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Political Party Twilight in Australia

by
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If I go out into the street and ask passersby how they voted in Australia's federal election last October, one person will say something like, "Oh, I voted for the coalition parties now in government, didn't you?" The next person will say something like, "I wouldn't vote for those in government if you paid me. Don't blame me. I voted for the other mob."

In Australia, the governing coalition prior to the election was made up of the Liberal and National parties, led by Liberal Prime Minister John Howard. The primary opposition party is Labor. In the election, those three parties won 86 percent of the votes. The Liberal-National coalition won by a sufficient margin to be returned to government. But if you were to ask me what the coalition parties and their Labor opponents stood for during the election, it would be difficult for me to give you an answer that could clarify their respective political commitments. That is the sad truth. For it is not an exaggeration to say that the policies defended by the Liberal-National coalition are the ones it formulated after taking control of government (and the federal purse) in the Canberra Parliament.

This is because the basic principle underlying Australian politics today is pragmatism. Pragmatism has become prevalent over the last 30 years and is becoming more so all the time. If anyone challenges the commitment to pragmatism, he or she will be dismissed as a grandstanding dogmatist, someone out of touch with political reality. A party's campaign platform, therefore, is no longer something to stand on after election, but rather something from which to jump whenever those in government feel they must try to win support from those who didn't support their platform.

This relatively new style of Australian politics shows up in some terribly uncivil habits. For example, supporters and opponents of the current prime minister note how he makes a habit of turning his back on the opposition leader when the latter is given the floor to speak in parliamentary debates. This shows contempt not only for the opposition leader but also for Parliament and its offices. It is a small indication of something significant. Those in power flaunt their power while making a great deal of fuss about the mandate given them by the electorate in the last election. Yet they gain

their electoral support, in part, by displaying a deep-seated aversion to upholding and debating the underlying principles of their party's policies.

Prior to the last election, there was, for a while, a widely held expectation that change was coming. The Labor opposition had performed well in the campaign. Labor's leader, Mark Latham, had more than matched the electoral tactics of Mr. Howard. Latham's popularity was holding firm in opinion polls. Yet in the end, the Liberal-National coalition came out on top. In fact, Howard's coalition increased its margin of victory because a number of smaller parties stole support from Labor. And next July, the parties in government will also gain majority control of the upper house—the Senate. Why did Labor fail? They failed for a number of reasons, one can be sure, but the reasons add up, essentially, to insufficient pragmatism.

And what has happened since October? The Government has carried on in bold pragmatic style. It has maintained Australia's symbolic involvement in Iraq with a minuscule fighting force (800 members), recently increased by 50 percent, with the possibility of adding more in the future. During the election campaign, however, Mr. Howard assured the nation that any additional deployment would be a matter of only a minor increase in numbers. On the positive side, the government set aside one billion dollars to aid Indonesian victims of the tsunami tragedy in Ache province, Indonesia being our northern near neighbor. On the other hand, the Government has stirred grave concern because of the manner in which it continues to detain and house asylum seekers, their children, and the mentally ill. The Prime Minister has also announced moves that were not disclosed or really debated during the election campaign: he intends to introduce legislation to require nationwide uniformity of industrial awards. The education minister wants nationwide uniformity in university entrance examinations. And additional reforms are expected in the areas of social welfare and abortion funding. All of these are simply pragmatic gambits to try to keep the economy growing.

Kee in mind, Australia is a wealthy nation. Its wealth is part of the reason for continuing its commitment—shall we call it a religious commitment?—to pragmatism. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recently released a “report card” on the nation's wealth and commended the government for maintaining reforms that have been responsible for the increase in wealth. The OECD noted that the reforms date from the years when “accords” between the Labor government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) were adopted. Essentially the accords legislated a radical “free market” system, or what Australians call “economic rationalism.” Massive structural changes resulted for the labor union movement, thus curtailing its power to stand in the way of economic development. Industry was transformed. In other words, contrary to what one might expect from a Labor Party government, it did the dirty work that the Liberal-National government could never have achieved. But the Liberal-National coalition now claims those reforms as the basis for its further industrial reforms that will be introduced into parliament after July.

The Liberal-National government offers no expression of thanks to Labor for this. Instead it simply tells the nation that it has been and will continue to be the responsible manager of the national estate. Last October, for the third time, Mr. Howard went to the electorate as the nation's economic CEO and asked for a vote of confidence. Three times he has been re-elected. So the shareholders evidently approve of his “management.”

Management thus prevails over “history,” for additional industrial reforms would not be possible if widespread industrial change had not been initiated earlier by the Labor government. The circumstances, in turn, make it very difficult, if not impossible for Labor to enunciate its own alternative approach to industrial relations policies. Furthermore, the Howard government could not achieve new reforms if it held to the view it maintained in the 1980s that industrial relations are a matter for the states rather than for the federal government to handle. Under pragmatism, there is no long-term commitment to principle, and that lack of commitment extends even to one’s political views about the way the Australian Constitution distributes state and federal competencies.

As a consequence of all this, the 1980s have been forgotten or declared irrelevant despite the OECD’s reminder of the history of our economic-rationalist reforms. Citizens who desire to maintain high living standards want pragmatic results, not a debate about history or party platforms. Politics is about what works now, not about the historical source of what might become a future distress. The re-elected government justifies its actions by claiming to have a mandate for its post-election actions, even though industrial reform was not a prominent part of its electoral campaign.

What I’m describing here is the decline of meaningful parties in a democratic system. Parties that try to articulate and stand by principles and a distinctive political vision will only prove that they can lose elections. The major parties have become very much alike. They say to the electorate, “We represent what you want and the way you want it. Elect us.” And after the election, the winner goes and does what it wants as long as it thinks its successes will win it re-election the next time.

Did the 14 percent of the electorate not voting for Labor or the Liberal-National coalition vote for other parties out of commitment to those parties’ principles, or perhaps because they wanted to see a change in Australia’s electoral system? It would be nice to think that either or both of these reasons represented their motivation. But before a change in the electoral system can take place and principled debate among principled parties can enrich our political life, a much larger percentage of voters will have to undergo a change of political heart and practice.

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