

## **Australia's politics in disarray**

By Maurice Newman, The Australian, 7 July 2016

The one consistent take-out from the election is the apparent inability of mainstream politicians, political apparatchiks and most of the media commentariat to grasp what is happening within the electorate. That is certainly the case for the Prime Minister.

Never seen as legitimate in the eyes of many voters and, having learned nothing from Dale Carnegie during the campaign, in his first post-election speech Malcolm Turnbull vented about the "Mediscare" campaign and other Labor lies that his gullible followers obviously had swallowed. Of course, the Turnbull team was blameless for the election outcome. Smiling through the tears, Turnbull assured us, despite all the cheating, he was confident all would be right on some other night. How out of touch can you be?

Judged by their on-air performances today's political elites, like the PM, are captive to a narrow, self-indulgent, outdated, Labor-Liberal paradigm. In their splendid isolation, they are convinced only the extreme, or the uneducated, vote for Pauline Hanson, Jacqui Lambie, Derryn Hinch, Nick Xenophon or other minor parties.

They can't accept that "smart" voters think differently to them or are tired of what they recognise as a cartelised ruling establishment. So disconnected are they that they believe the masses fall for vague messages of compassion, fairness, jobs and growth. They think slogans that ooze condescension and promote cargo-cult dependency rather than advocate sound financial management and self-reliance fool the majority. In reality, when the people lose trust in their leaders and the system, they pursue narrow self-interest.

Why not? They see unions they never voted for exerting extraordinary influence on public policy. They watch big business win favours from big government at the cost of small business. They know Marxists are indoctrinating their children without their consent and feel powerless to stop it. Without consultation, their freedom to speak is constantly eroded. They feel marginalised.

Meanwhile, the major parties preach brand differentiation. The Liberals boast a broad church but welcome ever fewer conservatives and libertarians. The Labor Party presents as progressive, yet its links to the union movement are medieval and its ever-conscious need to distance itself from the Greens regularly throws up inherent contradictions. Today the brands are as different as Coles is to Woolworths or Ford is to Holden.

For political pundits, support for minor parties can be hard to read, let alone understand. Are the voters genuinely interested in a single issue, are they parking their vote until after the election or, as pollster Mark Textor says, are they sending a message as a pre-election "tickle up" to the parties?

Polling cannot answer these questions. Certainly, tribal loyalty is fading and poll gaming is on the rise. Voters see approaching elections as an opportunity to use polls to leverage the main parties and, in close elections, minor parties can be strategically rewarding.

Inevitably, volatile electorates are diminishing the predictive value of polls. We have seen Brexit, the unchanged New Zealand flag, David Cameron's unexpected second term and the comfortable win for the Coalition that wasn't. These results provide evidence that the political class is prone to groupthink and prefers to watch polls than listen to the electorate.

If the voters are gaming the establishment, the political class is using polls to game the people. Recently, a Reuters poll and an American ABC News/*Washington Post* poll were exposed as favouring Democratic respondents to flatter Hillary Clinton's standing.

Whether or not poll manipulation occurs in Australia (was the one before the election, demeaning Tony Abbott and flattering Turnbull, a case?), the people are aware politics is a murky business. They know how unions, crony capitalists and other rent-seekers repay patronage and privilege to the major parties in kind and often with recycled taxpayer funds.

No wonder they have become cynical and mercenary. They are fed up with a system they see as corrupt and self-serving and that treats them as uneducated serfs. They want respect and a government that is culturally confident and economically consistent.

Ten months ago, pushed by polls, 54 members of the Liberal Party demonstrated appalling judgment by deposing a sitting prime minister who had brought them to government from the wilderness. They replaced him with someone who had failed to win an election. Regardless of the legal niceties, Coalition voters saw this as a betrayal of their mandate and the values that attracted them to the party. Some commentators may heap scorn on these former party followers for putting the opposition in reach of government. Truth is, those deserters see marginal differences between the major parties and hope a stalemate may lead to a better future.

Meanwhile, as a former businessman, Turnbull knows he should resign. No business would tolerate a manager who had so trashed the brand and so divided his colleagues. Both are beyond his ability to restore. Turnbull's conceit, ineptitude and lack of judgment cannot change. He is as he is.

Most important, this is not just a defeat for the Turnbull Coalition team. It is a shocking result for the nation when dark clouds are gathering economically at home and abroad. A ratings downgrade seems a foregone conclusion. After all, who will command the authority to implement necessary structural economic reform?

The longer Turnbull stays as leader, the likelier the Liberal Party is to fracture. Who will replace him? Most of the candidates are cookie-cutter career politicians who still don't get where the electorate is at.

Abbott, with his anti-establishment, free-market instincts and tradie demographic support, probably has the credentials for the times. But whether he has the stomach for another try, or whether the bed-wetters will allow it, remains to be seen.