seems that women trying to become successful are hounded out by their male fellow politicians.

**Phillip Knightley** — Legislation is in place which offers women absolute equality in the workplace, because I think the people who formed that legislation believed that it was possible to force men to treat women as equals in the workplace. The problem I think is probably in the home. Behaviour in the household can't be legislated. Although there is some progress—I went to the fourth cricket test in Sydney, and I saw a group of 20 or so western suburbs building workers there, and one of them had brought his wife along. It was her job to stand in the beer queue.

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In personal experience, my sister is married to a former wool classer, a real dinky-di Aussie. She has had a frozen shoulder for some time, and was trying to sweep the kitchen out the other day, and was in pain. Her husband came in the back door, and she handed him the broom and asked him to sweep. She said that his hand came out to take the broom, when he suddenly realised what he was doing, and his hand just wouldn't go any further. He *wanted* to help, but he just couldn't manage it. So he went out and got the leaf-blower, and 'swept' the kitchen with that.

## **Civic Education and Political Knowledge in Australia\***

*Ian McAllister*

*The democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs ... to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are.*

*Voting, 1966*

### **Introduction**

Ever since democracy came into existence, there's been a tension between consulting all citizens, and the capacity of those citizens to make properly informed decisions. It's always assumed that one of the most important requirements for the functioning of representative democracy is the existence of knowledgeable citizens. Yet ever since mass opinion surveys first began to be used more than half a century ago, surveys have consistently found that most citizens are anything but knowledgeable about politics. The majority know little about politics and possess minimal factual knowledge about the operation of the political system.

Those of us who have marked first year Australian Politics essays know this from first hand experience. Even what most of us would regard as some of the most significant events in Twentieth Century Australian politics are often the subject of much confusion. I've read essays which have variously described the dismissal of the 1975

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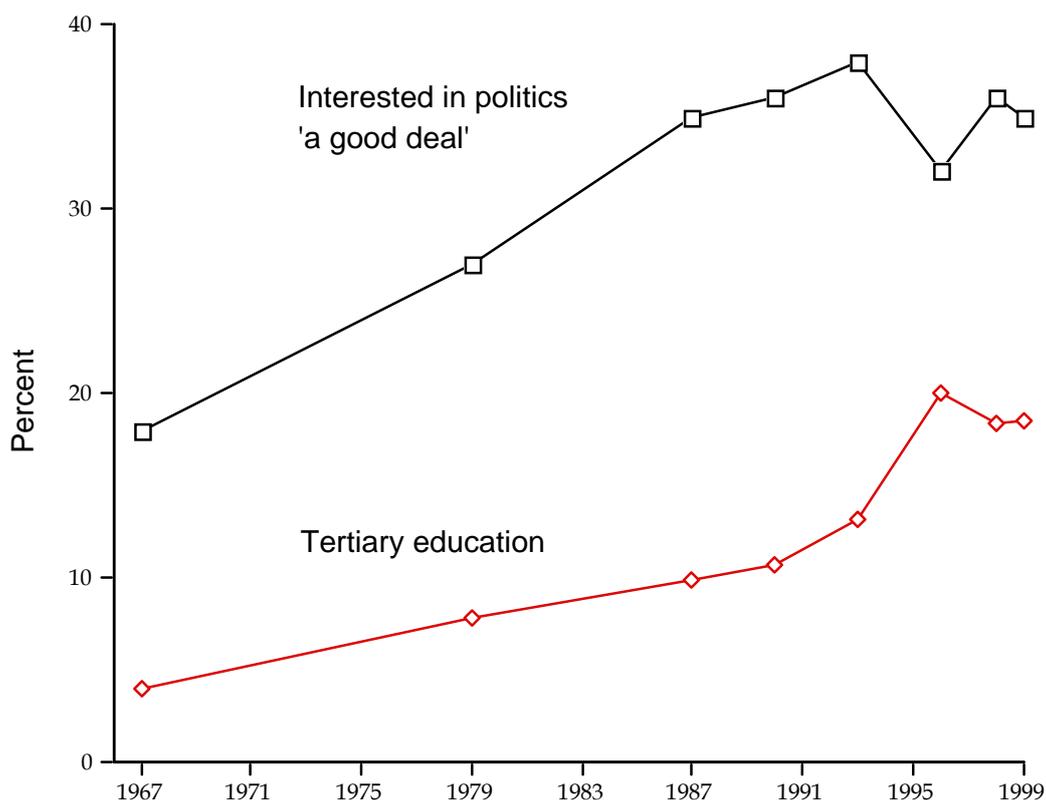
\* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 23 March 2001.

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Whitlam government as being caused by Bill Kerr, Billy Hughes and Margaret Thatcher.

Nor does the lack of political knowledge among citizens appear to be temporary. There has been relatively little postwar change in levels of political knowledge within the advanced democracies. This is despite the dramatic growth in information disseminated through the mass media, and the proliferation of political groups and organisations which might be expected to enhance political awareness and interest.

**Graph 1: Political Interest and Education within the Electorate**



*1996 Australian Election Study Survey*

If we take just two indicators, interest in politics and the proportion of citizens with a tertiary education, both have increased quite dramatically over the past three decades. In 1967, less than one in five survey respondents said they were very interested in politics; at the time of the referendum of 1999 that proportion had doubled. Yet the overall levels of political knowledge have remained unchanged.

### **The Response**

How should we respond to this situation? Do modern democracies have to operate with relatively ill-informed electorates?

One answer to this question is that they do. The response of some political theorists has been to argue for democratic elitism. Rather than participating fully in the political process, democratic elitists have interpreted the voters' role as one of choosing between several competing elites, who will then take decisions on the

electorate's behalf. This approach has been supported by research which has shown that elites have a stronger commitment to democratic principles than citizens.

In contrast, many democratic governments have approached the problem in a different way, by promoting civic education. Internationally, civic education courses have generally followed one of three models.

- (1) The oldest model is found in the United States, where civic education is an integral part of the curriculum in all parts of the school system. This approach also involves students participating in active programs on particular community issues.
- (2) The second model is provided by Britain; although there is no separate civic education program as in the United States, civic education forms part of a wide range of subjects within the national curriculum, with a particular emphasis on history.
- (3) The third model falls between the integrated program you find in the United States and the more informal British approach; the best example is France, which introduced a discrete civics curriculum in 1985, focusing mainly on French history and the operation of the political system.

In Australia, there's been a variety of approaches to civic education, which have differed across time and across the states. Interest in civic education dates back to federation in 1901. The first New South Wales primary school syllabus, published in 1904, included a 'Civics and Morals' course which covered imperial history as well as topics such as responsibility, duty and patriotism. This remained a core part of the curriculum in most states until the 1930s, when criticism of its nationalistic focus resulted in its abandonment as a separate subject.

Alone among the states, civic education remained on the curriculum in Victoria, although it was subsumed under the heading of 'social studies'. In the 1970s, it became a separate subject called 'Politics', covering Australian political institutions and foreign policy. During the 1980s several of the other states also adopted politics as at secondary school subject.

During the last two decades, there's been something of a renaissance in civic education. In 1988, civics and citizenship education were examined by the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training which concluded that students should be provided with the knowledge to make them 'active citizens'. This renewed interest also occurred at a time when there was more interest in Australian national identity than at any time since the Second World War. Vigorous debates have emerged about the nature of Australia's political institutions, the relationship between the federal government and the states, and about Australia's place in the Asia-Pacific region.

The result of all of this activity was the appointment by the Keating Labor government of a Civic Experts Group to promote that they called 'public education on civic issues'. The Civic Experts Group's report proposed an extensive program of

civic education which would take place mainly in schools, and to a lesser extent in tertiary institutions and across the society as a whole. Both Labor and Liberal governments have supported the majority of the Group's recommendations and allocated funding for the program.

But despite several government reports and much public discussion, there remains no clear definition of what should be taught under the heading of civic education in Australia. At one level, the goal of simply increasing knowledge about the processes and structure of government has been seen as important. At another level, providing a sense of Australia's history has been emphasised. In theory, a country's history should be an uncontentious part of any civic education program, but in practice the twin issues of multiculturalism and reconciliation make the inclusion of an historical dimension to civic education highly divisive. A third goal has been to promote greater political participation. This is the part of civic education that politicians often stress.

### **The Extent of Political Knowledge**

So what do citizens actually know about the political system? Attempting to measure popular political knowledge raises the question of how we define it.

One view is that such knowledge is factual, covering information about events, personalities or institutions. Another view is that it is background knowledge, covering political concepts as well as the procedures by which political institutions operate. Background knowledge provides the skills to interpret political affairs, as well as to think in ideological terms.

For the purposes of the discussion here, I'm going to define political knowledge as factual knowledge, partly because it is the most straightforward and easily measured form of political knowledge, and partly because this is how the Civic Experts Group itself interpreted the term.

*Table 1: Political Knowledge within the Electorate*

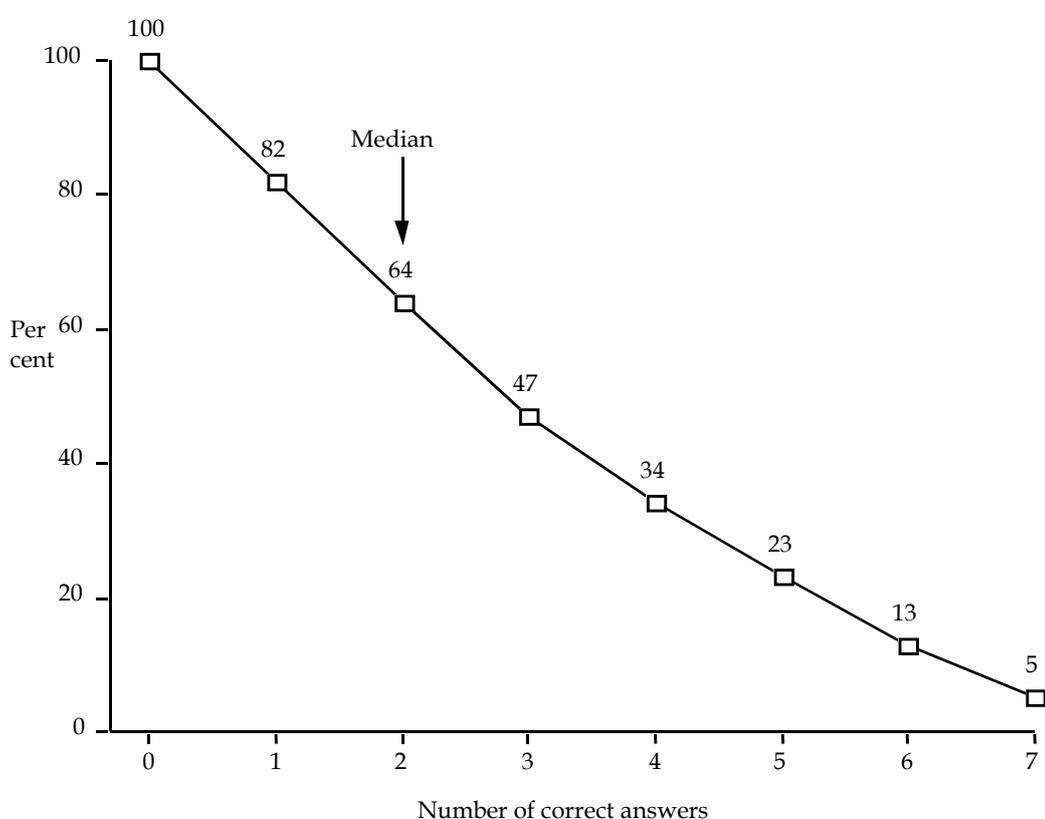
	<i>Percent answering:</i>		
	<i>True</i>	<i>False</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
1. Australia became a Federation in 1901	<b>65</b>	3	32
2. The Senate election is based on proportional representation	<b>45</b>	10	45
3. Senators may not be members of the Cabinet	18	<b>41</b>	41
4. The Constitution can only be changed by the High Court	29	<b>37</b>	34
5. No-one may stand for Federal Parliament unless they pay a deposit	<b>31</b>	36	33
6. The longest time allowed between Federal elections for the House of Representatives is four years	55	<b>31</b>	14
7. There are 75 members of the House of Representatives	21	<b>30</b>	49

**Note : Percentage of correct answers shown in bold type**

*1996 Australian Election Study Survey*

By any standards, levels of political knowledge within the electorate are low. The 1996 Australian Election Study survey asked respondents whether seven factual statements about political institutions were true or false (see Table 1). While the survey respondents were reasonably knowledgeable about basic political history—two-thirds knew that Australia became a federation in 1901, for example—fewer were familiar with the operation of the political system. Only about one in three knew that the House of Representatives does not have 75 members, that a deposit is required to stand for federal Parliament or that federal parliaments are not elected every four years. As the Civic Experts Group’s own survey found, a great lack of knowledge concerned the High Court: only 37 percent knew that the statement ‘The Constitution can only be changed by the High Court’ was incorrect.

**Graph 2: The Cumulative Distribution of Political Knowledge**



*1996 Australian Election Study Survey*

Overall, the median voter could correctly answer only two of the seven statements. Furthermore, just under one in four of the electorate could correctly answer five out of the seven statements, and only 13 percent could answer six. Only one voter in 20 had the highest level of knowledge by answering all seven questions correctly (see Graph 2).

Although these results suggest a high level of political ignorance, they are in line with international findings. In the United States, for example, despite a concerted civic education program, one researcher has concluded that citizens are ‘hazy about any of the principal political players, lackadaisical regarding debates on policies that

preoccupy Washington, ignorant of facts that experts take for granted, and unsure about the policies advanced by candidates for the highest political offices.’

How do we improve this situation? Many would argue that a concerted policy of civic education would improve matters. But the main problem with any form of civic education designed to improve political knowledge is that it concentrates on increasing the factual base of knowledge within the electorate, rather than inculcating an awareness of how and why the democratic system works in the way that it does.

### **Who Possesses Political Knowledge?**

Which groups within the electorate possess political knowledge? As many international studies have demonstrated, the least well informed tend to be the young, those who have low levels of educational attainments, who were born outside the country, or who are involved in home duties—in other words, the factors that are also most associated with lack of political interest as well as with lack of partisanship.

***Table 2: Gender, Birthplace and Occupational Differences in Political Knowledge***

	Number of correct answers		(N)
	Mean	Std Dev	
<i>All</i>	2.7	2.1	(1,793)
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	3.0	2.2	(861)
Female	2.4	2.0	(932)
<i>Birthplace</i>			
Australia	2.7	2.1	(1,370)
English speaking background (ESB)	2.8	2.2	(155)
NESB democratic country	2.3	2.0	(116)
NESB non-democratic country	1.7	1.6	(83)
<i>Occupation</i>			
Non-manual	3.1	2.1	(896)
Manual	2.2	1.9	(480)
Farmer	3.0	2.0	(45)

*1996 Australian Election Study Survey*

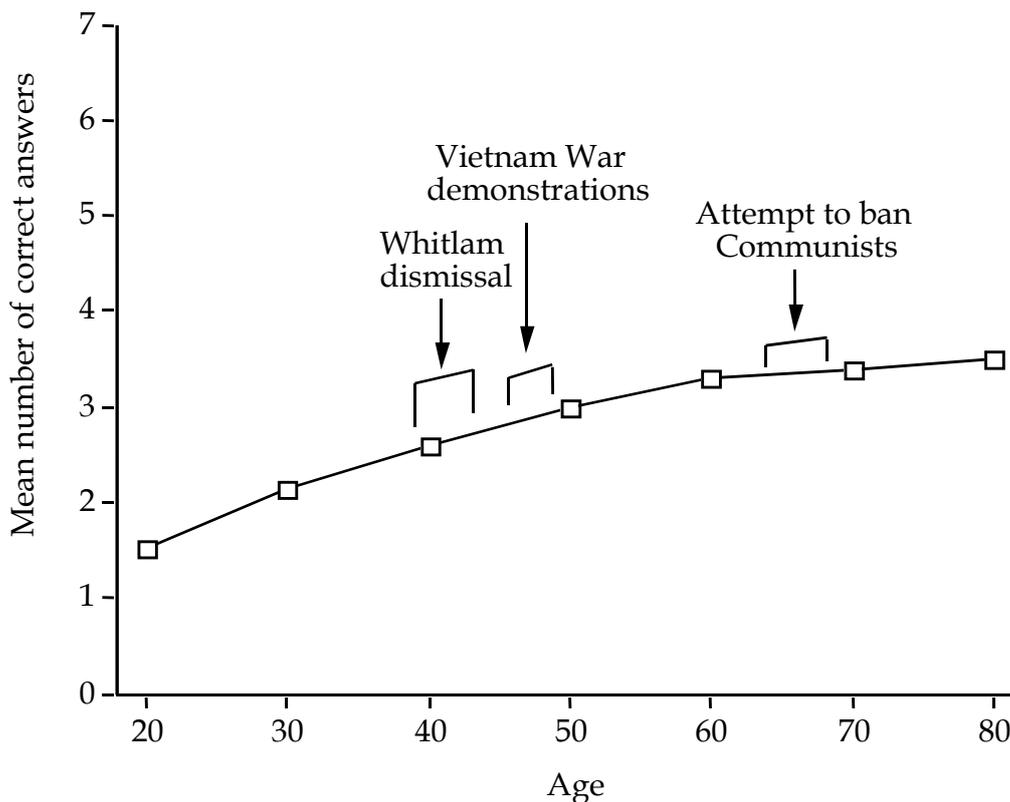
Gender, birthplace and occupation all influence the extent of political knowledge that a person possesses. Women have significantly less political knowledge than men, but as others have shown, participation in the labour force is an important factor which interacts with gender. Political knowledge is lowest among women who are involved in house duties; among men and women who are in the fulltime labour force, the gender gap almost disappears.

It is not surprising that those who have been born overseas possess less political knowledge than those who have been born in Australia, since they have had less exposure to the political system. However, the geographic and political background of immigrants also plays a role in the process.

- Immigrants from English-speaking countries, mainly the United Kingdom, have almost identical levels of political knowledge compared to the Australian born.
- Those born in non-English speaking countries with democratic traditions have less knowledge, although the difference with the Australian born is not statistically significant.
- Those who were born in countries with little or no democratic traditions have least knowledge. This confirms the findings of other research which has found that those from countries which lack democratic traditions possess different political values compared to migrants from countries with democratic traditions.

Age is usually identified as being a major factor influencing levels of political knowledge. Citizens accumulate political information as they gain more experience with the political system and as they are exposed to more political socialisation. As a consequence, other political indicators such as the proportions who participate in elections and identify with a political party increase steadily with age. It is not clear, however, whether this social learning process continues over the course of a lifetime, or whether its impact diminishes once a certain age or level of knowledge is reached.

**Graph 3: The Effect of Age and Political Events on Political Knowledge**



1996 Australian Election Study Survey

A factor related to age concerns the role of critical historical events. We might expect that political crises would enhance political knowledge by attracting widespread

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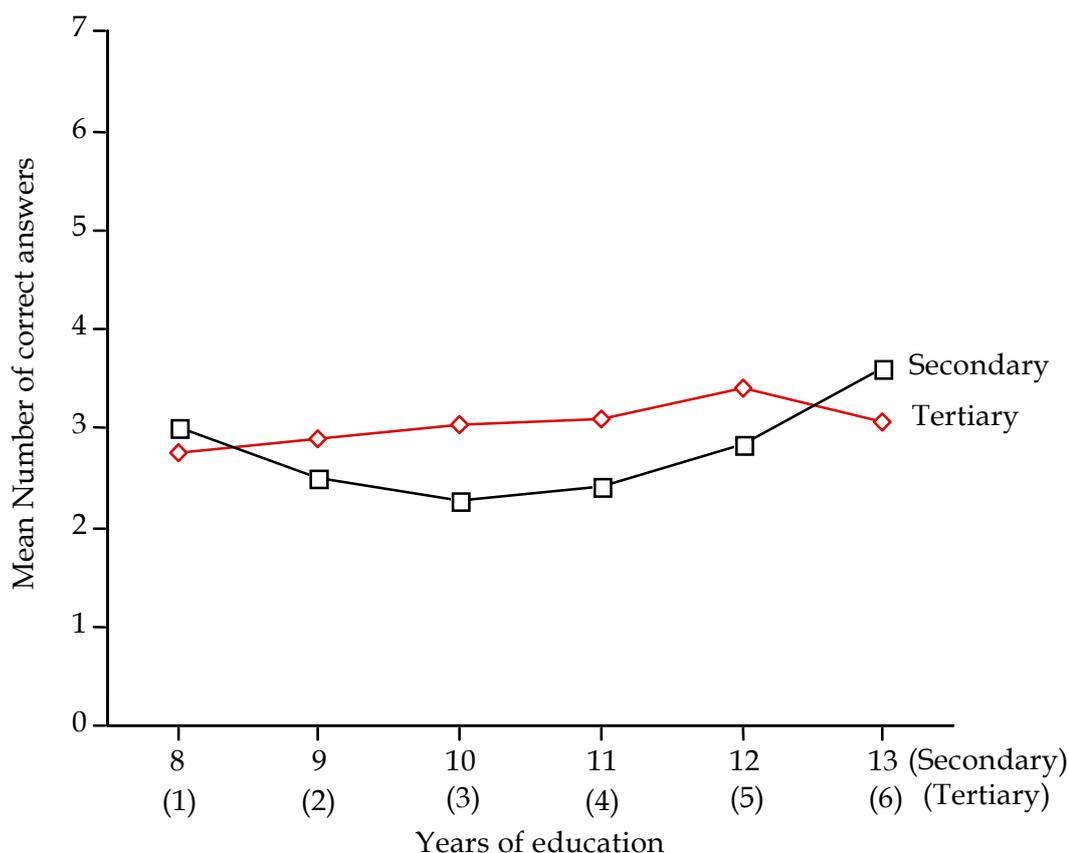
interest and by citizens becoming familiar with the political institutions that such events highlight. Three postwar crises stand out:

- (1) The dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government in 1975. This event focused attention on the role of the Governor-General as laid out in the Constitution and helped to stimulate the later growth in public support for an Australian republic.
- (2) The Vietnam War demonstrations of the late 1960s, events which in the United States have been shown to be important in promoting political interest and involvement, particularly among the young.
- (3) The attempt by the Menzies government to ban the Communist Party between 1949 and 1951.

Graph 3 shows that the impact of age on political knowledge in Australia is cumulative, with knowledge increasing by about half a question for each additional decade that a person has been a member of the active electorate. The cumulative impact of age in promoting political knowledge diminishes in middle age: someone aged 60 is only marginally less knowledgeable than someone aged 70, net of their socioeconomic status. That knowledge begins to level off in middle age probably reflects decreased political interest.

In addition to the passage of time, the results show that critical historical events also represent a source of political information that increase political knowledge. This is based on estimates which assume that such events are most likely to influence individuals when they are aged between 18 and 20 years at the time the events took place—that is, at the start of a person's participation within the active electorate.

Each of the three critical events of interest increases the amount of political knowledge a person possesses, although only the Whitlam Dismissal in 1975 is statistically significant. In the case of the 1975 crisis, being aged between 18 and 20 years at that time results in an increase in political knowledge of around one-third of a question out of the total of seven questions asked in the survey.

**Graph 4: The Effect of Education on Political Knowledge**

*1996 Australian Election Study Survey*

Like age, education is normally viewed as the major factor influencing political knowledge. Some have even assumed that education is a surrogate for knowledge itself: those with tertiary education are assumed to be the most knowledgeable about politics. But apart from those who are exposed to social and general studies curriculums, it is unclear how much and why the type of education the individual experiences is important in enhancing political knowledge.

As Graph 4 shows, secondary education emerges as more important than tertiary education in determining political knowledge, as we might expect. It is in the secondary school that particular political information is imparted, while tertiary education is generally based on a much more specialised curriculum, where the political content is likely to be negligible. Indeed, net of other things, someone who has completed three years of tertiary education has little additional political knowledge compared to someone who possesses six years of tertiary study, equivalent to a period of postgraduate study.

The effect of secondary education shows that those at opposite ends of the scale have the most knowledge, those in the middle the least. The unexpected effect for those with least secondary education showing comparatively high levels of knowledge does not reflect age (since that is controlled for in the model) but it is probably a

consequence of their early entry into the labour force and consequently of their greater social experience.

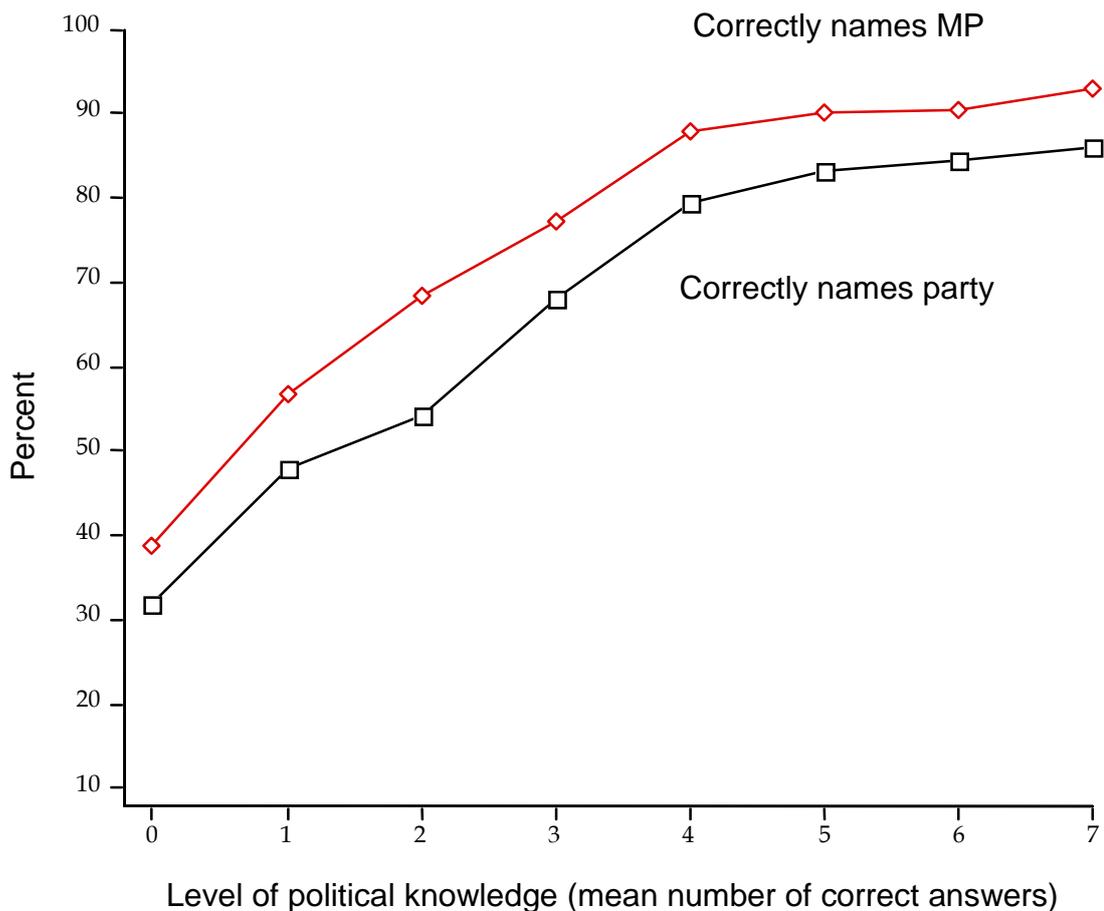
So what we can conclude from this is that the extent of political knowledge varies widely across Australian society. While it is the young, those who have migrated and women who are involved in household duties who have least knowledge, it is also clear that secondary education plays a major role.

### Political Knowledge, Competence and Participation

So how does political knowledge affect what we might call political competence or political sophistication? Are knowledgeable citizens also more politically competent and more likely to participate in politics than those who are less knowledgeable? In short, is the knowledgeable citizen a better citizen?

There is little dispute that the knowledgeable citizen is also the more politically literate citizen. The 1996 Australian Election Study survey asked the respondents if they knew the name and party of their federal MP in the House of Representatives prior to the election.

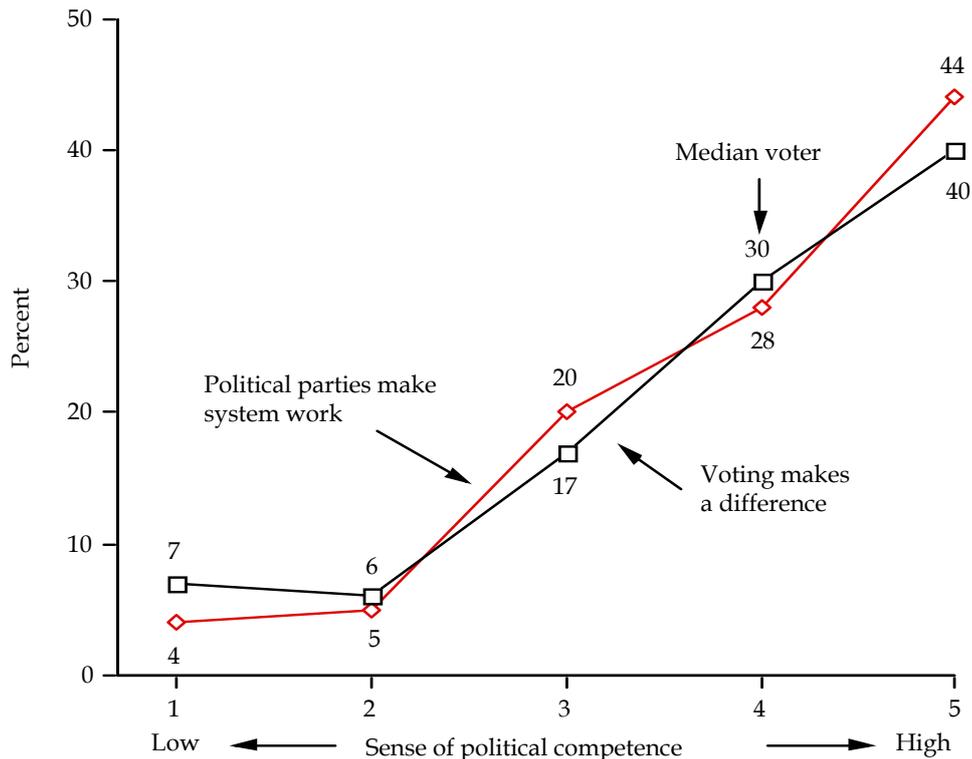
*Graph 5: Knowledge of Local MP and Party*



*1996 Australian Election Study Survey*

- Seventy percent correctly gave the name of the MP, and 61 percent the correct name of the party.
- However, among those who were unable to answer any of the political knowledge questions correctly, the figures were considerably lower. By contrast, around nine out of ten of those who could answer five or more questions correctly knew both the name and the party of the member—almost a threefold increase.

**Graph 6: The Distribution of Political Competence**



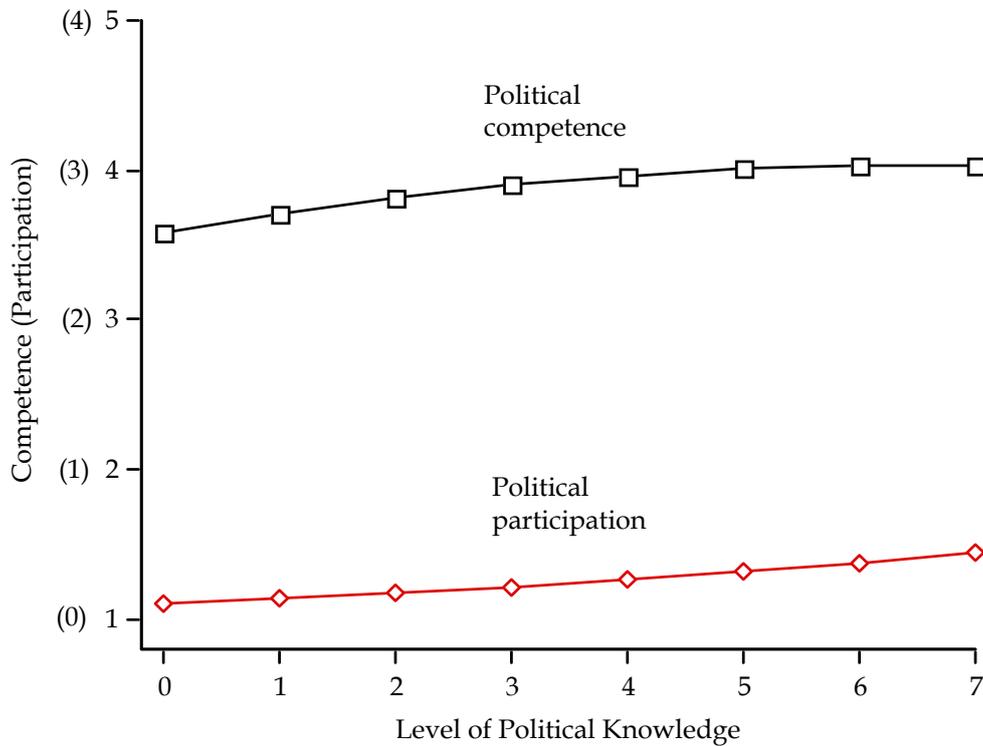
1996 Australian Election Study Survey

Political knowledge does therefore result in better political literacy, but does it generate greater political competence? Political competence is usually defined as the extent to which a citizen can utilise abstract political concepts to interpret the political world, to evaluate arguments and debates, and to make informed political decisions. In Graph 6, political competence is measured by two questions.

- The first relates to whether the respondents considered political parties important in making the system work. On a scale of one to five, where five denotes the highest level of competence and one the lowest, the median voter scores four, suggesting a high level of political competence.
- The second question concerns whether or not respondents thought it mattered who they voted for. Once again, the results show that there is a strong sense of political competence, with four out of every ten respondents believing that it did

make a difference who they voted for. The responses to these two questions are combined to form a single measure of political competence.

**Graph 7: Political Knowledge, Political Competence and Political Participation**



*1996 Australian Election Study Survey*

The second aspect of political behaviour which may be related to knowledge is participation. Political participation can involve a range of activities which may influence politics, starting with such activities as discussing politics with others, which requires little skill or initiative, to more demanding activities, such as joining a political party. As it is used here, participation is measured by the extent to which the voter participated in five activities during the 1996 federal election campaign, ranging from discussing politics with others to working for a party or candidate. The median voter participated in just one of the five activities.

Relating political knowledge to competence and participation shows that knowledge has a modest impact on both, net of socioeconomic factors. Political competence increases in line with knowledge up to about four correctly answered questions; thereafter, the benefits of enhanced knowledge in stimulating more competence is negligible. The most benefits are found at the lower end of the knowledge scale.

There are smaller gains to be found in more knowledge leading to greater participation. Participation, already low, increases with knowledge, but the difference between those at the bottom of the scale and those at the top is not large.

So what we can conclude from this is that political knowledge does have some impact on how citizens view the political world and on how they behave in it. The

knowledgeable citizen is a better democratic citizen. But with the exception of basic political literacy the effects are not large. Moreover, it is how people view the political world that is more likely to be influenced by knowledge, rather than how they behave in it.

### **Conclusion**

So what do these results tell us about civic education? Civic education has the laudable goal of increasing political awareness and knowledge about a country's history, national identity and political institutions. The intention of such education is to increase political literacy, competency and participation under the assumption that such skills and activities will strengthen public support for democratic institutions. But establishing a program of civic education involves two major problems.

- (1) The first is to devise a curriculum which attracts widespread public support. Most countries have emphasised the historical dimension, and encroached on contemporary politics only insofar as it concerns the origins and functioning of democratic institutions. In Australia, however, history is itself a matter of dispute, on the one hand over monocultural versus multicultural history, and on the other, over Aboriginal versus settler history.
- (2) The second problem concerns the priorities of educationalists as against the priorities of politicians. Educationalists view civic education as a public good in its own right. By contrast, politicians see it as a means of promoting political participation and, indirectly, enhancing their own public standing and self-esteem.

What I've been concerned with here is the second of these problems: the consequences of civic education for political outlooks and behaviour. The main conclusion is that political knowledge increases political competence, which is a major component of support for democratic institutions. If individuals do not consider themselves to be competent, they are less likely to see the system as responsible and therefore less likely to give it their support.

Another conclusion is that political knowledge has, at best, little influence in promoting political participation, the major goal that politicians wish to derive from civic education.

What are the implications of these findings for the development of civic education in Australia? The results suggest that the curriculum, or at least the part that deals directly with politics, should have the modest goal of imparting basic factual knowledge about political institutions, since these enhance political literacy and competency. The more ambitious goal of promoting active citizenship through civic education is unlikely to succeed.

In terms of how the curriculum could best be delivered in schools, the extensive international research on civic education suggests that such programs have relatively little role in moulding political attitudes and views; it is the total experience of education that matters. That implies that a system of civic education that integrates

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civics into the general educational curriculum may be the most effective in promoting democratic values and beliefs.



**Question** — These are comments, rather than questions. I’ve taught civic education and politics to journalism students for the past 12 years. I haven’t seen any increase in political knowledge at all. As an example: if I asked the students, ‘Who is the Attorney-General?’ they’ll say that he is the representative of the Queen. The caucus or cabinet are just words that end up in the kitchen. They don’t know, for example, what it means to be ‘left-wing’ or ‘right-wing’. And they can’t read the newspapers. As a journalism lecturer, one wants the journalism students to read the newspaper and listen to the news, and there is much hair-tearing about the fact that they don’t. The reason they don’t is that, when you pick up a newspaper, it is a dense text to them. They have no idea what many of the words mean.

So, with the backing of the Professor from the department I worked in at the University of Queensland, I offered voluntary current affairs discussion groups to the 450 first-year journalism students and others who were interested. Of the 450 students, 420 turned up week by week for this voluntary, non-examinable subject. And they didn’t want to know a lot of those political questions—they wanted to know what it meant to be ‘left-wing’ or ‘right wing’; what is meant by ‘balance of power’; what does the Liberal Party stand for compared to the Labor Party; what do all these terms mean? I had huge success teaching that. And what that discussion group gave them was the skill to read the newspaper, and from there they developed their political knowledge.

Another point I would make concerns the teaching manual that was designed in Queensland for teaching civic education. It deals with teachers who come through the school system, and if they don’t have any political knowledge, I doubt whether they would be able to teach the subject. That’s a major problem.

An interesting outcome is that those with lower education at school had higher political knowledge. My students, who all had high scores when they left school, all said they had had no civic education, because they were doing other subjects. So it was the so-called ‘less intelligent’ students who received the civics education. I wonder if that’s actually a factor in your graph?

**Ian McAllister** — I think the most interesting part of your comment is the dichotomy we have between people’s factual knowledge about politics and their understanding of the political processes, and their ability to use skills to interpret the political world. I think this is very important. If you’re developing some program of civic education not focused on factual knowledge because it’s something that’s easily measured in surveys, it’s something that, in theory at least—apart from your journalists—ought to be something that could be increased across the population through education.

But understanding the processes by which people arrive at political decisions is important, because it's not something that can necessarily be taught in a very simple way. It's something that people pick up from their environment—from political socialisation, from parents and schools, and so on.

I've spent a lot of time analysing public opinion in Russia and the former communist states of Eastern Europe, and the extent to which people expressed democratic values. What's very noticeable there is that people have had no experience of this. People have to be in contact with a particular system over a long period of time. They inherit political values from parents and people they are in contact with. And it is actually very difficult to generate this type of support for a democratic system in terms of this skill in thinking about politics and using that skill to interpret the political world over a short space of time. And that's probably why developing any program of civic education is such a delicate balance between all of these various things.

**Question** —In regard to civics education internationally, the research is actually showing that it's not having much of an impact, and I think that is because it is starting too late. Educationalists know that people—especially young children—learn by actually doing. If we're going to have a truly politically literate community in the end (one that supports our representative democracy) we need to be teaching children, through 'doing', what it means to choose a representative for a particular role—and to allow those children at a very early stage to see the consequence of their choice. A political curriculum which is actually going to have a measurable effect needs to be one that is designed across the curriculum, and schools need to be encouraged to use the preferential voting system, which is our system, and to be demonstrating that to students. There are a whole range of ways you can ensure that students actually actively learn that the choice that they make has a direct consequence on their life. They will then become politically astute through that process, and you can teach them the history and the factual stuff that goes with it much later on, because they will then know that it actually has an effect on their real lives. If you start when they're 18, you've started far too late.

**Ian McAllister** — I would agree with almost everything you've said. What the results in our survey show is that, when you get people early on, you're much more likely to inculcate sets of political values than if you get them later on. So, for example, we showed that tertiary education really didn't matter all that much in terms of people's political knowledge.

The international research on political socialisation shows that people tend to get political awareness around the age of seven or eight, and then it develops through identifying political party labels and so on. By the age of about 14 or 15, people have some understanding of the electoral system and the head of state and so on. The very first election people actually vote in is very important, because it cements their party identification and their commitment to the system over a long period of time. We can actually trace to a large degree people's subsequent party identification—even when they are in their sixties or seventies—right back to the first election that they voted in.

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A separate issue to that is compulsory voting. It actually draws people out and ensures that younger people vote, whereas in voluntary voting systems, non-voters tend to be disproportionately young.

So I would agree entirely with your comment. I think the earlier people are exposed to civic education and the nature of the political system, the better.

I suppose one other comment I would make is that it's actually quite difficult to educate people politically in a country which is politically stable. That may seem something of an anomaly but what we find in a lot of the international research is that a political crisis or instability actually enhances people's knowledge of the system.

For example, I've done a lot of research in Northern Ireland, and the levels of political literacy and knowledge there are really quite remarkable. You could have a conversation with someone in a downtown bar about the intricacies of the single transferable vote method of proportional representation on independents—or something like that—and they would have a very good knowledge of what you were talking about. Now I'm not suggesting political unrest as the solution to a lack of civic education, but it does suggest that, in a country as stable and as settled as Australia, politics tends to be a peripheral activity and it is difficult to get it into the forefront of people's understanding.

**Question** — In developing your curriculum on civics, have you looked at the impact of location as a variable? People in, say, the outback or outer regions tend to be more conservative, whereas in Canberra people become politicised almost by osmosis. Is there something in your plan to include this aspect?

**Ian McAllister** — Indicators such as political sophistication or competency are obviously going to differ very much in terms of how they're measured—by locality, region, state, or as urban, rural and so on. We didn't really look at that in the survey. I would have thought the only way you could reasonably relate that back to any program of civic education—apart from making federal Parliament meet in every state capital and regional town in the course of the year—might be to ensure that the things we have been talking about are part of a core national curriculum. The development of civic education in Australia has gone through fits and starts. It's differed across time, it's differed across states, and there's been no concerted policy. For a country such as Australia, which has compulsory voting, and which has a large proportion of its population born overseas in non-English speaking countries, a large proportion who are young, and a large proportion who live in isolated areas, it would be very important to have a concerted national approach to all of this, agreed between the Commonwealth and the states. To date, that is something that has largely not occurred.

**Question** — From reading the daily press, especially the 'Letters to the Editor' in various papers, it seems that it doesn't really matter how much civic education you may have, people seem to be responding only to the daily issues of their life. The moral and ethical behaviour of the politicians, or the decline thereof, and the way in which the media—particularly television—handles the issues of the day and portrays

the political process to us seems to have a much greater effect than civic education. Do you agree?

**Ian McAllister** — I think that people who write letters to the editor are a very skewed sample of the population. I agree with your basic point. Politics, to a large extent, tends to be peripheral to the lives of a lot of people. It's something that doesn't really grab them unless there's a high profile political event occurring, and these really only come along once every decade or so. The republic referendum last year might be considered to be the event of the 1990s, the Whitlam dismissal was probably the event of the 1970s, and so on. I think you are correct when you say that the way the mass media portrays a lot of these things is very important. I showed a graph at the beginning which suggested that people's level of interest in politics had gone up almost twofold over the last quarter of a century. That's not because people know twice as much about politics—it's because all of these sound bites now surround people every 15 to 30 minutes on television or radio, and so they believe they're better informed and more interested.

There has actually been quite a bit of research analysing the content of mass media over the last 20 or 30 years. It has found that, about 25 years or so ago, the normal length of a story that would be broadcast on radio and television was about 40 seconds. Quite often now, on the radio, a story is about five or ten seconds. So there has been a dramatic difference in how these stories are actually portrayed to people. And people think they have more knowledge and interest, but in fact they don't—despite all the changes in levels of tertiary education and everything else. So I think the mass media to a large extent is responsible for a lot of this, and indirectly it's also responsible for a lot of the decline in confidence that people have in democratic institutions across a very wide range of countries.

**Question** — I wanted to comment on matters raised by the lady earlier who was speaking about curriculum matters. I am with the ACT Department of Education, and with very limited resources, there is probably only about one of us in there who is trying to work on some sort of civics and citizenship framework for the ACT. I just wanted to let you know that, due to this civics expert group, the first grant of the Curriculum Corporation was connected to the development of curriculum materials nationally, and the second part of that grant, the professional development aspect, is now getting under way for every state and territory. Within the Discovering Democracy pack, there is a primary pack and a secondary pack, and there's lower, middle and upper primary, and lower and middle secondary. Those units hopefully will go some way towards increasing the knowledge of students. I don't know that we can measure their knowledge as such, but I do know that there are many schools in the ACT that are undertaking case studies and are doing units of work in association with that pack. We have an extreme advantage here in that we have a lot of resources that we can utilise and, as far as I know, at least interest is generated.

There is a lot of talk going on and there is a lot of visiting, for example to the new National Museum. These sources are very useful resources. But it's difficult and challenging, as you say, and I would like to hear a 'part two' of this lecture, on the solution to embedding civics and citizenship into the education system.

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**Ian McAllister** — I am available for grants and consultancies.

**Question** — Can any comfort or interpretation be drawn from the material you have found for the proponents of compulsory or voluntary voting? Senator Minchin and other people are speaking about voluntary voting, and it seems almost a conclusion from your results to say that voluntary voting could be seen as attractive, but would you like to take that step into the dark?

**Ian McAllister** — I would probably reverse the question a bit, and say that when you have a system of compulsory voting it makes civic education much more important, because what you find under a compulsory voting system is that 95 percent of people vote. If you had a voluntary voting system, you would probably have an initial turnout in the low 80 percentage, and then it would gradually decline perhaps to about the British level of the low 70 percentage. But the people who vote in a compulsory system who wouldn't vote under a voluntary one tend to be people who are disproportionately young, less interested in politics, less knowledgeable, much more volatile in their voting, much more likely to protest and to be highly conservative (in a 'small c' sense) in terms of what they actually vote for. So in that context, civic education is very important, because you are finding that virtually everybody votes and in that situation there is an obligation, I would have thought, on behalf of the state to ensure that people have the technical skills and knowledge before they go out to cast that vote.

There are some interesting things about compulsory voting coming out of the surveys we have conducted in the last couple of years. We regularly ask people if they would vote if it was voluntary, and we find about 80 percent say they would and the other 20 percent say they wouldn't. When we calculate a lot of results we actually find that it does make a substantial difference if you have voluntary voting. For example, in the referendum survey we carried out at the end of last year on the republic, we found that the referendum proposal would have been carried under a voluntary voting system, because, disproportionately, the people who said that they only voted because it was compulsory tended to be people who voted for the status quo. Which is what you'd expect, because they were less knowledgeable and they didn't particularly want to change it.

We also found in the 1998 election survey that a disproportionate number of people who voted for the One Nation Party were people who wouldn't have voted under a voluntary system because they were people who were simply expressing a protest against the system, rather than people who had very strong beliefs about one or other of the major parties. So I think to a large extent people in Australia tend to take compulsory voting for granted, but it actually has all sorts of effects right round the political system—civic education is one, support for third parties another, and the outcome of referendums is another. But it really is a very important thing that infuses itself through all our political institutions.

**Question** — Some of these conclusions, for instance about the referendum result and also the support for the One Nation group, vindicate some research I have done. I was going to refer to Senator Payne, who in 1924, introducing a private member's bill, said: 'Apathy and indolence are to be found in all directions amongst the people, and

compulsory voting would induce in a short time, a wonderful improvement in their political education.’ That was the bill, of course, that gave us compulsory voting. I was going to ask whether you think it has done anything at all to induce an improvement in the political education of the population?

**Ian McAllister** — It’s very difficult to test that empirically. I would have thought that it probably hasn’t, in the sense that people accept compulsory voting in a very direct way. They don’t regard it as an imposition and it is very much ingrained in the political culture of Australia. So it’s not something that forces them to think very strongly about political issues. I think where it does make an important difference is the very high levels of partisanship you find in Australia. And when you compare Australia to a variety of other advanced industrial democracies, Australia has by far the highest levels of party commitment that you’d find anywhere in the world.

For example, in Britain and the United States there has been a rise of independents and third parties—you really haven’t had that here to the same extent. A lot of that can be drawn back to compulsory voting. People have to vote every three years in a federal election, or less, and every three or four years at state level, depending on what state they’re in. So, on average, people are voting in an election once every 18 months. That means that they think very directly about the political parties, and that they are in the front of their minds when they vote, and that’s translated into the high levels of identification you find with the major political parties. You don’t get that in other countries, and it’s had a major effect by ensuring that the party system and the party machines here are very strong and that you have very strong party discipline in Parliament. I don’t think, by and large, that compulsory voting makes people think more about the political issues, because they identify with a party. Fifty-five percent of people in our surveys use ‘how to vote’ cards, or in the case of the Senate, it’s ninety-odd percent of people who vote above the line. So they don’t actually think about the particular issues and discriminate among candidates.

**Question** —The Electoral Commission conducts a survey after each federal election, and probably going back as far they have records, there’s been about two-thirds support for compulsory voting, and that continues and it’s really never varied. Another thing I wanted to mention is that if you look at the United States system, one of the effects of the lack of compulsory voting is that the parties’ own policies for those that vote—i.e. the lower socio-economic groups—are not catered for. That has quite an effect.

**Ian McAllister** — I would agree. These are all things people take for granted under a compulsory voting system. People don’t always realise to what extent it flavours the political institutions of Australia, the political culture, the way people look at politics and so on. A lot of my American friends say that we are very lucky to have compulsory voting, because everyone turns out and it makes the surveys you run much cheaper and more effective, so you get a more reliable indicator because you know that everyone has voted when you sample them. It’s much more difficult with voluntary systems.

On the other hand, its clear that, unless you had a country like Australia that had a utilitarian political culture, where people basically obey political rules, it would be

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very difficult to bring in a system of compulsory voting anywhere else. So it works very well in Australia where we have a utilitarian, Benthamite political culture, but it clearly wouldn't work in a society like the United States where you've got a 'rights' culture.

## **Political Structure and Constitutional Reform in the United Kingdom\***

*Sir Alastair Goodlad*

I am delighted to be here today and honoured to be asked to present a lecture in the Senate Series.

It is a great privilege to be invited to address you in these hallowed surroundings on political structure and constitutional reform. Mr Twemlow, in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, said that the House of Commons was the best club in Europe. My former colleague, Jeremy Thorpe, remarked in passing that it was the only club in London that paid him to be a member. In any event we are undoubtedly assembled in one of the best clubs in the Southern hemisphere.

A parliamentary career, according to Lord Macaulay was one:

... in which the most its combatants can expect is that by relinquishing liberal studies and social comfort, by passing nights without sleep and summers without one glimpse of the beauties of nature, they may attain that laborious, that invidious, that closely watched slavery which is mocked with the name of power.

He was describing the golden age of Parliament.

In *The English Constitution* in 1867 Bagehot wrote, 'In such constitutions as England's there are two parts—first those parts which excite and preserve the reverence of the population ... the dignified parts ... and next the efficient parts ... those by which it, in fact, works and rules.'

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\* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 27 April 2001.

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Which category the Whip's Office comes into is not for me to say, but a combination of the two is desirable in any package of reform.

My presentation today focuses on political and constitutional change in the United Kingdom since May 1997. The Government's aim then was to modernise Britain, and change the structure of British politics with a significant and wide-ranging program of constitutional reform. Devolution was the major part of the program. But it also included the creation of a city-wide authority for London; exploration of regional government in England; reform of local government; modernisation of the House of Commons; reform of the House of Lords; commitment to a Freedom of Information Act; the modernisation of the machinery of government; and the incorporation into UK law of the European Convention on Human Rights.

I cannot hope to cover all these issues in great depth in this lecture. So I will concentrate on exploring the thinking behind such widespread change; and on what has been achieved so far.

### **Why reform?**

A challenge for any government is how to engage people, and explain policies in terms to which they can relate. The phrase 'constitutional reform' sounds boring for most, except the experts. Yet its importance is huge and democratic change is a popular concept in Britain today. Talk of 'bringing power to the people', 'opening up Westminster and Whitehall' and 'giving voters more say' strikes a chord.

### **But why the need for democratic change?**

Democracy is about liberty and self-government, in which Britain has a lengthy record. Britain has enjoyed parliamentary government for a long time, drawing on civil liberties dating back to the Magna Carta. Until the early part of this century, the British Constitution proved highly adaptable. Although the outward appearance of the Crown, the Lords and Commons remained unchanged, the system of government was fundamentally altered. In the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, power passed from the Crown to Parliament as Britain became a constitutional monarchy. In the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, Parliament itself became more democratic. The House of Lords became subordinate to the House of Commons; and the Commons—an oligarchic assembly until the early Victorian era, extended the vote first to freeholder men, then to all men, and finally to women. But every landmark change—from the 1689 Bill of Rights guaranteeing the role of Parliament, to the Great Reform Act of 1832 beginning the process of voting reform, and the 1911 Parliament Act curbing the powers of the House of Lords—followed a political crisis. By 1928, when women gained the vote on the same terms as men, the Constitution had adapted sufficiently for democratic evolution to thrive in Britain.

But over more recent decades, many have argued that the political system has not adapted quickly enough to modern life. Power passed from the Crown to a Cabinet, which was accountable to the House of Commons. But, with the first-past-the-post voting system in the United Kingdom, this left the House of Commons largely under the control of the government of the day, so far as it could command the support of the majority of MPs, and gave it an opportunity to change and implement law as it

saw fit, subject to parliamentary assent. Of course the rule of law is firmly established in the UK, but the judiciary must give effect to the ‘will of Parliament’. And so, it was argued, what Quintin Hailsham called the ‘elective dictatorship’ had the effect of strengthening an already centralised government, leading to fewer checks and balances on the government, or for that matter, extending popular participation beyond the occasional voluntary act of voting.

So, when the present government came to power, they believed they saw an over-centralised and bureaucratic government in need of modernisation; a House of Commons in need of modernisation; and a House of Lords dominated by hereditary peers with no democratic legitimacy. They also believed there was a lack of clarity about individual rights and that people had difficulty gaining access to information. So their aim was to develop a more participative democracy with more responsive, localised centres of power, where individuals enjoyed greater rights and where government was carried out closer to the people.

Faced with such a widespread reform agenda, the government took a pragmatic approach and embarked on change step-by-step in the British evolutionary tradition. In the first session of Parliament, they have concentrated on devolution and human rights, while taking some preparatory steps on reform of the House of Lords and on Freedom of Information.

### **So how far have they got?**

Devolution—the devolving of centralised power from Westminster to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—was the centrepiece of the Government’s constitutional reform agenda and, some would say, is the most radical constitutional change to be implemented in the UK since the Great Reform Act of 1832.

For me, it is particularly interesting to be in Australia for the Centenary celebrations this year. One hundred years ago your forefathers embarked on radical constitutional reform that saw the six British colonies with their own bicameral parliaments transformed into a nation with six separate states and subsequently two territories. During the course of the century, Australia has become not only an independent nation, but a strong, vibrant, mature, stable and effective democracy.

The British Government’s reform goal was not to create a federation of states like Australia, but to devolve powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—already mature polities of their own—in a varying fashion, to match the history and contemporary circumstances of each.

Constitutional reform, in the UK as elsewhere, needs public consent, and during 1997 and 1998, referendums were held in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on how they should be governed.

In Scotland and Wales, people were simply asked whether systems of devolved government should be established in their respective countries. Both referendums decided in favour of devolution. Unlike Australia, in the UK voting is not compulsory. But in Scotland, over 70 percent of those voting—and there was a 60 percent turnout—voted in favour of a Scottish Parliament. In Wales, the result was

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closer: 50.3 percent—of a 50 percent turnout—voted in favour of a National Assembly.

In Northern Ireland, voters were asked to approve the Belfast Agreement, now known as the ‘Good Friday Agreement’, which contains provisions for devolved government, a Northern Ireland Assembly and a Northern Ireland Executive Committee of Ministers. In the 1998 referendum, over 71 percent—of an 81 percent turnout—voted in favour.

### **Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland**

Even before devolution, Scotland had considerable administrative autonomy. The Act of Union in 1707 guaranteed the independence of its legal, education and church systems. But political responsibility remained in Westminster, with the Secretary of State for Scotland, who was a UK cabinet minister, although there was a period when the office did not exist between the 1745 Jacobite rebellion and 1886.

After the 1997 referendum, the Westminster Parliament passed the Scotland Act 1998 which provided for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament and a Scottish executive.

The Act left the British Government with overall responsibility for non-devolved issues, such as the Constitution, foreign affairs (including relations with the European Union), for defence and national security, economic and monetary policy, and immigration and nationality questions. The Edinburgh Parliament—rather like Australia’s state governments—now has full responsibility for a broad and important range of public services, including health, education, local government, agriculture and the environment.

A new voting system was introduced for elections to the Scottish Parliament. The single member constituency simple majority/first-past-the-post system applies together with a regional vote for a political party or candidate standing as an individual. The Parliament has 129 members: 73 represent constituencies and 56 have been elected from eight regions. A Labour-Liberal Democrat Coalition hold power at present.

Historically, Wales has never had the same autonomy as Scotland within the UK governmental framework. Again, political responsibility resided with the Secretary of State for Wales—a British cabinet minister. The Government of Wales Act 1998 provided for the establishment of a National Assembly for Wales, to be sited in Cardiff.

The Assembly inherited nearly all the Secretary of State’s functions: including responsibility for the Welsh language, arts and heritage, industry, education, economic development, agriculture and fisheries. And, as in Scotland, the British government keeps responsibility for non-devolved issues. Reflecting the fact that the Assembly inherited the former Secretary of State’s powers, it can only make secondary, not primary, legislation.

Acts of Parliament for Wales must still be passed by the Westminster Parliament.

I will not go deeply into the political situation in Northern Ireland, which I know is followed closely in Australia. But, after the Belfast Agreement was approved in May 1998 in a referendum, elections to a new Northern Ireland Assembly took place in June 1998. The voting mechanism used was the Single Transferable Vote, reflecting practice in local government elections in Northern Ireland, as well as in elections for previous Northern Ireland Assemblies. The Assembly and Executive can exercise full legislative and executive authority over issues that fall within the responsibility of the Northern Ireland government Departments in Belfast. This gives the Assembly devolved power over a number of areas such as agriculture, environment, education and training, employment, enterprise and investment, health, culture and the arts.

But the Northern Ireland Secretary retains responsibility for other issues, particularly in Northern Ireland for policing, security policy, criminal justice and international relations, though there is provision for law and order matters to be devolved in due course.

Devolved powers were formally transferred from the UK Government to the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales on 1 July 1999 and to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive on 2 December 1999.

All these arrangements are bedding down. We are in a period of adjustment. The peace process for Northern Ireland is difficult. But the government remains completely committed to securing the peace it seeks—whatever the difficulties—as is the community.

### **Reform of the UK Parliament**

For the whole of the UK, Parliament itself is being reformed.

In the House of Commons—the elected chamber, which forms the government and provides the majority of its ministers—procedures are being reformed, with some sittings and voting at more convenient hours, though a commitment to the importance of scrutiny and debate has made the search for solutions as difficult as always. G.M.Young wrote in *Portrait of an Age* in 1936: ‘The procedural history of Parliament is a struggle between an old principle (freedom of debate) and a new one, to make a program and get it through.’

As a recent member of the Select Committee on Modernising the House I can confirm that there are no easy answers. Each generation has to strike its own balance between the rights of backbenchers and the convenience of the government. Changes to the voting system for the Commons are being studied. An attempt has been made to look for a workable alternative to the ‘first-past-the-post’ voting system which some criticise as favouring the larger parties at the expense of the smaller, and producing a result which does not necessarily reflect a constituency’s general will, if such a thing exists. First-past-the-post does however, generally produce a government with a working majority and a mandate, both important elements for effective governance. Work on modernisation continues. But any proposed change of course would have to pass through the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

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In relation to modernising the House of Commons, I should also mention that we now have a parallel chamber, Westminster Hall, whose main business is backbench adjournment debates and debates on Select Committee reports. It is in fact directly modelled on the Australian ‘Main Committee’.

In the House of Lords, the first stage in its long-term reform went through in 2000, with hereditary peers losing their automatic right to sit and vote in the chamber. Ninety-two of them, elected by their peers, retain a seat in the transitional House. Further reform is still under debate and consideration. The Royal Commission appointed to consider the future of the House of Lords envisages the role, powers and functions of the Second Chamber building ‘to a considerable extent’ on those of the existing House of Lords. The 550 members whom they thought should remain, should act as one of the main ‘checks and balances’ in the political system, should be able to ‘cause the House of Commons to think again’ about its decisions, and should provide a voice for the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. Further Lords reform is unfinished business for the next Parliament.

### **Mayor of London**

Turning from regional devolution, the government have also created an important institution in London, with a poll in May 2000 for the first ever elected Mayor of London and an Assembly of 25 members. The new Mayor, Ken Livingstone, and members of the Assembly, who are drawn from all political parties, none with an overall majority, took office in July 2000. They have substantial responsibilities, including budgetary powers. They will control the London Development Agency and the renamed Transport for London, which operates the city’s buses and the Underground. They will make appointments to the Metropolitan Police and the Fire and Emergency Planning Authority. The Greater London Authority will have a budget that amounts to about A\$10 billion (£3,600 million). Given that London is one of the world’s greatest business capitals, with an economy bigger than Holland and Belgium—or Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia—put together, this ‘local government authority’ for more than seven million people will be an important institution.

### **Modernisation of the machinery of government**

I should also tell you about change in the machinery of government.

Modernising government is central to the government’s program of renewal and reform. But what does it mean? Essentially it is a long-term program to improve the whole of the public sector, by putting people first and ensuring public services are available to all. It’s a commitment:

- to ensure that policy is more coordinated and strategic;
- to emphasise the role of public service users, rather than providers, thereby matching services more closely to people’s lives; and
- to deliver public services that are of high quality and efficiency.

There are many motors for change: the need for continuous renewal; greater demand from people for the results they expect; a recognition that we need to embrace ever greater social diversity; new opportunities that the new technologies bring; increased

globalisation; and a realisation that by showing the public sector that it is valued—and giving it the resources to do the job well—there can be better public services for all.

The government's determination to modernise applies to all parts of the public sector—the National Health Service, schools, prisons, the armed forces, local authorities, agencies and central government departments.

In the government's spending review last July, public services were given a financial boost to deliver these reforms, as well as tough new targets to meet in the highest priority areas, published openly in the new Public Service Agreements. Service Delivery Agreements are also now in place setting out how departments will meet their obligations. But good government need not be big government. Rather, it is central government working in partnership with town halls, unions and the private and voluntary sectors to deliver the best possible services.

I mentioned just a moment ago that one of the key motors for change is the opportunities opened up by advances in information technology. A key plank in the government's modernisation agenda is the adoption of a holistic 'e-government' approach. This is intended to create an environment for the transformation of government activities by the application of e-business methods throughout the public sector. Essentially, this strategy challenges all public sector organisations to innovate, and it challenges the centre of government to provide the common infrastructure which is needed to achieve these goals. The Prime Minister announced on 30 March 2000 that the target date for which all government services to the citizen and business should be available on-line had been brought forward to 2005 from 2008.

A lot has been achieved, but work is continuing. There is still much to do.

### **European Union**

Let me say something about Britain and the European Union.

The government came to power on a 'pro-Europe; pro-reform' platform, committed to making a success of our European Union membership, and to playing a leading role in Europe—not least in the reform of the European Union's institutions and policies.

Despite what you read in some newspapers, Britain's membership of the European Union enjoys cross-party support in the UK parliament. Our membership of the European Union is good for Britain, good for business, good for the environment and good for the people and the country. Over 50 percent of our external trade in goods and services is with our European Union neighbours in the single market. Over three million British jobs, and one seventh of all UK income and production, are linked to trade with other European Union member states. One hundred thousand Britons work in other European Union countries; another 350 000 live there. The European Union forms the largest single market in the world and accounts for 38 percent of world trade; by its membership of the EU, the UK is well placed to play a leading role in the European Union's policy-making on trade and external relations.

Having said that, Britain also values her bilateral relationships and trade with the rest of the world. Australia is very prominent in that spectrum of value. Britain and

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Australia share a unique political and cultural heritage. So it is not surprising that the network of ties linking our parliaments, institutions, businesses and families is extraordinarily strong. But we must ensure together that that partnership continues to evolve, reflecting our modern multi-cultural and multi-racial societies. The UK and Australia look to the future with similar visions; both countries are close to the heart of their own regions while retaining a broad global outlook.

So, while remaining at the heart of Europe and being fully involved there, the debate continues in Britain on how much power to devolve to European institutions. The current focus of this ongoing debate is European Monetary Union.

The government's policy on membership of the single currency remains as set out by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in October 1997. The determining factor underpinning any government decision is whether the economic case for the UK joining is clear and unambiguous. The Chancellor has clearly set out the Five economic tests, which must be met before any decision to join can be taken. These tests will be assessed early in the next Parliament.

Because of the magnitude of the decision, the government believes that, whenever a decision to enter is taken by government, it should be put to a referendum of the British people.

### **The European Convention on Human Rights**

Finally a word about the European Convention on Human Rights. Unlike Australia, Britain has no written Constitution in the sense that it is written in one document. The laws of the land serve as our Constitution together with the procedures of both Houses of Parliament and constitutional convention. An early decision of the present government was to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law. The European Convention on Human Rights has been an obligation upon the United Kingdom in international law for half a century. The Convention was produced in 1950 in the Council of Europe and was conceived so as to ensure that the atrocities which had so disfigured Europe during the Second World War could not be repeated, by making the observance of civilised standards a matter of international obligation. The Convention and its standards are now being adopted by more countries, including some which were satellites, or even part, of the former Soviet Union. But until last year the United Kingdom courts had very limited power to take account of the Convention.

So, the government set about producing a Human Rights Act which came fully into force on 2 October 2000, which incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights into our own domestic law. The Act does not confer new rights; many were already prefigured by English common law. Hardly surprising, given the involvement of British common lawyers in the drafting of the Convention. But the Act now allows cases raising Convention issues to be dealt with in the United Kingdom courts. It also allows the courts to declare British statutes incompatible with the Convention, although the responsibility and power to change such statutes remains with Parliament and not the courts. How widespread the impact of incorporating the Convention will be on our national life remains to be seen.

In 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' Burke wrote in 1790: 'A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.' The UK has demonstrated its capacity to adapt, but where does all this change leave us?

It is a well known phenomenon of British life that the people who really know how to run the country are too busy driving taxis or cutting hair to do anything about it.

Writing in the *National Review* in July 1856 Bagehot said:

The most influential of constitutional statesmen is the one who most felicitously expresses the creed of the moment, who administers it, who embodies it in laws and institutions, who gives it the highest life it is capable of, who induces the average man to think 'I could not have done it any better if I had had time myself.'

Has that test been passed—the barber/taxi test?

Tony Benn wrote in *The Guardian* in 1988: 'I did not enter the Labour Party forty-seven years ago to have our manifestos written by Dr Mori, Dr Gallup and Mr Harris.' Yet politicians of all parties now pay close attention to public opinion—polls, focus groups, referendums. Bagehot also wrote in the *National Review* in 1856, 'public opinion is a permeating influence and it exacts obedience to itself; it requires us to think other men's thoughts, to speak other men's words, to follow other men's habits.'

Having spent much of the last thirty years on other people's doorsteps I know just what he means.

It is too early to assess the full effects of the constitutional changes which I have described, far less their eventual impact on popular opinion.

Bagehot wrote in 1876 that: 'the characteristics of great nations like the Romans or the English, which have a long history of continuous creation, is that they may at last fail from not comprehending the great institutions which they have created.'

I trust we shall not fall into that danger.

I believe with Thomas Carlyle that 'people will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors', and that 'society is indeed a contract ... it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.'

The present generation of constitutional reformers carry a heavy burden of responsibility, but there is a commitment to popular consent. Arthur Balfour wrote in 1928 that 'our whole political machinery presupposes a people so fundamentally at one that they can safely afford to bicker.' I can give you two assurances: one—the bickering will continue; two—the process of change will continue.

Or should I say with Prime Minister Melbourne—'I wish I could be as cocksure of anything as Tom Macauley is of everything.'



**Question** — Could you comment on the contradiction between the concentration in Europe and devolution? These two are happening at much the same time, but apparently are going in opposite directions.

**Sir Alastair** — I don't think there is necessarily a contradiction. We pressed very heavily for the introduction into the Maastricht Treaty of the principle of subsidiarity—that principle being that power should be exercised at the lowest, most regionally appropriate level. And we have sought to achieve that both within the European Union and, as I described earlier, domestically. I think that there is a long-standing and valid distinction between *de facto* sovereignty and *de jure* sovereignty. We seek to share sovereignty, as we did when we joined NATO, where we pooled sovereignty over making war with our allies. We seek to pool sovereignty with our European partners, where in areas such as trade and environment and other matters, it is most effectively exercised on a regional level. And also by devolving power to regions within the United Kingdom, where it is more appropriately exercised at a regional level. So I don't see it in any sense as a contradiction, I see it as a seamless process of evolution.

**Question** — Have the reforms impinged on the small parliamentary assemblies such as the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands? And with the greater responsibility of the London Metropolitan, how does that impinge on the City of London?

**Sir Alastair** — The smaller assemblies have not had any jurisdiction removed from them, nor in fact has the City of London, which is the local authority for the Square Mile. So at the moment, they continue as they were before.

**Question** — The reforms that you mention are very much of an institutional nature. Do you see in the UK, as there is in Australia, a sense of disengagement from the political process by the general population? And are there reforms happening in terms of processes within political parties, bureaucracies and policy making organisations that seek to possibly provide greater 'bottom up' input, rather than what is commonly seen as a 'top down' approach?

**Sir Alastair** — We don't have compulsory voting, as everybody knows. We get turnouts of about 75–80 percent at general elections, and much lower at local government elections—although local government in the United Kingdom does exercise very widespread powers over people's lives. I find that regrettable, because people have fought and died for the right to vote and for our liberties. I don't think it has changed an enormous amount during the 30 years or so that I've been involved in it. I always had, as a Member of Parliament, a very healthy post bag—hundreds of letters a week—raising every issue across the political spectrum. I did not receive much, interestingly, on constitutional matters, but everything under the sun was raised.

There are a burgeoning number of think tanks producing papers and suggestions on everything. The Conservative Party had (and still has) an institution called the Conservative Political Centre, which produced papers on policy which are then discussed throughout the Party through the grass roots, sending back suggestions. So I think there is a commitment to participation, and I don't think that political debate has withered on the vine. I think that there is a necessity for every generation to try and include as many people as possible in political debate so that governments don't go off on tracks that prove subsequently to be unpopular, and out of tune with what is possible—which occasionally they do. They have to take unpopular decisions of course, but I think that there is a responsibility to keep new generations included in the process. I like to believe that is happening in the United Kingdom—I think it is certainly happening here.

**Question** — Are Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom from Scotland and Wales able to vote on issues such as agriculture and environment, which have been devolved to the parliaments in their own homelands? Are they allowed to vote on those issues as they affect England? If so, does that cause a problem with public opinion? And are there any moves for England to have a government of its own?

**Sir Alastair** — The position is that devolved matters cannot be voted on at Westminster if they are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. So Scottish members of the Westminster Parliament cannot vote on those. They can, on the other hand, vote on questions involving England. That is called the West Lothian question, because Tam Dalziel, who was the Member for West Lothian, made it a great issue last time devolution was discussed—that it was odd that Scottish members should be allowed to vote on matters involving England, but English members should not be allowed to vote on matters affecting Scotland. The government and the Parliament took the view that the best way to deal with the West Lothian question was to ignore it. So it's been ignored.

The question of regional assemblies for England remains in the air—there aren't any, and whether or not there will be I know not. The question that you have put has not yet been answered.

**Question** — You mentioned the concentration of power that is held by the government of the day in the UK Parliament. How do the reforms of the House of Lords affect their ability to influence and provide some checks on the government?

**Sir Alastair** — The reforms of the House of Lords that have hitherto taken place affect only the composition of the House of Lords, namely the removal of the majority of the hereditary peers. It has not affected the powers of the House of Lords. Whether subsequent legislation will affect those powers is for a future Parliament, but at the moment they remain unchanged.

In the previous House of Lords, the so-called 'Salisbury Convention' applied, whereby the hereditary peers, or the House of Lords itself, did not use what was a *de facto* conservative, in-built majority to block legislation which had been included in the manifesto of an incoming government. Now whether that convention—which is no more than a convention—still applies, is an open question. Many would say it does

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not apply. The powers of the House of Lords are extremely strong—unlike the Senate here, they cannot block money bills, but they can block anything else. If the Salisbury Convention no longer applies, there is potentially quite a difficulty for an unelected chamber. And that will have to be addressed by the next Parliament.

**Question** — Is there a trend developing in early debate towards an acceptance in the British style of governance to have laws written down, such as you mentioned in the human rights suggestion of joining the European Union?

**Sir Alastair** — I don't think there is any change in parliamentary thinking towards the common law, or indeed statute law (which of course is written down, and which draws on the common law). Nor do I think that there is much likelihood of moving towards writing our constitution down in one place. But written laws? Yes, of course we will continue with that.

**Question** — Do you think that the constitutional changes, particularly in Scotland and Wales, will counter secessionist nationalism there, or would we be looking to see the end of the British state at some time soon?

**Sir Alastair** — I don't think there is much of a secessionist movement in Wales. In Scotland the Scottish National Party is a secessionist movement. Speaking as a Scot, I have absolutely no time for secession at all—but putting that aside, I think the answer to your question is 'no'. Public opinion polls show that support for secession now in Scotland is lower than it was before devolution. So far, the intention of devolution—to give people in Scotland the feeling that they had a greater say in their own affairs—has been achieved. If I had to give a snap answer as to whether the United Kingdom would break up by way of secession I would say 'not at all'.

**Question** — It seems that constitutional reform has only just begun and it has to move off into one direction or another. I guess it is hard to say just which direction, at the moment. In particular I refer to what you referred to as the conflict between a government which is able to get things done, and people being able to have their say in checks and balances. In talking about reform for voting for the House of Commons, is there any thought of moving away from a majoritarian principle? You have, after all, moved away from a strict majoritarian principle in Scotland, where a version of proportional representation has been introduced.

**Sir Alastair** — There is such a thought. In fact the present government asked Lord Jenkins to undertake public consultation and to produce a report on potential alternatives to the 'first-past-the-post' voting system. His report sets out the various choices and puts forward an additional member system based on a regional party vote to make the composition of the House of Commons more reflective of party preference, rather than 'first-past-the-post'. I think it is fair to say that that report is now on the back burner, and whether or not it will be resurrected in the new Parliament I cannot say.

In the many hundreds of letters which I received while I was in Parliament for a quarter of a century, I think I had only one correspondent who raised the question of changing the voting system. In my perception it is not a great gut issue. People on the

whole feel that the person who gets the most votes should probably be the winner and they are rather suspicious of smoke filled rooms of party activists putting up lists of people. That may change, and it may reappear on the radar screen, but at the moment it is very much on the back burner.

**Question** — You mentioned the grand democratic tradition of England with the Petition of Right, the Bill of Right, Magna Carta, etcetera. I was wondering what your thoughts were on the Act of Settlement, because I heard somewhere that Tony Blair was trying to change that. As far as I am aware, the Dutchman William of Orange actually ascended to the English throne when he wasn't English at all, although he was married to an English princess. It seems unusual that there is no religious qualification for public office or for voting, yet there is for the monarchy. Does that come into any thinking in England at all, or is that not really considered?

**Sir Alastair** — It has been on the political agenda, and in fact a bill was introduced in the House of Lords—not the sort of bill that was going to get anywhere—to remove the requirement that the monarch is a Protestant. But it has not been on any government agenda, and whether it will be in the future I do not know.

**Question** — During your address you referred to the possibility of the House of Lords having a similar function in terms of representing regions in England much as the Senate does in Australia. Do you believe that the House of Lords would then be required to be an elected house, and do you think it should be so required?

**Sir Alastair** — My view is that it should not be an elected house, because that would challenge the supremacy of the House of Commons and would upset a widely accepted and reasonably well-working arrangement. What the Royal Commission envisaged was a percentage of the House of Lords being elected on a regional basis, so that not all the members were living in London, for example, but came from Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and other parts of the United Kingdom. The current debate relates to the proportion of the House of Lords that should be elected on that basis, if at all. But I think that the likelihood is that some of them will be. My guess is that it will be a minority of the House of the Lords who are so elected, and it will be a pretty small minority. But that will be for the political parties and for the next Parliament to decide.

**Question** — Is it possible at this stage to say anything about the political reaction to the greater role of the courts in human rights issues? I raise the question because, in this country, there's been a great deal of sensitivity to external scrutiny of government on human rights issues. When United Nations bodies have found Australia to be in breach of human rights obligations, the reaction of government has been to denigrate the body rather than to address the substance of the issue. At the domestic level there seems to be a strong view that a bill of rights would involve an unacceptable transfer of power from Parliament to an elected judiciary. Can you say anything about the political reaction in the United Kingdom?

**Sir Alastair** — The act has only been in effect for a few months so we haven't had to face up to any crunches. It's too early to say. The legislation did set out that, if a British statute was found to be in conflict with the European Convention on Human

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Rights, the courts had a right—and indeed a duty—to say so, but it was then up to Parliament to change the law if it saw fit. And the courts do not have the power to set aside British legislation on the grounds that they think it is in conflict with the European Convention on Human Rights. So that is an issue that will have to be faced in the future, if at all.

**Question** — You bear witness to the importance of public opinion and consultation in policy making, but you also admit to the philosophical difficulty of determining the general will or indeed implementing it. Across Westminster systems worldwide we see a diverse variety of techniques to consult on public policy—so diverse as to suggest that sometimes they might be strategies rather than actually objective methods. Do you think that there is an adequate discipline in the mechanisms of consulting with the public, or is there a risk that, by the diversity of techniques—dependent on what policy is being discussed—it might be seen as just a continuation of elitist politics?

**Sir Alastair** — There has been quite a long tradition of consultation. Every time (or nearly every time, but not always) legislation has been proposed in the last few decades there has been a Green Paper, setting out the ideas and alternatives and the government's preference. And then there has been a period of consultation amongst interested parties, carried out usually in writing, prior to the production of a White Paper—which puts the government's intentions in a rather more concrete form—prior to legislation.

In 1979 we set up select committees for each department, which have the powers to take evidence from people and scrutinise the legislative and administrative activities of departments. So I think that we do a very great deal to consult and are seeking to modernise the techniques.

But it is a 360 degree spectrum of activity, and occasionally governments get things wrong. When I was in government I think the only time we had a bill rejected at Second Reading was on Sunday trading, when there had been a lot of consultation over many years. The White Paper had been approved by the House of Commons, and then the liberalisation of Sunday trading was knocked back.

But by and large I think our system is very sensitive to what people think—but as anybody who's involved in the political process knows, there are as many opinions as there are men. And at the end of the day, someone has to make a decision. And you're not going to be able to please all the people all the time. But I think that the government mechanism is pretty good, and the Whip's office is an extremely sensitive instrument for anticipating how Parliament is going to react to things across the board. We live in an increasingly complicated age and we have to refine techniques to ensure that people's views, feelings and instincts are taken into account. But at the end of the day someone has to take the decision—that's what democracy is all about.

## **Reflections on the Election Fiasco in the United States\***

*Donley T. Studlar*

Two prominent Canberra-area academics, Mackerras and McAllister<sup>1</sup>, have said that ‘Australia probably is the most voter-friendly country in the world’ in terms of making it easy for voters to cast their ballots. The United States, of course—as we discovered in the presidential election of 2000—has one of the most voter-*unfriendly* systems in the world.

Over the years, of course, the US has taken from Australia one major innovation, the secret ballot—sometimes still called the ‘Australian ballot’. But we have not paid much attention to or adopted other practices such as preferential voting, the single transferable vote, or mandatory voting—despite the pretensions we have in the US about instructing others in democracy, and sending missions abroad to see that elections are conducted fairly. It was therefore particularly embarrassing in the year 2000 that, in an election for the most powerful office in the world, we had what I describe as a ‘fiasco’. How else could you describe a system where it was hard to determine the winner, there were a lot of contentious positions—and the problem went on for *37 days*? Some people compared it to a third world election, and in fact the following list comes off the Internet; the message here is that what went on in Florida is very similar to what you might expect in an underdeveloped country—

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\* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 1 June 2001.

<sup>1</sup> M. Mackerras and I. McAllister, ‘Compulsory voting, party stability and electoral advantage in Australia’, *Electoral Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, June 1999, p. 223.

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### *The Strange Third World Election*

1. Imagine that we read of an election occurring anywhere in the Third World, in which the self-declared winner was the son of the former prime minister and that former prime minister was himself the former head of that nation's secret police (CIA).
2. Imagine that the self-declared winner lost the popular vote but won based on some old colonial holdover (the electoral college) from the nation's pre-democracy past.
3. Imagine that the self-declared winner's 'victory' turned on disputed votes cast in a province governed by his brother!
4. Imagine that the poorly drafted ballots of one district—a district heavily favouring the self-declared winner's opponent—led thousands of voters to vote for the wrong candidate.
5. Imagine that members of that nation's most despised caste, fearing for their lives/livelihoods, turned out in record numbers to vote in near-universal opposition to the self-declared winner's candidacy.
6. Imagine that hundreds of members of that most despised caste were intercepted on their way to the polls by state police operating under the authority of the self-declared winner's brother.
7. Imagine that six million people voted in the disputed province and the self-declared winner's 'lead' was only 327 votes—fewer, certainly, than the vote counting machines' margin of error.
8. Imagine that the self-declared winner and his political party opposed a more careful by-hand inspection and re-count of the ballots in the disputed province or in its most hotly disputed district.

None of us would deem such an election to be representative of anything other than the self-declared winner's will-to-power. All of us, I imagine, would wearily turn the page, thinking that it was another sad tale of pitiful pre- or anti-democracy peoples in some strange elsewhere.

This was something to which the US might object, if it went on elsewhere in the world.

*The Economist*, in its satirical and pithy way, had a front cover called 'In the Mire'. It depicted the Statue of Liberty, in the mire, surrounded by alligators (this is Florida, after all). This was after two weeks of post-election wrangling. How could you describe the election as anything other than an international embarrassment and a fiasco?

Some Australian friends of mine have made comparisons with what went on in Australia in 1975, when the Governor-General dismissed the Prime Minister and the government. There was a lot of debate in the US in 2000 as to whether the election imbroglio constituted a real ‘constitutional crisis’. Certainly if it was not a constitutional crisis, at a minimum it was a fiasco.

To refresh your memory, I shall quickly review the basic facts of the election. The turnout of voting age population was relatively low. The real problem for voters was getting onto the electoral roll. Eighty percent of the people who are registered in the US actually turn out to vote, but a lot of people are not registered. Thus there was a little over 50 percent voting turnout. There were huge gaps in candidate choice among some sectors of the population—there was a gender gap, there was certainly an ethnic gap, but not so much of an age gap in the electorate. Their votes determined the electoral votes apportioned to each of the states, usually on the basis of winner-take-all—that is, a plurality of the popular vote. A plurality of the vote in a state results in one candidate receiving all of that state’s electoral votes.

There were 105 million people who voted in the election of 2000. Al Gore received 49.9 million—the most ever for any presidential candidate because of population growth. George W. Bush received 49.4 million, some 500 000 votes less. But, in terms of *electoral* votes, Bush received 271 and Gore 266, out of a grand total of 538 (one elector chosen for Gore refused to cast her ballot as a protest). Of course, whoever won the plurality in Florida—and it was a plurality, because of third party candidates—would win all of that state’s 25 electoral votes, and that would make the difference. The two Supreme Court decisions in *Bush v Gore* effectively ended the recounting in Florida and made Bush the President.

I do not propose to talk about Supreme Court decisions here, although I’ll try to answer any questions you may have. Even those who supported the decision have had a hard time explaining the logic behind it. The kindest thing that one can say—and this is from *The Economist*—is that the decision was ‘incoherent at best’.

The developments surprised not only foreign observers, but also many in the US. Polls show that about 70 percent of the population in the US recognise that the Electoral College, not direct popular vote, chooses the president. But only about 40 percent of the population can explain how the Electoral College works. I daresay that percentage will be higher in the next few years.

It is over 100 years, namely the election of 1888, since the Electoral College has been a determining factor in the outcome. This was the last time that the popular vote winner was not also the victor in the Electoral College. The results of the 2000 election perplexed many foreigners, as it confused many Americans. We also discovered other things that relatively few people know about—for instance the very decentralised system of registration, ballot formation, and vote counting that goes on in the US. After all, the presidency is the most powerful office in the world, and yet it depends on county commissioners and election boards in various places, all of whom do things somewhat differently. This election was so close that everything was

important, as will always be the case when the results are less than the margin of error in any public opinion survey.

One of the features that got a lot of attention was the infamous ‘butterfly ballot’ in Palm Beach County, Florida. There was a lot of confusion caused by the design of the ballot paper. Florida law specifies that the ballot paper is supposed to list the parties in order of the vote they received in the last gubernatorial race. On the ballot paper, the Republicans were listed first and Democrats were listed *second*—but to vote for them, one had to go to the *third* hole on the punch card ballot paper. This led to a lot of what were called ‘over votes’—people voting for more than one candidate—and people mistakenly voting for the Reform candidate, Pat Buchanan.

OFFICIAL BALLOT, GENERAL ELECTION PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLORIDA NOVEMBER 7, 2000		OFFICIAL BALLOT, GENERAL ELECTION PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLORIDA NOVEMBER 7, 2000	
ELECTORS FOR PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT  (A VOTE FOR THE CANDIDATES WILL ACTUALLY BE A VOTE FOR THEIR ELECTORS.)  (VOTE FOR GROUP)	(REPUBLICAN) GEORGE W. BUSH PRESIDENT DICK CHENEY VICE PRESIDENT	1 →	(REFORM) PAT BUCHANAN PRESIDENT EZOLA FOSTER VICE PRESIDENT (SOCIALIST) DAVID McREYNOLDS PRESIDENT MARY CAL HOLLIS VICE PRESIDENT (CONSTITUTION) HOWARD PHILLIPS PRESIDENT J. CURTIS FRAZIER VICE PRESIDENT (WORKERS WORLD) MONICA MOOREHEAD PRESIDENT GLORIA La RIVA VICE PRESIDENT WRITE-IN CANDIDATE To vote for a write-in candidate, follow the directions on the long stub of your ballot card.
	(DEMOCRATIC) AL GORE PRESIDENT JOE LIEBERMAN VICE PRESIDENT	3 →	
	(LIBERTARIAN) HARRY BROWNE PRESIDENT ART OLIVIER VICE PRESIDENT	5 →	
	(GREEN) RALPH NADER PRESIDENT WINONA LaDUKE VICE PRESIDENT	7 →	
	(SOCIALIST WORKERS) JAMES HARRIS PRESIDENT MARGARET TROWE VICE PRESIDENT	9 →	
	(NATURAL LAW) JOHN HAGELIN PRESIDENT NAT GOLDBABER VICE PRESIDENT	10 →	
		↔ 2	
		↔ 4	
		↔ 6	
		↔ 8	

*The Palm Beach County ‘butterfly’ ballot paper, November 2000 (reconstruction)*

The irony here was that this butterfly ballot was in a county where the electoral commissioner was a Democrat. In reality it was an administrative error, rather than something that was intentional—but that, among other things, probably cost Al Gore the election.

Some political scientists over the years had called attention to the fact that there were problems with the US balloting system. In fact, the first outstanding scholar of what is called ‘electoral administration’, J.P. Harris, said in 1929:

Little progress has been made in the technology of election in this century. Probably no other phase of public administration is so badly managed. Our elections have been marked by irregularities, slipshod work, antiquated procedures, obsolete records, inaccuracies and many instances of downright fraud.<sup>2</sup>

Harris, ironically enough, later helped popularise the punch card as a voting mechanism.

<sup>2</sup> J.P. Harris, *Registration of Voters in the United States*, Washington, Brookings Institution, 1929, p. 3.

The prominent political scientist V.O. Key in 1964 said essentially that, despite improvements in many jurisdictions, Harris' conclusions of 1929 would still be true. He went on to argue that election administration should be simple, but party politics interferes.<sup>3</sup>

Another prominent political scientist, Walter Dean Burnham, had argued that in the US liberal-individualist political culture, registration and voting are not held in high regard. 'American election law has not placed facilitation of voting high in its scale of values.'<sup>4</sup>

Finally, political scientists Darcy and Schneider in 1989 wrote:

New technology has brought about constraints on ballot organisation unanticipated in state legislation directed at paper ballots and lever machines. In an environment of neglect by both political scientists and state legislation, election officials have begun using ballot organisations that save money, are easily and quickly counted, and are convenient to administer. These are not necessarily the most effective ballots for expressing voter intentions, however.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, I could have entitled this lecture 'Fast, Cheap and Out of Control'.

Most political scientists did not realise these problems existed because electoral administration is not a topic on which US political scientists have concentrated recently. There is more focus on it in places like Australia. In fact, the head of my program at the Australian National University, Marian Sawer, has a new book on electoral administration in Australia.<sup>6</sup>

But there were other warnings. The National Bureau of Standards in 1988 documented the problems with punch cards, and recommended that they be replaced.<sup>7</sup> Voting machines are still popular, however, particularly in the northeastern part of the US; once they were thought to be 'state of the art' technology. In fact, parts for voting machines have not been manufactured since 1987. So whenever a voting machine fails—and they do—then that particular county has to move to a different method of voting. Perhaps the most important popular recognition of the problem was a *New Yorker* article in 1988, which foreshadowed many of the problems that occurred in Florida in 2000.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> V.O. Key, *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1964, p. 624.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Dean Burnham, 'The United States: the Politics of Heterogeneity', in Richard Rose, ed., *Electoral Behavior: a Comparative Handbook*, New York, The Free Press, 1974, p. 684.

<sup>5</sup> R. Darcy and Anne Schneider, 'Confusing ballots, roll-off, and the Black vote,' *Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, September 1989, p. 362.

<sup>6</sup> Marian Sawer, *Elections: Full, Free and Fair*, Leichhardt, NSW, The Federation Press, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Roy G. Saltman. *Accuracy, Integrity, and Security in Computerized Vote-tallying*. Technical report, National Bureau of Standards (now NIST) special publication, Gaithersburg, Maryland, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> Ronnie Dugger, 'Annals of Democracy: Voting by Computer', *New Yorker*, 7 November, 1988.

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Thus there were a few political scientists, journalists and technical specialists who had warned that problems could arise. In fact problems occur all the time, but they are normally at the local level and do not reach the level of national consciousness.

I want to focus now on three things that come between a citizen casting his vote and how that vote is counted or not in the US, and particularly what happened in 2000—first, the general voter registration and electoral administration procedures; second, the Electoral College; and third, the ballot design and its consequences.

## **1. General voter registration and electoral administration procedures**

In a recent article in *Electoral Studies*, Blais, Massicotte and Yoshinaka<sup>9</sup> survey the basic rules of who is allowed to vote in 63 democratic countries. The article indicated that there were two countries which could not be included in the analysis because their rules were too decentralised—Switzerland and the US. Thus the US has an unusually decentralised electoral administration.

There is no general constitutional right to vote in the US, either in the original document or in the amendments, particularly the first ten amendments, also known as the Bill of Rights, to the Constitution. Most of the rules for electoral administration are established at the state level, and in fact—as we found out in Florida—often states only lightly supervise what goes on at the lower levels, the counties and the precincts. There is, however, broad scope for federal intervention, if the federal government would choose to do so. Relevant US constitutional provisions are:

- *Article I, Section 2*—which essentially says that the basic suffrage rules for what was the only popularly elected branch at the time (over two centuries ago), the House of Representatives, would be set by the states.
- *Article I, Section 4*—which discusses the broad scope for federal intervention.
- *Article II, Section 1*—this article talks about presidential electors and how they are to be appointed. The states appoint the presidential electors and Congress chooses the time that these electors will be appointed.

It is only since 1860 that all the states have used direct popular elections to choose electors.

Although it was rendered superfluous by the Supreme Court decision, in early December, 2000, the Florida legislature was meeting—and was prepared to choose the electors themselves—if the election impasse had continued. That certainly would have been taken to court, but there is some constitutional reason for believing that that was entirely legal.

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<sup>9</sup> Andre Blais, Louis Massicotte and Antoine Yoshinaka, 'Deciding who has the right to vote: a comparative analysis of electoral laws', *Electoral Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, March 2001, pp. 41–62.

There is a factor, often overlooked in discussions of US election administration, which makes it unusual and helps account for some of the problems. Although there are many elections in the US—various special districts, primary elections within parties, referendums within the states (although never a national referendum)—every two years the US has a countrywide election to choose the House of Representatives. This election occurs on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. But the states have chosen—and I emphasise *chosen*—to make this a general election day not only for the House of Representatives and the President (every fourth year), but also for many state and local offices. The exact dimensions vary by state in terms of which legislative and executive offices are involved.

There are five states in the US that have what are called ‘off-year elections’; that is, they have made a deliberate attempt to insulate their elections for either governor or state legislature by holding them in a year when there is no congressional election. But this is obviously unusual.

Thus the US has all these of elections coinciding on one day, often resulting in very long ballots. This is one of the problems leading to voter confusion and the problem of what political scientists call ‘roll off’, or what was called in Florida ‘under votes’. In Australia, this is similar to ‘informal voting’. In the US, people do not vote for certain offices, either because they do not know anything about these offices and candidates, or they may just get tired. This is more likely to occur with the long ballot.

There is no federal constitutional rule that says that the House of Representatives elections have to occur at the same time as the presidential election. It wasn’t until the 1870s that this happened in the US. This could be changed. Certainly the states could change the dates for the elections for their own offices. The US has all of these elections coinciding, unlike a lot of other federal systems—Germany, Canada and Australia, to name three—where the states or provinces deliberately choose to have their elections at a time other than at the date of federal elections.

There have been some federal changes to voting rights—mainly extending suffrage to women, to blacks and to 18-year-olds by constitutional amendments. There have also been various non-discrimination laws (particularly in the 1960s). And in 1993 there was even what was called the ‘National Voter Registration Act’—popularly known as the ‘motor-voter’ law, because when citizens went to renew a driver’s licence they would be presented with a voter registration form. Problems were subsequently discovered with this system—sometimes the driver’s licence bureau did not forward the forms to the voter registration board, and it could also lead to people having multiple registrations. Thus the impact of ‘motor voter’ has been much less than intended.

There are also no uniform voter registration standards across the states. A person who may be eligible in one state may not necessarily be eligible in another. The rules differ in terms of waiting periods, for instance—the period of residence in the state prior to the election. Also, as made famous by the Florida episode, the rules that apply to felons or former felons differ. There are 14 states—and Florida is one of them—in which people with felonious criminal records receive lifetime bans from voting. At the other end of the scale, there are four states that have no laws about this

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whatsoever. And in between there are various gradations—for example, once someone is on parole or probation or after a certain number of years, felons can reclaim their voting rights in some states. In Florida, there was also the problem that the state of Florida had contracted with a private organisation to purge the voting roll of felons. There were so many errors made that some election officials in Florida found that they themselves were listed as felons, and were therefore ineligible to vote!

This situation is of significance particularly because of the high rate of incarceration of black males in the US, many on drug offences. The US has one of the highest percentages of prison populations in the world, particularly in the last 20 years, because of tough drug laws. It is estimated that one in eight black men in the US is disqualified from voting because of felony convictions and residence in one of the states in which this is grounds for disqualification from voting.

Not only are there no uniform rules of electoral administration across the states, even within states, the rules often differ. There are only seven states in the US that have a uniform statewide ballot form. Florida, embarrassed as it was, is one of the few states that have made major changes since the election, and it will be the eighth state with a uniform ballot form. Otherwise it is mix and match. There are, of course, different standards even concerning what constitutes a vote, hence the pregnant, hanging, and dimpled chads famously held up to the world's view last fall. There also are different rules across the states for the treatment of absentee ballots, with considerable local variation. Even when states have rules about the order of candidates there may be differences in how that is implemented, as with the Palm Beach ballot.

The general point is that electoral administration varies tremendously, depending on where one resides in the US. In fact, although the focus was on Florida in 2000, under slightly different circumstances it could have been another state in the dock. It could have been any of those states where there was a close result and questionable voting practices, even in one locality. For example in New Mexico, where less than 500 votes separated Gore and Bush, at one point a ballot box was reported missing. New Mexico could easily have been in Florida's position. The presidential election was so close that any state with three electoral votes would have made a difference—and all of them have at least three electoral votes.

## **2. The Electoral College**

We ignore the Electoral College for the most part, because it usually magnifies differences. A plurality vote winner in a state normally gets all of that state's electoral votes. Thus elections that are fairly close in terms of popular vote, like Kennedy and Nixon in 1960, in terms of electoral votes are much larger. What happened in 2000 was that the Electoral College took a close result and shrank it even further, so that those few hundred votes in Florida certified by the Supreme Court made Bush the victor, out of over a hundred million votes cast.

Presidential electors are not legally bound even to vote for the candidate to whom they are pledged, except in a few states. Over the past two centuries there have been dozens of cases of what are called 'faithless electors'—although this has never decided a presidential election—where people have cast their ballots for a candidate in the Electoral College, even though they were chosen to vote for somebody else.

Although most Americans recognise that there is not direct popular election for president, they do not understand how the Electoral College functions. For the last 50 years there have been surveys conducted sporadically on what Americans think of the Electoral College, and they show that about 60 percent of the population of the US pretty consistently would like to switch to direct popular vote. As with many surveys, however, if one changes the question, one gets somewhat different results. For instance, adding ‘what if we switched to direct popular vote but it harmed small states?’ reduces the support level for abolition to about 40 percent. Small states do get a tiny advantage in terms of the Electoral College versus what they would have in a direct popular vote.

One of the curious things about the whole US electoral system is that most Americans have never seen the electors for whom they are literally voting when they go to the ballot box. In the 1992 ballot in the state of Oklahoma, where I was residing at the time, the electors for Democratic, Republican, Libertarian and Independent were listed underneath the candidates. There are only ten states in the US in which the electors are identified on the ballot. They are normally small states that do not have many offices at stake during a presidential election year. Thus there is room to list the presidential electors.

### **3. Ballot design and its consequences**

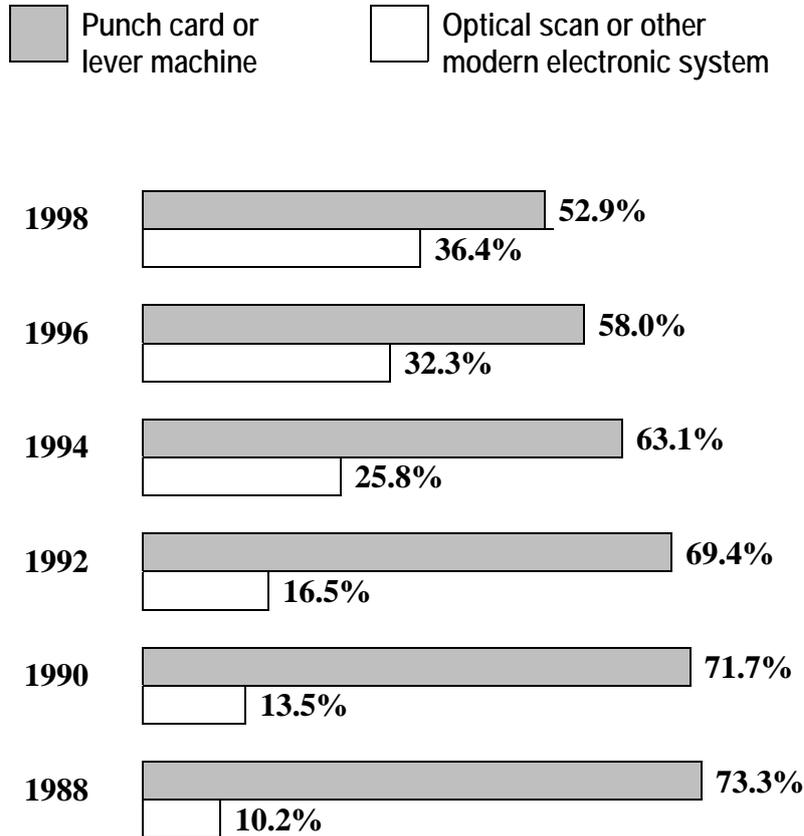
In 1975 the United States established a Federal Election Commission, which is mainly concerned with campaign finance regulations and ballot forms. The FEC periodically issues findings and pronouncements concerning voting technology and procedures. These admonitions are only voluntary, however; it remains for the states to choose to adopt them. Even states claiming to adhere to FEC guidelines often normally keep their old voting machines under ‘grandfather’ clauses. For instance, the website of the Federal Election Commission indicates that Florida in 2000 was one of the states claiming to abide by Federal Election Commission standards for their voting procedures.

Over the long term, the older ballot forms using punch cards or lever machines are declining, and the more modern forms—the optical scan, which is like a multiple choice test, and other modern systems—are increasing. However, it was estimated that in 2000, one-third of the population of the US was still using punch cards. The decision to change to more modern systems remains with the states, and sometimes even with the individual districts or counties within those states.

A majority of states are still using punch card ballots. Although that is not necessarily the only form they use, punch cards are quickly processed in larger population areas. An analysis based on the election districts in the US shows that 40 percent of the counties used optical scan, 20 percent used punch cards, 15 percent used levers, 12 percent used paper ballots, nine percent used electronic touch screen, and four percent were mixed. The US likes to think of itself as a high technology country, but in voting it is less technologically up-to-date than the grocery store counter, the bank cash machine, or voting in some other countries.

## How every vote is counted

Only slowly is new voting technology being deployed.  
Percentage of registered voters using :



What are the consequences of these practices? For decades, nationally, the roll-off (informal or under-vote) for president was about 2.3 percent. This could be because people chose not to vote for president—in effect saying ‘none of the above’—or they deface their ballot. In the state of Maryland in 2000, 0.52 percent didn’t vote for president. In Florida, the figure was higher than average, at almost three percent. This does not even include the over-votes. And in 21 of the 67 counties in Florida, the under-votes were more than six percent. These were mainly black and Democratic counties. But at least four states had greater roll-offs than Florida did. To repeat, what happened in Florida could have happened elsewhere as well.

Does ballot form make a difference? In Florida there were 24 punch card counties, with a roll-off of almost four percent, whereas in 24 optical scan counties, the roll-off was only 1.5 percent. So it would seem that ballot form does make a difference.

Under-votes are more common than over-votes (voting for more than one candidate). The problem in Palm Beach was the high rate of over-votes. Did this cost Democrat

Al Gore a substantial amount of votes? There is substantial evidence that it did. For instance, Palm Beach County was the only county that used that butterfly ballot, and over-votes in that county were four percent. Over-votes for president in the rest of Florida were one percent. Furthermore, Palm Beach County used the butterfly ballot only for the presidential contest. There were so many presidential candidates it was decided to spread them over two pages. In the other races in Palm Beach County over-voting was no more prevalent than in races for the same offices in other counties in Florida. In other words, it is clear that the butterfly ballot in Palm Beach County cost Al Gore thousands of votes, and probably the presidency itself. Ballot forms *do* make a difference.

Since the election, upwards of 60 percent of the public are in favour of federal standards for voting, depending on the exact question asked. There have been lots of studies, a National Commission on Electoral Reform (co-chaired by former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford), 1 500 legislative bills introduced in states, 60 bills in Congress--but relatively little action. Only three states have undertaken major reform efforts: Georgia, Maryland and Florida. Florida has put an end to punch cards. It has provided for state aid to counties. Supposedly by 2002 they are all going to have optical scan machines, improved training of local officials, and improved voter education. If anybody wants a relic of the 2000 election, the Florida punch card machines are on sale on e-bay.

Expense is a discouraging factor, because most costs are borne by state and even local jurisdictions. While local jurisdictions are waiting for the states to aid them, the states are waiting for Congress to aid *them*. Congress shows no inclination toward such aid.

#### **4. Proposals for reform**

There is no shortage of proposals for reform, and there is broad scope for federal intervention, if the government choses to act. There could even be a constitutional amendment to abolish or change the Electoral College. Although many proposals are potentially feasible, the problem is getting agreement.

What are the problems in generating political support for reform? Why has reform been frustrated?

There are three broad problems. First, there is the question of partisan political advantage—sometimes even bipartisan political advantage, because the two major parties in the US do not want to enact legislation which might facilitate minor party voting. One example is election-day registration. There are six states in the US that have election-day registration, and one state—North Dakota—does not have registration at all. One of the states with election-day registration is Minnesota, which in 1998 elected Independent (originally Reform) candidate Jesse Ventura, former professional wrestler and sometime movie actor. The analysis of that election indicated that, without election-day registration, Ventura probably wouldn't have won. He mobilised a lot of people to vote, and in Minnesota they could register on election day. Thus parties have a vested interest in trying to get as many of their people registered and to the polls as possible while discouraging others.

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The Republicans are not interested in improving voter access; they claim this will simply lead to more fraud. They complain that the Democrats mobilise uninformed voters, some of whom may not even be eligible to vote. In 1996 there were accusations that the Democratic administration had allowed foreigners to vote or made them US citizens in an expedited manner in order to get on the voting rolls and cast their ballots for Democrats.

The US is becoming a more ethnically diverse society, as is Australia, and surveys indicate that the Republican Party is the bastion of the white, married male. But becoming more ethnically diverse is an advantage for the Democratic Party only if it can get them registered and to the polls. President George W. Bush presented a budget with no federal aid to the states to improve their voting technology. Most Republicans do not want to deal with ballot reform at all because it raises questions about Bush's legitimacy. The Democrats have pursued it more vigorously. Nevertheless, in the US there is always the question of whether parties pursue issues in the hope of electoral gain, or whether they genuinely are trying to solve problems.

The second problem is bureaucratic inertia and fear of change. This is the system to which people are accustomed. This also impinges on the third problem, of local discretion and jobs. Local officials like the system because it gives them authority and positions. What local officials have almost uniformly said to Congress is, 'Give us some money, and we will fix it.' They do not want federal rules, because that will limit their discretion. As with most issues concerning electoral systems, for instance re-apportionment of districts in the US (largely a partisan process through state legislatures), the people who benefit from the current system are reluctant to change.

What changes are likely to occur by the next presidential election of 2004? Some states will make changes to improve their voting systems, but this will be slow and incremental. Potential difficulties will remain. As long as there is no repetition of the national impact of Florida's problems in the presidential election, by and large these 'little local difficulties' will be ignored. Nevertheless, the chances of some of these problems becoming major in the presidential election are probably increased simply by the fact that the US has been so divided in partisan terms in recent years. This is true of the balance of power in Congress, as well as in the presidential election of 2000.

Before the US institutes major change at the federal level or more sweepingly across the states, it may have to experience a second instance where the popular vote winner for president and the Electoral College winner were not the same. The US, in terms of electoral administration, is basically a very conservative and partisan country. What is clear from the analysis of the election of 2000 is that a plurality of voters in Florida went to the polls to vote for Al Gore, but, as it turned out, a plurality was counted for George Bush. It all brings to mind the cry of a veteran electoral official on the eve of election day: 'Please God, whatever happens tomorrow, let somebody win big.'



**Question** — Americans often talk about being a registered Democrat voter or a registered Republican voter. What action do the political parties have to take to get these people on the roll? Have they enlisted these people? Why do you let the political parties have anything to do with enrolling the voters?

**Donley Studlar** — Well actually they don't. As for being identified as a registered Democrat or Republican or Independent—first of all, it's not up to the parties. And secondly, it means very little, because even in these primary elections in the US you sometimes can't keep people who are registered in the other party from voting in them, or you may only have to have been registered in that party for a month or so. People change their registration all the time. The registration is normally done by the states, and you go down and declare yourself. You don't have to pay any fee, and what it supposedly entitles you to is the right to vote in that party's primary. Parties are very weak in the US, and in some states they have what are called 'open primaries'. You can actually be a registered voter in one party and go vote in the other party's primary.

**Question** — Do American voters often walk into the ballot box with a fistful of ballot papers from all the different candidates, for instance dog catchers, sheriffs and so on? What form is the ballot? Is it on separate sheets of paper, or all on one sheet, or what?

**Donley Studlar** — Well, again, it varies. As much as it takes. In most places you are not allowed to bring anything in. Certainly parties have sample ballots and in the newspapers they prepare sample ballots. But it's a formidable and intimidating process to go into an American voting booth. I've lived in several states, I have an advanced degree, and yet I still get intimidated when I go into a new state and go to a voting booth.

**Question** — Is it constitutionally possible for Congress to pass a uniform election law for federal elections?

**Donley Studlar** — I would think it would be, yes. Again, the provisions are essentially deferred to the states, but the constitutional provisions would not seem to prohibit the federal Congress from doing this. As with most things in the US, as soon as it's done, it might be challenged in a federal court, but it's not obvious that Congress would be kept from doing this. The one thing that is obvious is that they couldn't change the Electoral College without a constitutional amendment, which takes a two-thirds vote of both houses of Congress, plus three-quarters of the states. Therefore, the blocking power of a minority of small states is considerable.

**Question** — Do you have to register for each election, or is it a case of once you're on the electoral roll, you stay on it? Also, I have heard stories of there being huge queues and a shortage of voting places. Is this the case?

**Donley Studlar** — In terms of only registering once and then staying on the register—well, it will not surprise you, after my remarks, to say that it depends on the state. In most states you have to cast a ballot at least once within three or five years or you may get purged, and then have to take action to get yourself back on the roll. One

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of the complaints the Republicans have about ‘motor-voter’—and they claim this has the potential to lead to fraud—is that it makes it harder to purge the roll, because you have registrations coming from various places and people can be on the roll multiple times. I have heard the claim (though I can’t validate this) from a *Los Angeles Times* story on voter practice in the US, in which they claim there are more people on the voter registration list in Alaska than there are residents of Alaska.

There are different voting places. But, again, you have voting machine breakdowns. Part of the problem in the US is that you often have poll workers who are inadequately trained, and when you have a larger than expected voter turnout, this can lead to long queues and attempts to rush people through the polls, which only leads to more confusion. This was apparently one of the problems in Florida.

**Question** — Do employers allow their staff time off to vote? And what are the hours of voting?

**Donley Studlar** — Will it surprise you if I say ‘it depends’? The hours of voting vary tremendously from state to state. Those of you who follow US elections may recall that two of the earliest reporting states are Kentucky and Indiana. They are not on the eastern seaboard, and the early reporting has to do with when the polls close. It’s up to the employers essentially. Ninety percent of US elections, including primary elections, are held on Tuesdays. That’s one of these customs, just as in Britain they hold a general election on Thursdays, in Canada—just to be different—they shifted towards Mondays. Many countries hold their elections on the weekends. There is nothing to prevent the US moving to weekend elections, and there is some data to show that you get a better turnout if you have elections on weekends, particularly on Sundays. But normally, if they want to vote, people can find time before or after work or during their lunch hour.

One of the issues that I didn’t have time to mention is that the Republicans would like to see a uniform poll-closing time across the US. We’ve had situations, because we’re across four time zones (or six, if you include Hawaii), where results are announced before the polls have closed. That only seems to have affected anything in 1980, when President Carter, for reasons best known to himself, went on television and conceded the election early, before the polls closed on the West Coast. While obviously it didn’t change the presidential election, it is claimed that the Democrats suffered disproportionately from their voters not showing up. But in Florida for instance—and, again, this is a Republican complaint—they are actually in two time zones, and some of the networks were projecting Al Gore as the winner in Florida, before the polls had closed in western Florida. The Republicans claim that this may have discouraged some of their voters. There could be federal legislation mandating simultaneous opening and closing of booths across the US, as there has been, for instance, in Canada, which is across the same time zones as the US. So, that’s under discussion.

**Question** — Would there be any merit—unlikely though it is to happen—in making the Electoral College electors allocated in proportion to the voting, rather than ‘winner takes all’?

**Donley Studlar** — Again, there have been proposals for that in the federal Congress, that essentially the plurality winner of the state gets a bonus, whereas the rest of the electoral votes are allocated by whoever wins that particular congressional district. In fact, there are two states in the US—Maine and Nebraska—that don't allocate their electors on a statewide basis. It depends on the electoral district. These are both small states—Nebraska has five electoral votes and Maine has four—and so far in about three elections it hasn't happened that a person has won one district and someone else has won a different district, but it is possible. The states have the electors, and it's up to the states to determine how these electors are going to be allocated. And Maine and Nebraska have quite legally chosen to allocate them differently. Although it hasn't *practically* made a result, after 2000, who knows what will happen?

**Question** — Have you analysed it to see whether that would give a fairer indication by Electoral College votes of who won?

**Donley Studlar** — I can only repeat something that I saw on the Internet the other day, where somebody claimed that they had done an analysis which showed that, if the allocation had been by who won the congressional district, the electoral vote would have turned out exactly the same—271 to 266.

**Question** — In 1960, in the Kennedy-Nixon contest, participation rates were quite a bit higher than they have been recently, I thought about 60 percent. Has the trend—perhaps because of the registration process and all the problems you mentioned—to non-participation been worsening in the last 40 years? If it has, why do you think that is so?

**Donley Studlar** — You're correct. Since 1960 it's been going down. There's been a more mobile population, people move around more, and we've had the introduction of the 18-year-old vote. In fact there's a dispute among scholars now. In general, except for countries that have mandatory voting, we've seen a general decline in voting turnout. Some people claim it simply relates to the fact that we enfranchised all these younger people who tend not to vote as frequently, and others suggest there's a more systemic problem. Let's just say there hasn't been a huge effort—'motor-voter' to the contrary notwithstanding—to try to get people to the polls.

Of course, what happened in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century was that the political parties in the US acted as mobilising forces. There was more party loyalty. Of course, some of that had to do with what in Canada they call 'treating' on election day. So you had much higher voter turnout on those occasions, but we've generally had progressively declining voter turnout of voting age population. But when we say the US is a voter-unfriendly system, part of that has to do with the ballot, but a lot of the problem is caused by the self-registration of voters—they have to take the initiative to get themselves on the voting registers.

**Question** — If a person is living in a state where they have been convicted as a felon, and they cast a vote in a presidential election, then move to a state where they lose that right, could you envisage that they'd have some scope to launch a legal challenge against the effective withdrawal of their democratic rights?

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**Donley Studlar** — I never underestimate the creativity of the American legal system. I don't know of any, but I commend an article in *The Economist* to you (I think it appeared in March 2001) on proposals for reform, in terms of legal challenges. The American Civil Liberties Union has filed legal challenges in four states, that the states do not have uniform voting rules. And *The Economist* article says that the wildcard in this whole discussion on voting system reform is the Supreme Court's decision in *Bush v Gore*, which was based somehow on equal protection of the laws, and they took pains to say 'one shouldn't generalise from this.' But again, we are the most litigious society in the world, and *The Economist* suggests that the Supreme Court may have essentially put out a ticking bomb, metaphorically speaking, and that *Bush v Gore* can be cited as a precedent and *will* be cited. Whether courts will accept it remains to be seen, in terms of challenging some of these practices.

What really isn't challengeable, unless Congress attempts to change it, is the notion that it's up to the states to set the voting rules within that state. It would take federal legislation to change that. So, on the face of it, I don't think the felon who crosses state borders would have much of a case, but I'm not a specialist in the law.

## **Parliament, Meetings and Civil Society\***

*Judith Brett*

Today I'm going to talk about meetings—'meetings, bloody meetings', as John Cleese's training video describes them—and their relationship to what happens in our parliaments. What is the relationship between the procedures of our national, state and territory deliberative assemblies and those followed by the deliberative assemblies of our civic and economic life? And what are the implications of this relationship for people's attitudes towards parliament?

Once this relationship was close. Meeting procedures were based on simplified forms of parliamentary procedure and so participation in the many meetings of civil society familiarised citizens with the ways parliament operated and helped to build a sense of legitimacy for parliament's deliberative strategies. However, I will argue, this closeness no longer pertains. Meetings have changed, in both their form and their location. Where once they were formal and adversarial, like parliament, they are now informal and consensual; and where once they were primarily located in people's civic and community life, they are now a ubiquitous feature of working life. As a consequence of these two shifts, meetings no longer work to familiarise people with the procedures of parliament and to endow them with conviction; in fact quite the opposite. The public seem to be becoming increasingly impatient with and alienated from parliament's adversarial procedures which no longer accord with its commonsense understandings and practical experience of the way good decisions are made.

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\* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 27 July 2001.

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This lecture is organised into three parts. In the first and longest I discuss the rise of the meeting and its relationship with the history of parliament. This takes us from the Eighteenth Century to some time after the Second World War. In the second section I discuss contemporary meeting practice as it has developed since the War. In the third, concluding section I discuss the implications of the argument for popular attitudes to parliament. I had been thinking about meetings for some time as part of work I was doing on ideas of citizenship and their relationship to people's practical political knowledge and experience, when I came across a book called *Meetings, Manners and Civilisation: the Development of Modern Meeting Behaviour* by a Dutch man, Wilbert van Vree.<sup>1</sup> This book surveys the development of European meeting practice and has been enormously helpful in the development of my argument.

### **Origin and Development of Meetings**

So, to begin with the origins of meetings: what are meetings? Meetings are occasions when people come together for common discussion and for non-violent decision making. Their medium is regulated talk, which occurs according to certain rules with which the participants are more or less familiar. And their intended outcome is some sort of decision. The explicit regulation of talk marks meetings apart from informal talk, from gossip, chit chat or conversation, and bestows their decisions with a degree of legitimacy which binds participants to the outcomes. Meeting procedures are ways of giving legitimacy to the decisions of deliberative bodies; those who lose the argument accept their loss, and those who win know that they can now legitimately act on the outcome of the meeting—further even that they are expected to act on the outcome.

The meeting developed as part of the broad historical process of the pacification of politics in which rule-governed talk was substituted for force and violence as a way of settling disputes within increasingly large territorial units.<sup>2</sup> Its history includes the increasing need for orderly and co-ordinated decision-making procedures among the European ruling elites of church, town and state, the Reformation and the Protestant Meeting Order which spread meeting discipline among the lower classes, and the emergence of national parliaments as deliberative bodies in which conflict is settled by talk rather than force, a process sometimes referred to as 'parliamentarisation'. As monarchs asserted their monopoly over coercive force, other, more peaceful means were needed for the members of the ruling elites to settle their differences and display their prowess. Tournaments and duels were replaced by debates and oratory. One attacked the words of one's opponents but not the opponent himself.

Organised sport and parliaments developed hand in hand, both providing arenas in which military combat could be replaced by other forms of combat. Fighting with weapons was replaced by playing sport and fighting with words, and both sport and parliament were organised around adversarial teams which competed for an outcome, and which provided opportunities for the display of individual prowess. They subsequently followed their own lines of development, but the deep shared history of

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<sup>1</sup> Leicester University Press, London, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> The following summary account is based on Wilbert van Vree's introduction to *Meetings, Manners and Civilisation*. Van Vree situates the development of meetings within the broad process of historical change described by Norbert Elias in *The Civilising Process* and subsequent publications.

the two social forms meant that sport has remained a rich source of analogy for descriptions of parliamentary events and behaviour. As he struggled with the instability of the first federal parliaments, Alfred Deakin famously complained ‘What kind of game of cricket ... could they play if they had three elevens instead of two, with one playing sometimes with one side, sometimes with the other, and sometimes for itself? It was absolutely imperative that as soon as possible the three parties should somehow be resolved into two.’<sup>3</sup> This resolution occurred at Fusion in 1909 when Australian politics took on the two-party shape of labour and non-labour which it has held to ever since. As this anecdote reminds us, disciplined political parties are now central to our experience of the adversarial forms of parliament, particularly in Australia. And as organised groups learned to operate the adversarial forms and procedures previously operated by individuals, the forms and procedures changed, becoming more rigid and mechanical, with majorities on the floor predetermined by the balance of party numbers.

The spread of the meeting from the ruling elites to the lower orders was in the main the result of the rise of the voluntary association in industrialised societies. Voluntary associations in the form we know them today emerged in the Eighteenth Century, as a response to the increasing complexity and rate of change of social and political life. Their formation intensified in the first half of the Nineteenth in both numbers and public importance until they had become the pervasive and easily recognised social form Charles Dickens satirised in *Pickwick Papers*. The basis of their growth was the adult male urban classes, but the social form was easily adaptable to purposes ranging from the special interest hobby group like pigeon fanciers to a political association or a workers’ co-operative. All that was required was a purpose, a set of rules, and a membership defined by a formalised act of joining. Even children could form a club, as the Marsh girls did in *Little Women*, to rehearse the skills and forms of adult life. Acting independently of both the family and the state, the activities of these organised groups contributed to the network of formal and informal associations and institutions which makes up civic society.<sup>4</sup>

Australia was settled after the rise of the voluntary association in Britain. Nineteenth Century colonists brought this experience of voluntary associations with them and turned them to the purposes of community-building in the new land. They had perhaps even more need for them here than at home; with no traditional ruling classes to rely on, if anything were to happen it had to be made happen by the colonists themselves. Like the settlers in the United States, they were building a new society, and Alex de Toqueville had observed on his visit to America in the 1830s the range and effectiveness of American associational life. He saw this enthusiasm for voluntary associations as the basis of their successful democratic life: ‘In democratic countries, knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge.’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred Deakin, *Age* (Melbourne), 9 February 1904, cited in J.A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: a Biography*, vol. 2, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1965, p. 363.

<sup>4</sup> R.J. Morris, ‘Clubs, Societies and Associations’ in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950*, vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1990, p. 395–6.

<sup>5</sup> Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, (1835) Harper & Rowe, New York, 1966, p. 485–8.

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In new areas of settlement, both rural and urban, public resources were limited and the provision of many essential services, such as hospitals or fire brigades, depended on voluntary effort, or on convincing the government of the local area's urgent need. By the end of the Nineteenth Century the typical Australian country town and suburb had a plethora of community organisations: sporting clubs such as cricket, football, horse racing, tennis and lawn bowls, musical societies, literary and debating clubs, public halls, mechanics institutes and subscriber libraries, agricultural societies to organise the annual show, and so on. As well, there were the churches, which supported their own range of organisations, and the women's auxiliary fund-raising organisations attached to institutions such as schools, hospitals, fire brigades and children's homes. There were also associations with an economic purpose: trade unions, chambers of commerce, farmers groups.

A survey during the early 1940s of 180 Victorian country towns ranging in size from 250 to 10 000 people found well over 3 000 social organisations and 1 700 sporting organisations, as well as boards, councils and trusts and the more formal organisations of political and economic life. Of the 180 towns surveyed, 161 had a public hall.<sup>6</sup> And a national survey in 1967 found that Australian membership of organisations of all kinds was higher than found in any of the five countries which had been surveyed by Almond and Verba for their classic account of the Civic Culture, including the United States.<sup>7</sup> All of these organisations required people to run them, people who knew how to combine. Each required at least a president, a secretary and a treasurer, and although there was some doubling up, people also took turns. As one meeting manual put it:

To be able to acquit oneself creditably as the chairman of a meeting of any kind is ... not only a useful accomplishment but also a necessity of modern times [for] there are few persons who do not belong to some local council, association, society or club over whose meetings he or she may not be called upon to preside.<sup>8</sup>

The first woman parliamentary candidate for the Country Party in Victoria, Helena Marfell, who unsuccessfully contested the Victorian federal seat of Wannon at the 1949 election, is remembered by her daughter as always between meetings:

Mother would return home from an afternoon meeting, and, not even stopping to take off her hat, would get the tea, make a couple of sponge cakes, sandwiches or biscuits, eat and rush off again to an evening meeting ... She ate most evening meals with her hat on.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A.J. & J.J. McIntyre, *Country Towns of Victoria: a Social Survey*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1944.

<sup>7</sup> David Kemp, *Society and Electoral Behaviour in Australia: a Study of Three Decades*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1978, p. 351.

<sup>8</sup> Morton F. Parish, *The Chairman's Pilot and Chart: a Practical Guide to Procedure and Law*, 2nd ed., Sweet and Maxwell, London, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Mirth Jamieson remembering her mother, Helena Marfell, cited in Heather Gunn, 'For the Man on the Land': Rural Women and the Victorian National Party, 1917-1996', Ph.D. Thesis, La Trobe University, 1996, p. 139.

Helena Marfell was a good public speaker and she could run a good meeting. Meetings were particularly important for women, providing them with opportunities for casual talk and sociability. The survey of associations in country towns referred to above noted that the majority provided a cup of tea at their meetings. Meetings were also women's main means of acting politically. The pacification of society of which the development of the meeting is a part enabled women gradually to participate in public life, to learn the skills of rule-based debate and decision making, and to turn these to their own purposes.

It is an intriguing historical question how people like Helena Marfall and countless other Australian men and women learnt to run meetings. All the more politically oriented clubs and societies saw training in the skills necessary for political participation as part of their purpose. The Australian Natives Association, for example, educated its members in the various forms of political life through Mock Parliaments and Mock Banquets,<sup>10</sup> debating societies were popular with their formal speeches for and against particular motions; and the political parties had sections devoted to training, with speaking and debating clubs where political activists could learn the skills needed for the hustings. After women were enfranchised, women's political organisations such as the NSW based Women's Political Education League established classes in speaking and debating and ran schools for citizenship.<sup>11</sup> Later organisations such as Rostrum developed to give people specific training in such skills as chairmanship,<sup>12</sup> and as a teenager I was a member of a YWCA organisation called The Girl Citizens in which we were taught how to run meetings. It is likely, though, that most people learned on the job, beginning from participant observation as ordinary members and then serving in understudy positions such as vice president or acting treasurer. Some people, of course, already had relevant education and work experience: treasurers could generally be drawn from people with book-keeping experience, and larger organisations might be lucky enough to have a trained accountant. Participation in trade union activities gave on the job education in political skills for many workers. There has not, as far as I know, been any systematic investigation of the way knowledge of and skills in meeting procedures were disseminated through society, either in Australia or elsewhere.

Many, however, would have had recourse to manuals like J.P. Monro's *Guide for the Chairman and Secretary*, particularly when they had to take up an office. Monro's *Guide* was part of a series of Everyday Useful Books which contained other titles by Monro, on *Model Speeches and Toasts*, and on *Model Letters and Invitations*, as well as a guide to Australian etiquette and a book on what to name the baby. Monro's book was first published in Australia in 1934 and still in print in its fourteenth edition in 1958.<sup>13</sup> Such manuals began to appear during the Nineteenth Century. They served a

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<sup>10</sup> Marion Aveling (Quartly), 'A History of the Australian Natives Association, 1871-1930', Ph.D. Thesis, Monash University, 1970, p. 266.

<sup>11</sup> Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: the History of Australian Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999, p. 147.

<sup>12</sup> The Rostrum Movement was founded in 1923 in England and inaugurated in Australia in 1930. Rostrum leaflet (1983) in my possession.

<sup>13</sup> The copy in my possession is the fourteenth, revised and enlarged, published by J. Pollard, Melbourne, 1958.

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similar function to etiquette manuals which had diffused throughout society the manners first developed in the dense and complex social interactions of the European courts. Meeting manners similarly instructed the lower classes in forms of behaviour already developed amongst the elites, and they are a valuable source for investigating the values and self-understandings associated with this new form of political behaviour.

The very early manuals focussed as much on meeting manners as on procedural issues such as the order of motions; one should not arrive late or depart early, fall asleep, fight, shout, spit or swear, but should rather endeavour at all times to listen attentively to the views of others and to maintain a calm and dispassionate demeanour when stating one's own.<sup>14</sup> Meetings were about rational talk, and to participate in them successfully one had to learn to talk and listen in appropriately rational and reciprocal ways: to take one's turn, to control ones' outbursts of scorn or temper, to subordinate one's own interests and views to those of others, or at least to appear to do so. As innumerable meeting manuals told their readers, 'Common sense and common courtesy are the foundations of good meeting procedure.'<sup>15</sup>

As meeting manners became more widely known and more people knew how to conduct themselves—knew not to spit or throw things or interrupt and shout abuse—attention shifted from instructing the ordinary members and participants to advising the chairman, the person ultimately responsible for the effective and orderly conduct of the meeting. As the advice made clear, knowing how to run a good meeting is far more than knowing formal procedural rules. It is knowing how to balance competing interests and views; how to achieve an effective outcome; how to handle a potentially disruptive outburst of anger, or even violence; how, that is, to maintain public order, prevent it from descending into chaos and still get things done. Meeting manuals thus mix exposition of the various rules with advice to the chair on such matters as how to control passions and passing impulses in oneself as well as in the meeting under one's charge. *Roberts' Rules of Order*, the standard United States manual, concluded its list of 'Parliamentary Don'ts for the Presiding Officer' with 'Don't lose your calmness, objectivity and impartiality.'<sup>16</sup> Some manuals also included advice on dress and deportment, so that the Chairman would be able to project the necessary authority. 'The Chairman should be neatly dressed, otherwise the dignity of the position may suffer', advises J.P. Munro. He does concede that he has met in the ranks of Labor many very able Chairmen who at an emergency have presided at a stopwork in their shirt sleeves, but notes that at their union meetings in the Trades Hall the presidents and secretaries are neatly dressed.<sup>17</sup> This observation concurs with what is known of the early commitment to meeting discipline amongst the English working classes. They too learned to substitute meetings for violence: 'The poor, when suffering and dissatisfied, no longer make a riot, but hold a meeting—instead of attacking their

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<sup>14</sup> See van Vree, op. cit., p. 256 passim for a close reading of meeting manuals in terms of Norbert Elias's concept of the civilising process.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, 'M.P.', *The Young Men's Parliamentary Guide*, Macmillan Co. of Canada, Toronto, c. 1919, p. 6; Marjorie Puregger, *Mr Chairman*, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1962, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> General Henry M. Robert, *Robert's Rules of Order*, (1876), Spire Books paperback edition, 1967, p. 167.

<sup>17</sup> Monro, op. cit., p. 14.

neighbours, they arraign the Ministry' noted an observer of the Manchester working class in 1819 on the eve of the Peterloo massacre.<sup>18</sup>

In the main, the procedures for the meetings of civil society were based on modifications of the procedures parliament had developed to guide its decision making. Parliament was the model of how ordinary meetings should be conducted and many modern meeting manuals still evoke its history in their introductions. And although the development of meetings was a European-wide accompaniment to industrialisation and modern state formation, manuals produced for the Empire generally present it as an exclusively British development. Marjorie Puregger's widely used *Australian Guide to Chairing Meetings* begins with a brief overview chapter on the history of parliamentary procedure under the heading 'The distilled wisdom of the centuries', and commences: 'The system of meeting procedure in use today is largely derived from the proceedings of the Houses of Commons.'<sup>19</sup>

After a brief nod to Indian, Greek and Roman precedents, she places the development of meeting procedure firmly within the history of the English parliament, with its origins in the folk moots of the Anglo Saxons and its development through the Magna Carta, the Tudor, Elizabethan and Stuart parliaments, the Civil War and the Commonwealth to the 1832 Reform Bill. Earlier meeting manuals similarly implicitly claim meeting procedure as a manifestation of the slowly evolving wisdom of the British parliamentary traditions. The standard Canadian meeting manual, *Bourinot's Rules of Order*, first published in 1894, claims that 'On the basis of common sense and fair play, the British Parliament slowly, through the centuries, evolved a system of rules and conventions upon which are based the procedures and usages of all free parliaments.'<sup>20</sup> A manual published in London about the same time links the development of the meeting to the right of the British 'to assemble at pleasure for the purpose of discussion', a right confirmed by the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, which acts the author stresses are not to be seen as the origin of such rights but as their confirmation.<sup>21</sup> Another claims that the word 'Parliament'... embodies the spirit that has characterised the British people at home and abroad, through the generations'.<sup>22</sup>

Such claims and narratives drew meeting participants into the much larger historical narrative of the development of the British system of parliament as the expression of the wisdom and common sense of the British people. The reader of such manuals could be in no doubt that knowing how to run a meeting was valuable knowledge, linking them to the deep history of their nation and its political institutions. In one's local meetings one followed procedures developed in the mother of all parliaments at

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<sup>18</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, London, 1968, p. 456.

<sup>19</sup> Marjorie Puregger, *The Australian Guide to Chairing Meetings*, revised edition, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Qld, 1998, p. 1; this is the 6th revision of a guide first published under the title, *Mr Chairman*, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1962.

<sup>20</sup> Sir John George Bourinot, *Bourinot's Rules of Order*, (1894), revised by J. Gordon Dubroy, McClelland & Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1963; from Introduction to the first edition, p. x.

<sup>21</sup> James Tayler, *A Guide to the Business of Public Meetings*, Effingham, Wilson & Co., London 1893, pp. 5–6.

<sup>22</sup> *The Young Man's Parliamentary Guide*, p. 5.

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Westminster. The smallest and the greatest meetings of the land were linked by their shared deliberative procedures. *Robert's Rules of Order* has a frontispiece with three simple words: CHURCH—CLUB—GOVERNMENT. His *Rules of Order* are sufficient for each, a shared woof and weft which holds them together in a single cloth. Meeting procedures thus embedded in the day to day life of the community a knowledge of and commitment to parliamentary proceedings as embodying the way civilised people went about resolving conflicts and making joint decisions. Knowledge of and commitment to parliament and to parliamentary procedure as the way to settle political conflicts was not a weak or abstract commitment to a distant institution; it was a commitment enacted in every meeting convened or attended. As well, the etiquette of meetings, in which one participated in reciprocal talking and listening and subordinated self-interest and passing impulse to the common goal of arriving at a collective decision, accorded with widely held liberal notions of the qualities of good citizenship in which individuals were able to subordinate sectional and self interest to the common good of the nation.<sup>23</sup>

There has recently been renewed interest in the links between the quality of democratic public life and citizens' engagement or not with community organisational life. The focus of this work has been on the way participation in voluntary organisations builds what has become known as 'social capital', networks of reciprocity and reservoirs of social trust which enhance communities' abilities to solve their problems, and on the likely consequences of the recent dramatic decline in such participation.<sup>24</sup> My argument suggests that this work needs to be supplemented with attention to the values embodied in the practical political knowledge people bring to such participation. It is not just the fact of participation that matters, but the forms it takes, and the lessons people draw from these forms about legitimate and illegitimate ways of resolving conflicts, effective and ineffective ways of combining together for shared purposes. In learning how to run a good meeting, people were learning about connections between personal character and public order, between the ethics of self-control and the effective pursuit of collective outcomes, between the principles needed to run a good meeting and those necessary for a good society.

Confirmation of the importance of such practical political knowledge to Australian political life can be seen in the troubles which have beset Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party over its organisational modes and practices. Although the organisation described itself as a party, it lacked the formal participatory structures and transparent finances associated with voluntary associations. Instead it was structured like a business with Hanson and two of her close associates as directors rather than as elected office bearers.<sup>25</sup> One Nation's failure to meet its members' organisational expectations has been a continual source of acrimony and resignations: for example, Debbie Bevan who worked in the Queensland office of the party described it as a rabble;<sup>26</sup> and in early 1999 three of its sitting Queensland members resigned over its

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<sup>23</sup> I develop this argument at greater length in 'Retrieving the Partisan History of Australian Citizenship', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 36, no. 3, November 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Putnam, 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6, no. 1, January 1995, pp. 65–78.

<sup>25</sup> Glenn Milne, 'The Party must be Over', *Australian*, 6 July 1998.

<sup>26</sup> *Australian*, 2 September 1998.

autocratic structure.<sup>27</sup> Neither a rabble nor an autocracy is a legitimate modern deliberative body. When One Nation was first formed, most commentators regarded it as a potential threat to Australian democracy because of the views its members espoused on questions of race and national identity; they failed to see the democratic values embodied in Australians' practical political knowledge about legitimate and illegitimate modes of combination and the trouble this spelled for a politically inexperienced leader like Pauline Hanson and her maverick political advisers.<sup>28</sup>

### Modern Meetings

Since the war, meeting practice has been changing. Of course there are still many meetings run along the formal procedural lines set out in manuals like *Roberts' Rules of Order* and Marjorie Puregger's *Australian Guide to Chairing Meetings*, but these are no longer the undisputed centre of modern meeting practice. Many meetings are now markedly less formal, and much of what is found in the modern meeting manual owes very little to parliamentary procedure. In particular, the role of the chair is now far more than the keeping of order through the firm and impartial adherence to procedure. In more recent manuals, the chairman is advised on how to develop the necessary communicative and psychological skills to ensure an effective outcome. The aim, as one widely-used manual puts it, is to 'find the will of the group while keeping group unity, as much as possible without identifying the minority, and while giving the greatest possible atmosphere for free and informal participation.'<sup>29</sup> In achieving such an end, parliamentary procedure is of little use:

Parliamentary procedure and motions should be avoided in reaching decisions in most conferences. ... Parliamentary procedure imposes a degree of formality on the conduct of the discussion which does not allow for the informality, spontaneity and permissiveness we strive for in the conference ... members should feel free to speak up and make contributions at any time without recognition by the chair or first indicating their desire to speak.<sup>30</sup>

Formal turn-taking through the chair is replaced by the more informal techniques people use to take turns in everyday conversation, and discussion replaces debate. Even recent editions of *Roberts' Rules of Order*, the bible of meeting procedure, express reservations about the applicability of formal procedures for all groups. Although required in legally constituted meetings, 'in small groups the ponderous procedures involved stymie human interactions, and the flow of creativity. The rules stimulate a legalistic and mechanical way of thinking.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Weekend Australian*, December 18–19 1999; 'One Nation's Last Gasp', *Age* (Melbourne), 6 February 1999.

<sup>28</sup> See Judith Brett, 'Representing the Unrepresented: One Nation and the Formation of the Labor Party' in Nadine Davidoff (ed.) *Two Nations: the Causes and Effects of the Rise of the One Nation Party in Australia*, Bookman Press, Melbourne, 1998.

<sup>29</sup> H.P. Zelko, *The Business Conference: Leadership and Participation*, New York, 1963, p. 163. This book was first published in 1957 and is representative of the new genre of meeting manuals. See van Vree, p. 272.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in van Vree, p. 286.

<sup>31</sup> 1978 edition; cited in van Vree, p. 291.

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There are two reasons for the shift to less formal meetings. One pertains mainly to political meetings, the other to meetings in general. The social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s were self-consciously hostile to formal structures and procedures, regarding these not as enabling participation—as they had done in their origins—but as stifling it. The commitment to grass roots participation, to everyone’s voice being heard, and a distrust of the authoritarian potential of leadership was widespread amongst the social movements, which tended to see existing meeting procedures in terms of the repressive values and practices they were seeking to change. For example, it was argued within the women’s movement that formal procedures were a tool of the patriarchy and that women needed to develop their own distinctive organisational forms which reflected women’s more openended ways of thinking and acting.<sup>32</sup> Also at work in the social movement’s distrust of formal proceedings was a shift in the way many people experienced organisational membership, with a heightened individualism making many less willing than they once had been to be bound by group decisions and majority votes.

The second change is the spread of the workplace meeting. At work, more and more people are required to attend more and more meetings. While this is most obvious at the top of organisations, chief executives and departmental heads generally spending, depending on the size of the organisation, about 50 percent of their time in meetings, the work or office meeting is a ubiquitous feature of white collar work and rapidly spreading to blue collar, as horizontally co-ordinated work teams replace hierarchical command structures in work place organisation.<sup>33</sup> It is now likely to be at work rather than in their community life that people learn their meeting behaviour. Early meeting manuals were addressed to the person in their community and non-work life. In his preface to the *Guide for the Chairman and the Secretary*, J.P. Monro explicitly links people’s need for his handy practical guide to their increasing leisure and opportunity to participate in interest-based clubs and societies. Now there are many meeting manuals solely about the work based meeting: Malcolm Reid’s *The Australian Meetings Handbook*, published in 1991, begins ‘This is a no-nonsense meeting book for the busy executive who finds that he or she is increasingly involved in convening, chairing or simply attending gatherings of all types.’<sup>34</sup> Meeting manuals are now more likely to be addressed to managers exercising authority in the workplace than to citizens holding elected office. As the book accompanying the John Cleese training video *Meetings, Bloody Meetings* says, ‘meetings are management’.<sup>35</sup>

Guides to workplace meetings draw on management theory and on social psychology, particularly group theory, and few make any mention at all of parliamentary precedents. The deliberative body is generally small, the team or the work group, and the aim is a consensual outcome to which people will feel committed and on which they will act. Meetings need to be both efficient, to not waste time, and to be

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<sup>32</sup> Verity Burgman, *Power and Protest: Movements for Change in Australian Society*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992, pp. 92–3.

<sup>33</sup> van Vree, pp. 277–8.

<sup>34</sup> Malcolm Reid, *The Australian Meetings Handbook: More Effective Meetings in Half the Time*, The Business Library, Melbourne, 1991.

<sup>35</sup> Antony Jay, *How to Run a Meeting*, Video Arts, London, 1976.

effective. Also important is the continuing cohesion of the group. One guide's list of the meeting's functions is: establishing group identity; collective thinking; helping individuals to understand their role in the group; creating a commitment to the decisions made; and acting as a status arena.<sup>36</sup> Only the last has any connection with what happens in parliament. The focus on small group dynamics has transformed the role of the chair from the impartial umpire of the rules to something more like a facilitator. One manual describes the chair as 'the social leader, keeping the group together'; another, which compares meetings with dinner parties and orchestra performances, describes the chair as a 'meeting master':

Meeting masters saw their meetings as if they were orchestral performances. The hall had been prepared, the pieces selected, and some rehearsal accomplished. Everyone was an expert, trying to do his or her best. The job of the chairperson was to facilitate, to help, to conduct the committee orchestra.<sup>37</sup>

### Meetings and Parliament

So, what has all this to do with parliament? There has been much speculation over the past decade or so about popular dissatisfaction with Australia's political institutions and about declining levels of trust in politicians. For example, a 1991 survey of Australians' confidence in their basic institutions found that 62 percent expressed little or no confidence in their political institutions.<sup>38</sup> Since then evidence of disaffection with the major parties, with increases in electoral volatility and the rise of independents and of One Nation, has fuelled journalistic speculation at least. Hugh Mackay has singled out the unruly nature of Australian politicians' parliamentary behaviour, together with the disappearance of clear and meaningful differences between the parties, as possible explanations. With the parties apparently so close, he argues, parliament's adversarial forms seem pointless:

It is a source of widespread astonishment in the Australian community that, at the very time when parties seem quite capable of stealing each other's policies or invading each other's territory, it is not possible for politicians from all sides of the political fence to work together in a more co-operative and harmonious spirit. ... The common cry of parents in particular is that they would not allow their children to behave in the way that politicians typically behave in parliament.<sup>39</sup>

Mackay sees the main problem as the convergence of the parties. The search for reasons has also focussed on the behaviour and the moral quality of the parliamentarians themselves, on claims that they are too self-interested, too prone to temptation to feather their nests at public expense, not as watchful as they might be about conflicts of interest, and so on. I have always been sceptical of explanations

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>37</sup> John E. Tropman, *Making Meetings Work: Achieving High Quality Decisions*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1996, pp. xii, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Hugh Mackay, *Reinventing Australia: the Mind and Mood of Australia in the 90s*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1993. p. 178.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 179.

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which focus on the moral qualities of individuals without attention to the institutions and practices within which these moral qualities are shaped and perceived. This lecture has put forward another argument about possible reasons for shifts in public perceptions of the parliament, which would flow onto perceptions of those who inhabit it.

Neither in top level negotiations between companies, nor in settling community disputes do most people abide by formal rules based on parliamentary procedure. Changes in both the form and location of meetings, from formal and adversarial to informal and consensual, and from community to work, have weakened the threads which once tied the general community to its parliament. With the prime locus of meetings shifting from civil society to the work place, meeting attendance is no longer primarily the actions of citizens of the polity but of workers in the economy. Meetings thus no longer help to give form to a person's sense of their non-work self, to tie them into the civic affairs of their neighbourhood and through that to those of the nation. And as their conduct has changed, from formal and procedural to consensual and discussion based, so they no longer provide the same link between the deliberative bodies of the community and the national parliament.

Two implications can be drawn from this for broad changes in the position of parliament in the political culture, and both point to a decline in its centrality. The first is that parliament is no longer so present in the community. Not only are people less knowledgeable about its forms and procedures, but they no longer enact them so frequently in regular meetings which keep them alive to their purpose and periodically connect community-based deliberations with those of the national parliament. Operating according to different principles, community civic life seems increasingly cut loose from parliament and active civic citizenship no longer so readily builds trust in the nation's central political institutions.

The second implication is even more damaging for general popular confidence in parliamentary institutions. It is not just that people's active civic life no longer connects them with so readily to parliament, but that in many cases it makes them reject the adversarial form at the heart of the Westminster system. From the perspective of those experienced with the modern, informal meeting and its consensual means of reaching a decision, parliamentary procedure is no longer seen as enabling but as precluding cooperative action, and no longer seen as conducive to good decision making. Long used to the replacement of weapons with words in the settlement of political conflicts, people in contemporary society are looking instead to develop more finely-tuned and flexible communicative mechanisms for the solution of group problems.

The decline in the role of the speech in parliament is evidence of the loss of relevance of the forms embedded in parliament's origins. Once the speech to the House was at the heart of the parliament. Great parliamentarians were great orators, displaying their skill before their assembled peers, winning, through their ability to persuade, the highest offices in the land. But as Carmen Lawrence has recently observed, one of the more disquieting experiences of the modern parliamentarian is that speeches are delivered without an audience, into a void where once sat parliamentarians whose adherence needed to be won and maintained. 'Speech after carefully prepared speech

disappears without a trace, having no impact on the fate of the legislation.’ She calls for consideration of ways of opening up decision-making and for more civil and cooperative parliamentary conduct; for a parliament that is less reflexly adversarial, so that we can become more focussed on solving the problems we face as a nation.<sup>40</sup>

The general shift in the community’s experience of decision-making away from adversarial forms also helps explain the apparently high level of popular acceptance of the changed role of the Senate which has developed since the formation of the Democrats in the late 1970s, despite complaints from some parliamentarians that it is preventing governments from governing. Mechanisms which slow down decision-making, enforce discussion and attempt to build consensus, such as the use of bipartisan committees in the development of legislation, are far more in tune with contemporary practices than those which allow majorities free rein. Commentators on parliamentary reform regularly discuss the need to enhance parliament’s deliberative practices by creating more spaces in which it can operate free from executive dominance,<sup>41</sup> and there are currently attempts being made to reform the Victorian upper house to make it more like the Senate.

To conclude: what has been described as ‘the parliamentarisation’ of associational life, which lasted from the late Eighteenth Century to the middle of the Twentieth, is now on the wane, and parliaments, the product of an earlier civilisational wave, are left exposed to the criticism of citizens who now do their day to day and community politics in quite different ways. Where once parliament led the way, establishing procedures and protocols which became the model for other assemblies, parliament is now being left behind, its rigid adversarial procedures deployed by our rigidly disciplined parties no longer according with the community’s experience of the processes necessary for good decision making.



**Question** — I’d suggest that the Speaker of a parliament probably has a more difficult job maintaining order and civility than your average secretary of a local stamp club. The manuals that you talked about seem to be saying that the aim is adversarialism, tempered by civility and mutual respect. And possibly what we have in parliament, is adversarialism *not* tempered by civility and mutual respect. Is that a relevant nuance in the argument, rather than just saying adversarialism itself is the problem? And I think there is a democratic deficit. The work meeting model is the model for the non-parliamentary association of life. I understand that we can’t go back to anachronisms, but if you look at those sorts of massive organisations in civil society like unions, etc. which developed their own procedures using all these manuals back in the 1910s or 1920s, they were trying to push that into the arena that it gets discussed at. Whereas nowadays we have the *Bowling Alone* phenomenon, where people aren’t joining these

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<sup>40</sup> ‘Renewing Democracy’, speech to the Sydney Institute, 17 August 2000.

<sup>41</sup> See for example, John Uhr, *Deliberative Democracy in Australia: the Changing Place of Parliament*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1998, chapter 9; John Uhr and John Wanna, ‘The future roles of parliament’ in Michael Keating, John Wanna and Patrick Weller (eds), *Institutions on the Edge? Capacity for Governance*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000.

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organisations and so don't have the experience of them. Do you have any ideas on how to reinvigorate or address this democratic deficit without being anachronistic?

**Judith Brett** — Your first point about parliament is right. People look at parliament and see an absence of the manners that they think are appropriate in formal procedural meeting places. Your second point is more difficult. I know Eva Cox is doing some work on this, but whether or not Australia's associational life has fallen away to the same extent as that in the United States is hard to know. I don't think there's any hard evidence on that.

I think within the trade union organisations and the Labor Party, these more formal procedures are still learned and maintained and deployed very effectively. But, for example, if you go to your local kindergarten meeting, nobody wants that run in a formal way. Whereas when my parents ran kindergarten meetings, they did run them in a formal way, so that's a big generational shift. Obviously in parliament—and in other big public meetings such as union meetings—there is a requirement, because of the size, for much more formal meetings. But in the past, even the smallest of meetings was run in these very formal ways, whereas now smaller meetings are run quite differently. People don't want to take votes, for example—they want a much more consensual outcome. They see that as more democratic, which is interesting. They see the putting of a majoritarian type vote, procedurally, as somehow stifling democracy, rather than enabling it.

To explain your reference to *Bowling Alone*, it's a book by Robert Putnam.<sup>42</sup> The title refers to tenpin bowling alleys, and is saying that more and more Americans are not joining organisations or sporting clubs in the way they once were. They go to the tenpin bowling alley on their own, rather than in a bunch. He links this not just to a democratic deficit, but to a loss of social capital. People don't know how to organise themselves to get a bunch of friends to go bowling.

I don't have any particularly innovative ideas on how to reinvigorate community life. I'm not so sure that our community life is in the same state as America's. I'm awaiting Eva Cox's research on that.

**Question** — I'm glad you mentioned Rostrum. I'm an ex-president of Rostrum in the ACT. We have the problem of steering people through meeting procedures. We've been very much aware over the years of this shift from very formal meetings to informal meetings. We find that the informal type of meetings, where you don't adhere strictly to the rules of debate and so on, are fine for meetings of say seven to twelve people. But once the meeting starts getting bigger than that, then we find that the chairman has to take some sort of control. So you have a dilemma of people wanting to be more informal, and yet sometimes the situation won't allow it. I belong to some associations where 60 to 70 people turn up to meetings. If you don't have some sort of control it becomes mayhem. The other thing is, smaller meetings still depend on the goodwill of the people attending. At one stage, I was responsible for

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000.

administering grants to organisations in the ACT, and I wanted to go to some meetings, incidentally of kindergarten groups, where you had small groups of up to twelve, and I was told by one president of such an association: 'I wouldn't come if I were you, it's very bloody. The fur and the feathers fly everywhere.' Because there was no control and they tried to do things informally and speak in group discussions, the antagonism left the meeting in absolute mayhem. We have problems with this change in direction getting away from very formal meetings. It does really rely on the goodwill of the people in the meeting.

**Judith Brett** — I'd agree with that. In developing the argument, you need to have a closer look at the social-movement type meetings of the 1970s, where you had similar problems. Organisations like the women's movement, or environmental groups, were wanting to mark a break with this formal institutional-bound and rule-bound past, and attempting to do politics without procedures. I think this was exactly the same sort of thing. It took a huge amount of time, it wasn't particularly effective and it led to a lot of aggression and anger and disappointment. That's my hunch on it, though I haven't seen anybody write about it. I'm just remembering these ineffectual meetings. It's the same problem—and after a while they realise that there was a utopianism in much of the ideals of participatory democracy, of everybody having a voice. Because everybody's voice is saying something different and you have chaos. So they then moved back to some more formal procedural practices.

**Question** — I was interested in the comments you made about the Senate, and developments there since the late 1970s, where you have more debate and more consensus-seeking, simply by the composition. You raised the possibility of making more use in parliament of inter-party or multi-party committees to develop legislation. It seems common sense that you would possibly get better policy if you use that approach rather than a purely adversarial one, which is what the public sees played out spectacularly in the House of Representatives at question time and in other debates. I know in the House also, behind the scenes, a lot of valuable committee work takes place, but that doesn't get publicised. Do you have any ideas on how you could have the Senate kind of approach replicated in the House of Representatives? Associated with this, something very much on our minds at the moment is election campaigning, and if you were to get more deliberative proceedings in the houses of parliament, what would the implications then be for parties campaigning at election time? How might they differentiate themselves? It's a real dilemma because our democratic parliamentary system does depend on parties for a certain degree of stability and manageability.

**Judith Brett** — I don't have any solutions. I'm only trying to set out an explanation for this widespread dissatisfaction with our parliamentary adversarial forums, which I don't think was so prevalent previously. I think people previously saw this as quite a good way of resolving things. Ian Marsh has done some work on what is happening with the parties. He says that, if you look at the policy-making process, instead of all of the interest groups in society being picked up by the parties and then carried into the policy-making process through the parties, there is now an opening up, where there is a lot more consultation between government and community organisations and peak groups.

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I think it's a big problem, the way we're locked in to the two parties, and the way there's a sort of reflex adversarialism, such that a new party gets in and they undo the things that the past party had done, some of which were quite good and some of which weren't so good. Now they probably don't undo as much as we think, because we tend to see the things that are undone more than we see the things that are continuous. I think the relationship between the Fraser government and the Whitlam government was very telling in this. I remember at the time being a supporter of the Whitlam government, thinking that all Fraser was doing was dismantling. I can now see with historical hindsight that, yes, he dismantled a few things, like Medibank, but there was also a great deal of continuity which was not so obvious at the time. There were changes in rhetoric and changes in emphasis, but in terms of indigenous policy, multiculturalism, and so on, much of that agenda stayed and really flourished under Fraser. So I think often things appear to be more adversarial at the time, than they appear later, from a greater historical perspective.

**Question** — It seems we've been getting away from networking in communities and the neighbourhood, and this seems to have been replaced by networking in the work places. Perhaps that's another way in which the parliament has got away from what is happening in the communities. I had a good look at the composition of the parliament in 1996, and it was clear that there was a very low representation of some of the functional groups out there, and yet that's where the networking is happening. There were a lot of lawyers, and there were quite a lot of people from companies, but there weren't very many retailers. There weren't very many people from technological industries. So the parliament has moved away from being representative as well, it seems. We should be thinking, maybe, about how we deal with that functional aspect. You've made it pretty clear that the rigidities that have crept in have stopped the parliament adapting the way the community has.

**Judith Brett** — There are no manual workers left in parliament, either. If you look at the occupational representations of parliament historically, the parliament now has an occupational spread that's almost the same as the parliament in 1901, before the Labor Party and the Country Party brought different sorts of people into the parliament. So probably the most representative parliaments, occupationally, were the ones of the 1950s. Whereas we've now gone right back, partly because of the decline of the Country Party as well, which was also bringing in people with quite different backgrounds. Now about 50 percent of the parliament is professional, which is about the same as the 1901 parliament.

**Question** — I was interested in your comments about the decline of oratory, particularly when you were quoting Carmen Laurence. My experience has been in bringing students to the two houses, and I think they were actually more shocked by the Senate being empty while Bob Brown made a speech, to virtually an empty chamber. They were much more shocked by that than by the rough and tumble of question time in the House of Representatives, which is at least entertaining. I wonder whether or not we shouldn't be very radical about the whole oratory issue, and perhaps even consider setting up a smaller room than this. Perhaps a room a quarter the size of this, where the public can come and listen to Bob Brown, or whoever is making their speech to parliament, so it can be kept on the record in a media way, instead of the pretence that these big chambers are an audience. When we went to the

Senate, there were about 20 people in the public gallery listening to this speech. There were very few senators. It looked to me as if the process was about the people in the public gallery, not about the rest of the Senate. And that isn't being recognised in the way we actually design the buildings or talk about parliament any more.

**Harry Evans** — The arrival of very large chambers coincided with the arrival of television cameras, and the two things don't go well together. You'll probably find that a large number of people around the building heard Bob Brown's speech, they saw it on the screen and had the sound going.

**Judith Brett** — That's interesting, but I'd like the parliamentary speeches to continue, because they're a great source for political historians. It's a very good way of getting at general common sense. Backbenchers, particularly, are often representative of certain common sense understanding and thinking about issues.

**Harry Evans** — There are some places that will not allow television cameras on that basis—that it empties the chamber. And it did here.

**Question** — I want to comment on networking. A previous questioner mentioned two forms of networking. But no one has mentioned networking on the Internet. Why not do what the lecturer has suggested and have a small room and relay it on the net?

**Harry Evans** — There is great debate about this also, in particular about how it depersonalises the whole thing.

**Judith Brett** — I think the use of the net is so new, that we do not yet really understand what it means for organisational behaviour, which is really what I'm interested in here. Clearly there is a bit of work being done on what it means for people's social lives—people meeting people on the net and forming relationships, and that sort of thing. And to a small extent social movements are making great use of it as it suits the horizontal networking political organisation which has been involved with things like the S11 protest and that sort of thing. Whether you could use it for deliberative proceedings, well, we'll have to see.

**Harry Evans** — There is already a large literature of people saying that the Internet will destroy deliberation, that it's a destructive thing for deliberation.

**Question** — The first mass media conducted election was, I think, Eisenhower in 1953 in America, which was run by a marketing company. From then on, most elections were run by marketing companies. Do you have any comments on the use of mass media in the political process, and the decline of people's confidence in politicians and political parties because of it?

**Judith Brett** — It's a big question. It's clear that mass media leads to the decline of the political meeting of the sort held pre-war where Bob Menzies would go to the Malvern Town Hall or whatever, but also the decline of the local politician's role in disseminating party policy through the local meetings. The other line of argument would be: 'Does the mass media give you much more detailed knowledge of individuals?' I think that the use of the political interview in elections means that

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people are probably more knowledgeable about their politicians than they ever were, because they can see them close up, making decisions, and reacting under pressure. In the past if you were an ordinary not-very-interested person, you were lucky if you ever sighted your prime minister or minister. It has meant, of course, that there's now a focus on the leadership as against backbenchers. People in the past may have known their local member more. So it seems to me that it's quite a complex issue.

Regarding the decline of the mass media in meetings and associational membership—I think that Putnam is exploring the idea that it was the advent of television that marked the beginning of the decline of people going to meetings. They stay home where it's warm, rather than going out to some draughty hall.

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