

TRENDS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PARTY SYSTEM

Associate Professor Paul Reynolds

Introduction

Political parties have for so long been an integral part of modern liberal democracies that one is apt to take them, if not for granted, then as a given in the landscape of politics. The party system in Australia, in embryonic form, predates Federation, although its rapid rise after 1901 is both a cause and a consequence of the federal process. It is one of the supreme ironies of federation in Australia that the Constitution was written by men who constituted the final generation of non-party politicians. In other words, the late 1890s was the last time possible for the Constitution to have been written *sans* parties. That having been said, the document proved to have been so flexibly drafted that lack of formal and constitutional recognition neither inhibited the rise by the parties to dominate the polity, nor did its operations and application by the High Court prevent their on going operations, much less threaten their legitimacy as cognate players in the political process.

The Formation and Role of Political Parties

The number and reach of political parties in Australia over the past 120 years has been remarkable. We tend to think of the three permanent “Majors” – ALP, Liberal and Nationals – plus a couple of add on “Minors” as the sum total as these represent the permanent players. However, at the state and local levels parties have a rich history of formation, operation, decline and fall, or, maybe, morphing into another stage of political evolution. Two observations then seem warranted.

First, parties are formed when a section of society feels that *it has a claim on the political and decision making processes of the state which is not being addressed by current persons or organisations*. The “Majors” of course represent this proposition as text book cases, especially the ALP mobilising working class consciousness (Rawson, 1969) and the Nationals giving political expression to “conytrymindedness” (Aitkin, 1977, 1982). On the other hand the Liberals/Nationalists/UAP were parliamentary organised parties without any durable mass base. While the latter was incorporated by Robert Menzies in 1944, the modern day Liberal party bares many of the hallmarks of an organisation constructed from the top down. Nevertheless, in class terms, it makes sense to view the Liberals as a case of middle class mobilisation, or at least the middle class as it was comprised in the first half of the Twentieth century.

Second, in the 1960s, when I was an undergraduate, and the political science discipline was being established in this part of the world, we were taught that the difference between political parties and pressure groups was that the latter, whether instrumental or promotional, did not seek office, preselect

candidates or become involved in the electoral processes or, if they did, only as a tactic to further their aims. As well they were sectoral with limited policy horizons. The former, however, sought office, had a broad whole-of-Government approach to policy and were in the business of holding and wielding power rather than merely influencing its disposition in a limited direction.

From the perspective of 40 years or so such a taxonomy seems overly rigid, seeking hard and fast boundaries where none truly exist. The line between the two types of organisations has become extremely blurred, especially in respect to minor parties. These latter have no realistic expectations of gaining power, seldom have a “big picture” policy agenda and, even if they do, this is not what they are recognised for. Should they be successful in gaining Upper House representation, they are apt to behave as pressure groups depending on who holds power in these Chambers. Conversely, major, permanent and institutionalised lobby groups certainly will interact with the governmental processes in the guise of, as modern parlance has it, “stakeholders” but this, while vital, will be only one set of their multitude of agendas and activities. The interplay of such forces, moreover, is maximised in a city such as Canberra, a dedicated federal capital whose chief (sole?) task is national governance.

Functions Performed by the Party System

The most important explanation for the durability of the parties is that, simultaneously, they perform a variety of functions, doing so economically, skilfully and purposefully. For convenience I have listed six, although not in any order of importance.

- (1) Policy formation and articulation;
- (2) Recruitment of political activists;
- (3) Training for leadership through internal party mechanisms and parliamentary service;
- (4) Operating as electoral machines;
- (5) Providing for, and facilitating, the circulation of political elites via the transfer of power;
- (6) Demarcating differing ideological positions within the polity.

If this were an undergraduate lecture I would now discuss each point in some detail to give a sense of the complexity of the process. However, in this instance I want to observe that each of these roles has, over time, experienced profound change and metamorphosis. For example, parties do not now rely only on their internal processes to devise and propound policy, rather they draw policy inputs from an array of sources and process these according to the party's practises and lore. Recruitment of activists has become a specialised activity as, after the 1960s the old mass memberships gave way to cadres, many recruited as university students and drawn from the sandpit of university union politics. Leaders are no longer folk heroes like John Curtin or patricians like Robert Menzies but are apt to be made and unmade by opinion poll results and feedback from news media commentaries, including the incessant and mindless clamour of talk back radio and its “shock

jocks". As Emeritus Professor Joan Rydon was wont to observe, every year, somewhere in Australia, people are voting. This means that the parties are constantly on "election alert" with all that this implies in funding, planning and resources. The leaders of the "Majors" never survive election defeat, while even victory may not necessarily result in continuation in office (e.g. Cases as disparate as Thatcher, Hawke and Bjelke-Petersen). The circulation of elites is a constant, either through election results or, more rarely, on the floor of the House. That said, even the most casual perusal of the history of state and federal elections show that they mostly serve to confirm Governments in office and only occasionally (federally four times since 1969) change Governments.

Not only then is the party system durable, it is so because it is sustained by even more durable patterns of partisanship. The role of ideology in the Australian party system has always been contentious, but one can discern a sub stratum of ideas (to put it no stronger) in the formation of both Labor and the Liberals. While it may be true that pragmatism will always win out, the corollary question must be, "Pragmatism for what?", an indication that ideology can rescue the party system from sterile short term activity.

Whither the Party System?

In light of the durability of the party system over the past century and more, it seems altogether unreasonable to question its future as a *system* if only because its existence and continuity is testimony to its ability to adapt to social and economic change which has, in turn, shifted the balance of political forces within the parameters of the "Majors" and their politics. This notwithstanding it is useful to delve below the surface of apparent functionality in the hope of discerning trends which may well exert significant influence on future directions within the overall system.

First, it is as well to recall that the basis for the Australian party system is the state branch. Indeed it was not until the 1960s that the "Majors" established federal secretariats and not until the 1970s that the state branches surrendered to their federal counterparts the running of national election campaigns. Despite these developments the state branches enjoy considerable autonomy and power over their own affairs. They preselect and deselect candidates; they train generations of politicians at federal, state and local government levels; they operate as significant fundraisers, especially if in Government; they send delegates to national conferences and executives and manifest themselves as their party's sinews of war.

While, in theory, the Liberal federal executive can intervene in the affairs of a state branch, this is comparatively recent development and has never occurred. I am not aware of any such power in the National Party and, even in the case of Labor where this power does exist, it was exercised three times between 1970 and 1981 and never thereafter. The occasions when the ALP federal executive did so act depended crucially on the factional balance then obtaining on the executive.

Further to this general point, the state of the parties federally, and hence the party system, depends on how the parties are travelling at the sub-national level. The current situation where all states and territories are controlled by the ALP, which has been out of power federally since 1996, is almost unprecedented. (There was a brief period in the late 1960s when Labor was out of power in all jurisdictions). This then gives rise to two further considerations. The first is that, as federations go, Australia is not all that pluralistic, certainly insofar as race, language, religion and regional diversities are concerned. However, precisely because of this it can be argued that our interstate differences are more subtle and nuanced with each party branch taking on its own characteristics and folkways appropriate to that state's political culture. While it would require a thorough in depth investigation and research to explore the detailed working out of these processes, it means, at the very least, that a good deal of state/territory diversity lurks under the generic party labels.

The second consideration is that the state branches hold the key to their party's on going credibility and durability. To take the case of the Nationals, in their first and founding state, WA, they no longer exist, at least for federal purposes. Notwithstanding their ambitious name they exist, as a force at all, only because they have a political presence in NSW, Queensland and, to a much lesser extent, in Victoria. A further case concerns the Liberals in Queensland. They ceased to be a credible force in state politics in 1983 (save for a brief and impermanent revival, 1995-98). They have only sustained themselves as the federal Liberal's northern post box because, in South East Queensland one voter in five chooses to vote Labor (i.e. Beattie) at state level and Liberal federally. (Cheverton, n.d., 2005). Should this pattern not survive 2007, the Liberals in Queensland, at both levels, will be in grave danger of decline into total irrelevancy.

My second wider point concerns the circulation of leaders and elites. While it is self-evidently true that Australia is a stable democracy and that legitimacy of Governments or leaders is not an issue (1975 being the inevitable exception), it is somewhat sobering to recall that, of federal leaders and Prime Ministers, since 1945, only Menzies retired at his own time and of his own choice. All others were defeated electorally or cut down in their party room, or both. This observation then leads to a further consideration on leadership itself. The experience of the federal Liberals with the leadership issue from 1983 to 1996, and that of the ALP since 1996 shows how hard it can be for parties out of office to bring their leadership cycle into conjunction with public expectations when these latter are established by the Government of the day by deploying its considerable resources. This then is all the more problematical because of the evolution of the Prime Minister's position into a presidential style of office with all the accompanying concentration of power, effort, resources and attention. But the paradox remains, while the trappings of office bespeak permanency, the position of any incumbent is, at best, transitory. With no hereditary monarch as head of government (rather than head of state), and without a president elected at large, limited to a number of specific terms, the bestowal and withdrawal of leadership will remain with the

parliamentary parties where, in the absence of a separation of powers between the executive and legislature, it will ever reside.

My third and final point concerns the interplay between the major and minor parties. There were no minor parties when, in 1948, proportional representation (PR) was introduced for Senate elections. However, with the advent of the Democratic Labor Party in 1955, two electoral trends were established. The first was that a minor party with a disciplined support base could exert a totally disproportionate influence on electoral outcomes through the direction of its preferences. In the DLP's case it actually saved Coalition Governments in 1961 and 1969. The second was that PR created an opportunity for parliamentary representation via the Senate and this, in turn, meant the chance to hold the balance of power. Both trends survived the demise of the DLP in 1974, the difference being that there have been several claimants for the balance of power in more recent times including one individual in former Senator Harradine. While the current minor parties are not as bloody minded over preferences as was the DLP, the major parties have to build their minor counterparts into their electoral tactics in ways unknown in a first-past-the-post system. The widespread negative reaction, expressed in 2004 when then Coalition took control of the Senate suggested that, over the previous quarter of a century it had become a popular belief that Government *should not* control the Senate. It will be interesting to see if and how far, such sentiment translates this election year.

Conclusion

The party system in Australia has developed its own dynamic, has socialised successive generations into support for its protagonists and has, for many, become co-terminus with the whole political system. The party system itself has profited from two institutional changes, namely compulsory voting which frees the parties from the tedium and expense of having to "get out the vote" and, for the public, has become a civic virtue, while the other development, public funding, guarantees all who qualify a financial base, while giving the "Minors" more room to operate than they could otherwise expect.

The warning then, insofar as there is one, is that the federal parties are only as strong as their state bases. The first half of the last century was characterised by instability in both the Labor Party and urban non-Labor. The ALP split three times between 1916 and 1955, while the latter had to be re-invented four times between 1910 and 1944. By contrast the second half of the Twentieth century was marked by major party stability and minor party amoeba like formation and reformation. One distinctiveness that the Australian party system has compared to its NZ, UK and Canadian counterparts is the formation and survival of the Nationals. While the "Majors" can be expected to go through their electoral cycles as mirror images of each other, an indication of the on going health of the party system can be discerned from the size, vitality and success of the "Minors" which, collectively, measure the contentment, or otherwise, of the electorate with the party system.

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