

# Australian politics

## A political class takes charge

By Geoff Gallop

Times like these make it hard for anyone to maintain their faith in the liberating power of politics. Current events remind us that politics creates space for idealists who seek the greatest good for the greatest number as well as fundamentalists, fixers and cynical populists.

Fundamentalists believe there is only one truth, an attitude which creates a “whatever it takes” attitude to power. They are dedicated and driven.

Populists believe public opinion is always right which creates a need to follow opinion and attempt to shape it through means fair or foul. They prefer listening to focus groups rather than reading research papers on the economics of climate change or anything which relies on assembling evidence and persuasion.

For fixers vested interests are everything, public interest is an annoying inconvenience. For them concealment is a necessity.

For fundamentalists there is only one idea, for populists only one public, for fixers only one phalanx of interests. Much of politics today is the process by which fundamentalists, populists and fixers have come together to form a political class over and above the social movements and political parties that gave them sustenance. They have not been able to obliterate accountability to the public interest yet, in respect of how to avoid or undermine it, they are the experts.

A number of “deals” are involved. The fixers give support to fundamentalists and vice versa. It goes like this - a zero tolerance approach is granted to social

issues like same-sex marriage and illicit drugs, plenty of flexibility on gambling and alcohol. For their collusion, populists are gifted law and order but held back from popular reforms deemed out of bounds, like euthanasia. The fixers bring it all together. The purveyors of so-called value-based politics and opinion management are just as complicit.

Good policy is a good fix at the top held together by compromises and a sharing of resources. Money most notably but not only money. Such a system will provide opportunities the serving of personal as well as narrow ideological interests. Pollsters need money for research and marketing; fundamentalists need it for campaigns within parties and within the wider community. Should it really matter, they ask, if a compromise or two, here or there, is agreed for him or her so that the greater battles can be fought more effectively?

What has made it possible for this “system” to emerge has been the re-emergence of fundamentalism within politics and religion, the increased sophistication of political research and marketing, and the creation of an alternative advisory structure at the heart of government. The structure is the alternative to the public service and the membership of political parties. What was new about the arrival of these people as a critical mass is that what began as a means to assist the achieving of ancient goals became ends-in-themselves.

Policy advisers, pollsters, media manipulators, ministerial staffers became corporate entities, they institutionalised as pressure groups for their own right

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to advocate and consultancies to undertake the advocacy. They possessed their own language, an insiders' jargon about knowing and contacts, an expression of power different from that of the discourses within the political parties within which they operated and have come to control.

In both of our major parties in Australia today - Liberal and Labor - we see this constellation of forces. Both have their right wing religious fundamentalists. Both have placed more emphasis on political research rather than policy development. Both have witnessed a shift in power from party members to party apparatchiks - and been helpless in arresting the transfer of power.

Similarities between the parties are overwhelming, even if traditions and interests ensure differences on some issues. So we are seeing the Liberals proposing and Labor opposing, the so-called debt and deficit tax. And without blinking. The stance by each party is contrary to what they say they believe. Chalk this role-reversal down to another victory for the fixers on both sides.

None of this happens without consequences. Both of the major parties are struggling to contain the contradictions that these unholy alliances have created. Moderate Liberals are being outflanked by assertive populists from the Right. Social democrats within Labor are losing territory on the Left to utopian socialists outside the ALP.

Hollowing out the centre of Australian politics has made it even harder for principled liberals and social democrats within their respective parties. No longer can they rely on the political base they once enjoyed. The alliance of fundamentalists, populists and fixers embedded within their ranks will not be easy to defeat. Its roots are deep - and not just within the parties but also within civil society itself.

The loser is the public interest, an idea that urges us to think beyond our own interests to a broader interest that encompasses minorities as well as the majority, the weak as well as the strong, communities and the environment, the economy and its effects on all, the future as well as the present. Public interest is about the welfare and well being of individuals and their communities, public interest seeks to find out what works and what doesn't work. The broad aim is social progress. Just as importantly, public interest is about processes as well as outcomes. It is a doctrine that requires public officials to avoid conflicts of interest and to follow due process in developing and implementing policy.

This second part public interest is crucial that it is a legal obligation for elected and non elected officials. It puts a spotlight on the way we do things. Those who have created the fixes in politics today resent the scrutiny and the accountability. That is why they hold in contempt reformers in their midst who have created accountability agencies like the Independent Commission Against Corruption.

For the fundamentalists, populists and fixers to come together requires a regime of secrecy that covers up their system of favours. Much of what they do is in bad faith. It cannot be transparent. It is indefensible. Quite often, as well, it is illegal.

A limited universe is what they occupy. Inevitably limited results are what the political class produces. Results do not represent the greater good. Politics needs purpose beyond that provided by the ideas and interests of the political class that dominates our governance. The political class has usurped the role traditionally undertaken by the major parties of Left and Right. The question remains: given their current structures can either party break the cycle of decline?

## COMMUNITY PRESELECTIONS

Do they involve a wider Labor base or are they a means of concealing the death of the party below?

On the motion of William Taylor, the Branch has set aside time at the June meeting to discuss this issue. The State Organiser, David Latham, will be present to put the case for. All members should try to attend so as to make clear we care about such questions.

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## Notice of Meeting:


The next meeting of the Branch will be held on  
Monday, 9 June 2013  
at the CWA Hall,  
Elizabeth Street, Moss Vale

The meeting will commence at 8pm

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**Cover photo: 2008 Annual Conference. Lunch time.  
The restaurant opened especially for Neville.**