

Corruption of the Polis



"no man (sic) can prosper unless his (sic) polis prospers"

THE OLD ADAGE: A VOTE FOR THE MINOR PARTIES IS A WASTED VOTE, HAS NO CREDENCE FOR THE AUSTRALIAN ELECTORATE ANYMORE. In the 2004 election it just may be that Independents will consolidate and improve their position in the Federal Parliament. The most striking characteristic of the current election campaign is that independent candidates and alternative parties are being seen as a real threat to the major parties in many different areas. For the past twenty years the primary vote of the major parties has been diminishing, the only question is: how far will support for the major parties fall?

In the context of an election in which International terrorism is a major factor in the electorate's mind it is remarkable that the vote for independents and minor parties is holding up. On current trends, not only is the Senate a likely place for minor candidates to hold the balance of power, it may be that, in the not to distant future, Independents, three of whom were elected in the last Parliament, could hold the balance of power in the House of Representatives.

Independents are increasingly seen as good parliamentary representatives. Their election is not just a wake up call to the major political parties. The electorate has largely lost hope that the major parties will represent them in an open and transparent way and we can expect a further diminution in the primary votes of the major parties in Australia over the next decade.

It is time that electors realised that the problem is not the candidates we chose to represent us, the real problem, is the institution of representation and the internal processes of political parties themselves. In other words, it is the corruption of the polis, not the individual politicians themselves that is the problem that must be changed.

Two books - the amazingly blinkered Labor Essays of 2004 *The Vocal Citizen* and Margo Kingston's *Not Happy John* - are interesting artefacts of the state of Australian politics.

The extraordinary aspect of this year's Labor Essays is that the book is ostensibly about deepening democracy and yet there is not one single essay about the out-moded, faction riven, bureaucratic and anti-democratic Australian Labor Party. The only realisation that "perhaps political parties are finished - time has moved on and political party managers are the modern equivalents of slide rule manufacturers" - comes from a UK writer reflecting on the woes of the British Labor Party. That the British Labor Party is light years ahead of its Australian counterpart in terms of thinking, ideas and party democ-

racy is lost on the Australian contributors. It seems that "the vocal citizen" must overlook the fact that the movement in whose name the essays are written is increasingly driven by professional politicians, public relations firms and hired hands. We are all to be active citizens except, it seems, when it comes to contemplating or questioning the way the Labor Party does business. This is typical of the mind set of the modern labour movement. The two worlds of Labor seem never to collide, one of ideological purity and merit, and another of absolute grubbiness and pragmatism. While this remains the case, Labor is no alternative for any thinking person.

Margo Kingston is one of the most interesting journalist activists in the country because she refuses to accept any party line. Her Web Diary is the closest thing in Australia to the sort of internet political activism that got Howard Dean so close to the White House. Kingston's book on Pauline Hansen *Off the Rails* was probably the closest reading of the grass roots dynamics of One Nation. Behind the ignorance and racism of Hansen, Kingston found a legitimate protest and concern about established politics, which, as a Canberra Chief of Staff for a major daily, Kingston had seen first hand. Kingston tells us in her latest volume, *Not Happy, John*, that she voted against Paul Keating in 1996 and the spotlight now turns to Howard's Liberals. Howard, for Kingston and most of her contributors, is far worse than anything she had concerns about in 1996.

Kingston's question is: What can be done? One of the most confronting aspects of the book is Kingston's advice to cast a primary vote for a minor party that way ensuring more public electoral money will flow to alternative voices in the parliament. This will have resonance with many Australians.

Kingston's own chapter exposing the hypocrisy of "The Australians for Honest Politicians" assault on Pauline Hansen is good reporting without fear or favour regardless of what we think about Hansen or Tony

Abbott. It creates a strong focus on the impartiality and lack of public accountability of the Australian Electoral Commission.

However, it is disappointing that Mark Latham's Labor Party is often seen as a saviour rather than as part of the problem. At the end of her chapter criticising Tony Abbot, Kingston concludes: "Over to you Mark Latham".

Labor will not solve the sort of problems identified by the *Not Happy John* campaign. The Labor campaign itself is testimony to the problem. Indeed, it is a concern that there are threads of thinking in the Latham Labor campaign and one of the central premises of Hansenism and One Nation and that is that people on welfare should be treated less favourably than other citizens.

In a forthcoming edition of *Australian Prospect* we will devote much thinking to a wholesale remaking of the welfare state and the task of creating an enterprise state. But no politician has the right to trash welfare recipients for the sake of winning an election.

The so-called "downwards envy" theory of Keating's 1996 loss is driving Labor's electoral strategy. The idea was that Keating and the Accord gave too many benefits to the poor and not enough to the middle class creating a "downwards envy" effect. Howard's "battlers", and in indeed Pauline Hansen's One Nation, were seen to be a spontaneous political reaction against this phenomenon. So now what is the Labor Party strategy? Reward middle income families and penalise low income, welfare supported families. In other words, Mark Latham will have far more tax losers in his own electorate than perhaps any other electorate in Australia. This is not because there is some new welfare to work strategy, it is simply an electoral calculation! How terrible that the Labor Party has fallen to such a low ebb.

This edition of *Australian Prospect* is not about the current Australian election. It was devised over twelve months ago in the wake of the Hawke-Wran Inquiry into the Austral-

ian Labor Party. Hawke and Wran delivered a desperately disappointing review for those who believe in Labor as the voice for the poor and disenfranchised, and even more so, for those who remember Labor's history as a great democratic vanguard for Australian politics. It probably cost Simon Crean his job and provided some tokenistic changes but there was clearly much more to be done.

That this edition not only comes out in the middle of an Australian election campaign but has something valuable to contribute, given the sway of attacks against one side of politics is a fortuitous development. It is an important supplement for the many Australians who are concerned about the state of the Australian polis.

The jig saw puzzle of articles came together slowly. Norman Thompson and Lee Rhiannon's cogent research into corporate donations to political parties was a major missing piece. We were lucky to get the piece, coming as it has, from five years of long, independent, painstaking inquiry. The article provides information never before published and provides a level of detail never before made public. This is enough to make the essay a great one. But there is so much more to the piece than that. Indirectly, it also shows why parties no longer need members. Politics Inc - the bureaucracies and administrations of the major parties - receive the bulk of their parties' financial support from two sources: corporate donations and public electoral funding. The major parties don't really need members any more. With their streams of cash they can buy in advisors, public relations teams and even professional letter boxing professionals. Members, on the other hand, are costly, painful to have to deal with, uncontrollable and, worst of all, unpredictable.

Botsman's long commentary on the Australian Labor Party argues that, in this context of professionalisation and corporate financing, to allow ordinary members a more engaged and participative role in party conferences, policy and choice of leaders would

be completely against the interests of the party officers and insiders who now control Labor. They will not yield easily. The only hope for the future lies with the ordinary Labor member pushing for greater party democracy. There has to be a question mark over whether labor members will undertake this difficult task, many have already moved to other parties. However, it is important to support those, such as Lindsay Tanner and Carmen Lawrence, who have stood up for a more open Labor democracy.

For all their problems, the Australian Democrats have the most open and democratic party in the country, and probably one of the most open in the world. We invited Andrew Bartlett to write about the way in which his party elects its leaders, develops its policy and generally consults with ordinary members. Would you realise what a breath of fresh air, the Democrats party process is, if you read the mainstream media accounts of the flaws of the Democrats? As Bartlett says: when people are allowed to vote in the Parliament according to their conscience and not the party line, the media just don't get it!

Greg Barnes shows us the consequences of a party with no diversity of ideology anymore. The neo-conservative positions of John Howard and other Ministers are worrying in themselves, that there is no ability to question them from within the Liberal Party is of even more concern. Barnes piece, and his book, *What is Wrong with the Liberal Party*, supplements the work of Kingston and others.

Finally, Nic Frances, courageous as ever, gives us an indication of what politics should be all about, ensuring that everyone who wants to participate in Australia's economy and society should be given the best chance of doing so. Why is it, Frances asks, that we cannot just put our heads together to create and fund teachers aides positions for unemployed fathers, mothers and aspiring teachers? The answer sadly also relates to the conundrum and corruption of the polis, these questions just do not figure in the narrow

freeway of ideas that drives Politics Inc. Creating jobs was something that governments did in the 1930s and 1970s. We don't do that anymore. *Let us see what we can do to change their minds!*