



The PARTY game

It was the election of a 'disenchanted' electorate. Not for decades had so many voters given the major parties the cold shoulder. But why? David Burchell argues that some media and Left analyses were right off track.

Three years ago before the last federal election, in an article in *Australian Society*, 'Parties under Siege', I argued that the major parties were felt to no longer 'represent' their constituencies in the way they once had: "the ties of appeal between party and supporter had become perilously thin". Certainly the place of the major parties as major parties was not under serious threat. But what was a matter for serious discussion was that "what we are seeing at present is a serious bout of refashioning and realignment of the stuff of party politics in this country such as has not been seen in this country since the Second World War".

If the article raised interest in thinking circles back in 1987, I certainly never heard of it. Yet now the 'crisis of the major parties' has been the leitmotif of the entire 1990 election campaign. One could be forgiven for thinking that the media had no other intellectual tool with which to make sense of events throughout the entire six weeks since mid-February. Feature article after feature article in the quality dailies reiterated the theme of 'disillusionment' with the major parties, almost as if that in itself sufficed as political analysis of the campaign.

There is little doubt over the level of unhappiness in the electorate over the choices it faced in this election. The oft-cited opinion poll in the *Sydney Sun Herald* in the second week of the campaign which claimed that a third of all voters were 'swinglers' was a little dodgy - but the trend was unmistakable. Never since the days of the DLP had so few voters indicated their allegiance to one or other of the major party groupings. Where media analysis, like much analysis on the Left, went seriously astray was over

the origins of this disillusionment, its objects and its implications for the party system.

In the first instance, both the media and large sections of the Left were complicit in a subtle slippage, an intellectual sleight of hand. For the hard Left the formula is a ritual: there is disillusionment in the electorate because there is no choice between the parties. Labor has become (or always was) simply a 'second capitalist party', carrying out the bidding of multinational capital. Its reformist project (not that the hard Left ever supported that even when it was supposed to have existed) has been abandoned. This, we are told, is the politics of Tweedledum/Tweedledee.

It is worthwhile pausing to consider that the Coalition, had they been elected, were either publicly committed to or strongly implicated in all of the following: dismantling Medicare, privatising all significant public enterprises, privatising childcare, rerouting superannuation, gutting the wages system, mining Kakadu, cutting off the dole after nine months and winding back the small progress made by Aboriginal people these last seven years. This is not the stuff of Tweedledum/Tweedledee politics.

That image is an old theme on the Left. It had great currency during the Whitlam years (though few will admit to such sentiments now!), but of course even stronger sentiments were voiced during the Chifley years, and in the 'thirties, especially by Communists. In every significant period of Labor rule, in other words, some left critics have purported to find no real difference between the major parties. It could be said that social-democratic governments by their nature always disappoint but certainly they always disappoint those who have, or claim to have, millenarian expectations of them.

As for the media, it had a particular sympathy with the cynicism in the electorate - not least because it mirrored the media's cynicism about the electoral process. To a large extent this is self-inflicted. The media has created the media



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caravan, the doorstep interview, the five-second grab, and now appears to feel imprisoned by its own inventions. Whatever may have been claimed in editorial copy, there was no shortage of issues in this campaign - though the structure of media commentary now is such that it is very difficult to highlight issues unless issues come, in readily-packaged form, from the parties themselves.

Again, the cynicism of the media, like that of the electorate to some extent, reflected the complexity and often the drabness of the issues: interest rates which no-one can seriously claim to bring down *by much*, an intractable national debt and a highly complex wages policy debate hardly have the same ring as the Great Anti-Communist Crusade of Menzies in the 'fifties. But while the issues have become more complex, and the electorate more sceptical of economic 'quick fixes', media election coverage has tended to become much more electronically-centred, and thus almost inevitably more trivial. The paradox strains the fabric of electoral politics as traditionally understood.

However, while all of this may go some way towards denting some of the cosy orthodoxies currently abroad in the media and on the Left, it still fails to answer the question: why *are* people disenchanted with the major party groupings? And, more to the point, why *both* party groupings?

One part of the answer is clearly the spectre of diminished expectations. In the 'forties, each party could point to clear visions of the future which could be inferred, in shorthand form, from their political programs. For Labor it was a mixed economy with regulation and significant public ownership, and a welfare state somewhat on the European model.

For the Liberal/Country parties it was the spectacle of economic freedom and opportunity based upon a humanised free market, as opposed to the 'socialistic' claims of its opponents. Of course, in reality Labor's achievements were less grand, and the Coalition mostly limited itself to managing the post-1945 compromise in a rather more conservative manner. But the dreams were at least coherent and credible, and in theory were able to be achieved within the life of a few parliaments.

The comparison with the political landscape of 1990 is stark. The major economic lesson of the 'thirties was (or seemed to be) of the ability of national economies to reflate in the teeth of global austerity and fiscal conservatism. The lesson of the 'eighties is of the virtual impossibility of such an occurrence today. And worldwide the grand claims of the Left and social democratic parties of the 'forties lie in tatters. The old regulatory regime of the 'forties, the old model of public ownership, the old welfare state model -

all have taken a hammering in the last decade. And no radical and credible alternatives have taken their place.

At the same time the vision of the Right is more fragmented and ambiguous than it was in 1945, or even a decade ago. The New Right, that ghastly spectre of the 'eighties, has in a few countries taken hold of the reins, but in very few actually taken hold of the agenda. Radical solutions from the Right seemed credible a decade ago, when national economies like those of Britain and the US were manifestly ailing and prime targets for a 'short, sharp shock'. But today, after the monetarist electrodes have been removed, the patient's condition seems far less radically altered than the Right had hoped. It is now a matter for debate in Britain, for instance, whether 'Thatcherism' ever really controlled the agenda in the manner then suggested by more forward-thinking elements on the Left. And in Australia, as the Liberals' decision to retread Peacock showed, the radical Right prescription for the 'eighties too has taken a bit of a beating.

On both sides of politics, then, there is a perceptible absence of overarching vision such as animated in particular the post-war years. Indeed, where such visions exist, on both Right and Left, they tend to go hand in hand with economic 'hard-thinking' rather than grand social ideals. Award restructuring and superannuation are not populist rallying cries. Nor, for that matter, are 'labour market deregulation' and 'microeconomic reform'. Of course, this doesn't signal 'the end of ideology', as recent revivals of the concept might claim: ideological as well as political conflict is alive and well. But its technical, even technocratic, expressions today hardly serve to embed it in the popular imagination.

This is in one sense what it means to say that the parties no longer 'represent' their constituencies. There was a time when, however fitfully, the economic and social program of Labor and the Left spoke to many people as being the natural program of an economic class. To others, the program of the Right represented a supra-class national harmony based on the right-to-rule of a homogeneous elite. Neither of these propositions makes much sense today. Whatever claims socialism had to be the 'natural' cause of 'the working class' lost its last shred of credibility with the ignominious collapse of Eastern European puppet regimes.

Nor does 'Accord politics', with its national, hegemonic aspirations, look like the program of a specific and identifiable class - particularly when it explicitly involves restoring profit share at the expense of wages. In this climate the only thing ultimately ensuring that certain people become 'natural' Labor voters (let alone 'natural' socialists) is family custom or tradition. At the same time the Right seems more palpably than ever in the grip of particular 'special interests': after all, not even small business (let alone the CAI or MTIA) can agree on backing a Liberal/National election campaign!

Of course, these trends are not exactly new. After all, it was the Whitlam government which first made a decisive break with the class-corporate politics of the old-style ALP. And the crisis of direction in the Liberal Party could at a

pinch be said to go back to the chaotic Holt-Gorton-McMahon years, when the party seemed torn between small-l liberalism and a rerun of Menzies-style conservatism. The Fraser years, that oasis in the unhappy last two decades of the Coalition, in retrospect look very much like a pale imitation of the Menzies years with the difference being that, rather than managing growing prosperity, Fraser managed industrial decline.

What makes the phenomenon much more acute today is the pervasive lack of conviction in the ability of any government to rescue us from the spectre of slow, drawn-out industrial decline, with its 'banana republic' accompaniments of falling living standards and marginalisation within the world economy.

In that sense the vote for small parties and independents and the Greens and Democrats was not so much a vote against the major parties *qua* parties, but against 'government' itself. One strongly suspects that had the Democrats miraculously found themselves holding the balance of power in the House of Representatives after this election, and thus involved in the business of governing, their current popularity would fall correspondingly as a result. Likewise, a significant element in the appeal of the various Green electoral options at the present time is their perception as being 'outside the political system', and particularly outside the all-pervasive economic ground rules of debate.

To a large extent, then, the current political air of disillusionment is negative in origin, and those on the Left who take it as a starting-point for radical advance will probably find themselves quickly disappointed. The fact that the electorate is unimpressed by the mainstream political options does not mean that it is about to leap into the arms of snake-oil salespeople either of the Left or the Right. But the present moment does have another, much more positive, face for the Left. Who would have thought ten years ago, for instance, that we would see an election fought out over the terrain of childcare and green politics?

That a clear plurality of voters believes the environment to be the most significant issue at the present time in itself suggests that the political tide has turned rather strongly from the exceedingly narrow economic agenda of the last decade. Rather than arguing for 'more and bigger' from a relatively static economic cake, the Left might do better to focus on widening this agenda further. If the economic debate can embrace environmental sustainability, for instance, why can it not incorporate the economic and territorial needs of Aboriginal people (as it has, for instance, for Maori people in New Zealand)?

On the whole, the prospect for progressive causes seems brighter now than after any of the previous three elections of the Hawke era. That this is not paying dividends for the Left suggests that perhaps the Left has not yet freed itself sufficiently from the straitjacket of a previous era. It should not mean that we need subside into despondency and despair. Nor, for that matter, should it lead us to seek succour from the prevailing disenchantment with the political process - a disenchantment which ultimately can only bode ill for any democratic project.