

## Re-inventing Australian Democracy

By Adam Henry

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As the clock ticks down to the 2010 Federal Election what exactly are the major political parties offering Australian voters? Very little it seems. The atmosphere of major party fear and loathing is cause for some serious reflection on the state of democracy in Australia. Isn't it about time that we as citizens start to push for real change and accountability.

That moment has arrived and it is up to us to do something.

In terms of its major domestic and international policies the ALP ceased to be a progressive socialist party long ago. Under the conservative leadership of John Howard (and now Tony Abbott) the Liberals remain a combination of opportunistic economics, populist sentiments and anti-Left wing prejudices. For Australian voters, the choices between the dominant parties have finally become so narrow that many will become increasingly alienated from any active interest in the major political parties.

On asylum seekers voters have a choice between processing refugee applicants on the island of Nauru or in East Timor. The latter is still being held up by some in the ALP even though the Timorese parliament has already voted to reject any such plan. Both sides shamelessly politicize the arrival of refugees by boats to hysterical levels of hyperbole.

Both sides of politics are willing to do their bidding, or backtrack, in favour of the unfettered business objectives of the Australian Mining community. This is tantamount to ceding the sovereignty of the Federal legislature to a handful of billionaire mining CEO's.

On the environment no side of politics is willing to make decisions on climate change and renewable energy that will upset major Australian industries who happen to be major greenhouse polluters. The only idea so far has been to offer these businesses extraordinary amounts of taxpayer funded compensation should any moves be made by the government to lower greenhouse emissions.

Both major parties continue to faithfully adhere to the self designated Australian role of praetorian guard for US foreign policies. Yet neither party explains to the Australian public why our troops continue to fight, kill and die (for the benefit of the Karzai Regime - one of the most corrupt regimes on earth) in Afghanistan.

How might we make our politicians more accountable to constituent views? Let us be quite clear, all successful political candidates are elected to represent their local constituency NOT their own career trajectory. The whole point is that they bring a truly regional expertise that represents their electorate properly.

Here I offer some suggestions in the hope that readers can contribute, refine, critique and expand. Firstly, far more has to be done to address issues of branch stacking, manipulation of electoral rules, corruption, cronyism and political honesty.

The most effective mechanism might be increasingly vigilant citizen pressure and scrutiny. If we are unhappy about the outcomes generated by the maneuverings of our major political parties then we must be prepared to do something about it i.e. petitions, complaint letters and faxes, phone calls, legal challenges etc.

Second the time has come for voters to insist that their electoral candidates are actually *bona fide* local residents. The concept of parachuting individuals into various electorates as if they are mere play things of the major parties

should be totally unacceptable.

Third let's demand political honesty. Repeatedly promises are made to electorates all over the nation by politicians in order to get votes. Repeatedly once elected they ignore these promises and often do the opposite. Voters in any electorate should have the right to hold politicians to account for their actions while serving as their elected representative. Voters should have a mechanism allowing them to censure their elected representative.

There could also be a mechanism for voters to force by-elections or even full elections at Local, State or Federal Levels. On the question of honesty and accountability in matters of defence, any deployment of Australian military personnel for expeditionary war must receive a 90 per cent affirmative vote in both Houses of the Federal Parliament.

I strongly argue that politicians (or bureaucrats) who make public statements defending the ethics and validity of their policy decisions are often aided by the fact that confidential information, meetings, or archives are protected by law from scrutiny. A Cabinet Minister who lies or misrepresents their actions and views to the public should not be protected by Cabinet confidentiality. New legal mechanisms should be created so that access to such information can be examined and tested by the courts.

Finally, abolish registered parties from having any affiliations with Local Council elections and abolish all registered parties from student elections at universities too. People can hold their views and memberships, but let them be elected as individuals.

This is supposed to be grassroots democracy. In the state and federal parliaments let us force open the doors of transparency by making all chairpersons, speakers and presidents independents or from the largest minor party. Let us insist that question time be more than a childish circus of insults and orchestrated for TV taunts. The list could go on, but I will end here.

I was present at the National Tally Room during the Kevin 07 election night. Finally free from the ethical lead boots of the Howard years there was a sense of hopeful excitement. That excitement has well and truly faded. It is now time for us to reconsider our entire approach to the major political parties and Australian democracy.

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