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How politicians can sell unpopular reforms

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The origin of political gridlock lies in profound changes in Australian society. **Photo: Andrew Meares**

Ian Marsh

Tony Abbott's fall from grace has been precipitous. But it is not unprecedented. Its causes are much more fundamental than poor political judgment. How so?

Take the precedents. The Resource Super Profits Tax was released in May 2010, and was followed by a public opinion firestorm which unseated Kevin Rudd. WorkChoices led to the downfall of John Howard's government. Refugees and climate change destroyed Julia Gillard. Earlier, John Hewson was undone by Fightback and sponsorship of indigenous reconciliation and a republic contributed much to Paul Keating's defeat. In all cases, an unprepared public opinion delivered a populist verdict.

As opposition leader, Tony Abbott stoked these populist fires. But to stop the discussion there is to focus only on the surface theatre of politics.

The frequency of these episodes points to a more fundamental problem. It involves a slow-burn crisis of legitimacy. This will afflict any government trying make bold reform. At its heart is a disconnect between the formal political system and the public.

There is no infrastructure through which more complex political narratives can be aired or debated. Political leaders have almost no capacity to build a supportive public opinion for significant policy change.

There is only one recent exception: John Howard's sponsorship of the GST. He won the ensuing election but lost the popular vote. It was a dangerously close call.

The origin of this gridlock lies in profound changes in Australian society. A key decade was the 1970s. Before then two major parties, backed by large and powerful party organisations, attracted the rusted-on loyalty of the majority of Australian voters. Party brands were potent in cueing broader public opinion.

Hollowed-out shells

Now these party organisations are hollowed-out shells. They appear powerful only because they dominate the formal structure of the political system.

The social movements of the 1970s were the cause of this collapse. The women's, gay, environment, animal rights, consumer, indigenous and ethnic movements all emerged at this time. They created new agendas and agitated for their take-up by the formal political system. Class identity, the former sheet anchor of political engagement, was fractured.

By the 1970s, the parties were relegated to a brokerage role for the bigger social movements. Another example of agenda-setting happened after 1983. The big parties broadly adopted the same economic rationalist program. Bipartisanship was the unacknowledged political condition for these radical changes. These were implemented in the short period between 1983 and 1993.

After 1993 the crisis receded, and normal politics resumed. But differences between the parties had narrowed. So how were they to distinguish themselves? Opportunism and manufactured difference were the new currencies of debate. This was reinforced by the decline of the party organisations, leaving media as the conduit between political leaders and their public. Tony Abbott was a master practitioner of these dark arts. There is thus poetic justice in his present predicament.

Big policy change is demanding. It requires a solid base in public opinion, or bipartisan agreement. In the early 1980s, an acknowledged crisis led to bipartisanship. But short of extremity, the incentives in our system undercut that.

There is a symmetry between Kevin Rudd's promotion of the RSPT and the Abbott/Hockey sponsorship of the commission of audit/age of entitlements budget. In both cases an unprepared public opinion ignited like a firestorm. In both cases governments failed to release the preceding technical reports. Why? Because they feared the attack on details which their opponents might launch.

In both cases, the primary channel for the leaders was the media. There was no systemic ability to develop a public conversation except short-term sound bites.

What is to be done? Party reform is clearly necessary. But in the formation of public opinion, no amount of reform will restore the major parties to their former dominant role. The community is now too diverse and too educated to be represented by two monoliths.

End of the age of ideology

Think of climate change, or the Gonski report, or tax change or gay marriage. There is no longer any overarching ideology which would divide public views consistently on any of these issues. Action requires a base in public opinion. In each case, the coalitions that might underpin this will be different. Each issue needs to be aired on its own terms.

We need a formal political structure that fits our pluralised society. The need is create a public conversation before the executive decides what to do. But the system lacks any infrastructure to do this. Until this gap is closed it is hard to see how the present impasse can be resolved.

How might this be achieved? The late Liberal senator David Hamer suggested converting the Senate to a committee house with ministers no longer appointed from that chamber. The Australian Senate would be more like its American progenitor. At present this seems the most likely path for the needed reform.

There will be no remedy to this discontent until this structural challenge is met. A long-suffering public will express its disaffection and alienation more vigorously than now. The Palmer United Party and the Independents are perhaps the tip of an iceberg. Then the major party leaderships may recognise the need for structural transformation.

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