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Australia's two-party system has past its use by date

By Ian Marsh
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The past federal election campaign would be a good joke if the issues facing the country were not so serious. These include climate change, how not to dissipate our next resource windfall, the two-speed economy, education, asylum seekers and refugees, to name just a few. But neither party has campaigned on any of these matters in any other than populist terms. Short term political incentives have wholly trumped longer term policy needs. National interests have been sidelined.

What is to be done? The answer to this question is ultimately a challenge to political imagination. Our imaginings might be guided by one of two responses. One would be based in the familiar two-party patterning of politics. Over the past hundred or so years, this construction of political life has created our basic political habits. It has created our taken-for-granted expectations about the way the game of politics is played.

The other response requires a different imaginative effort. It invites us to consider whether the assumptions that underpin the existing formal system still hold. If the answer is no, it asks us to identify the salient features, from a political perspective, of contemporary Australian society. Then we need to specify the challenges these create if the formal structure of politics is to do its job effectively.

Let's imagine your response is coloured by the traditional way the game has been played. What assumptions lie behind this construction of political life? To answer, we need to look back to the genesis of the system. The two-party system had its origins in the rise of the Labor Party as a mass political organisation. This occurred in Australia roughly from 1891. Important moments occurred in 1909, when the Protectionists and Free Traders merged, and again in 1946, when Sir Robert Menzies established the modern Liberal party. In this perspective the political game is fundamentally about two main parties periodically contending for public support.

But this is based on some further important background assumptions. One is about Australian society. It assumes that for political purposes we broadly divide in two - our community has a real social divide that each party broadly mirrors. This was indeed a valid assumption for many years. But does a binary divide still hold?

Two dominant parties pattern of politics also involves an assumption about their ideologies. It implies that the two parties present the community with real and divergent choices and that these are based on broader differences of political philosophy or ideology. In turn, these different philosophies are assumed to provide guidance about how to respond to particular issues. Further, taken together, the philosophies of the major parties broadly exhaust the repertoire of political possibility. Again, these were all valid assumptions for most of the past hundred years. But do any of them still hold?

Then there are other assumptions about the roles of the major party organisations. These are assumed to play a significant role, internalising many important political tasks. They mobilise activists. They set or at least influence party agendas. They cue broader partisan opinion. They integrate interest groups. For many years, the mass party organisations did indeed perform all these roles. But do they still contribute any of these capabilities?

All these assumptions were once reality. None of them accord with the contemporary scene. The community is now much more differentiated and pluralised. Australians exhibit a much wider spectrum of attachments and attitudes. Relatively small numbers of voters remain rusted on

loyalists of the major parties. For their part, party organisations have virtually collapsed. They play almost no role in policy development or in activist mobilisation. Membership is insignificant. Power has flowed from the organisation and the members to party leaders. Party organisations have a minimal role in linking the community to politics. This has moved to the media: hence the corrupting 24-hour news cycle.

Finally, there is now often cross-party agreement about the general direction of policy. Witness the big change in Australian public policy that occurred after 1983. Tacit bipartisanship was the most important cause of its speed and degree. This continued through much of John Howard's 11 years in government. But you would never know if you only listened to what the politicians say - and ignored what they actually do.

The major parties often agree at least about the broad direction of policy. But this is a truth that dare not speak its name. All our present political incentives discourage such acknowledgement. This creates the incentives for opportunism, populism, manufactured difference and exaggeration - outcomes that now irritate many voters.

So this brings us to the second perspective. Recall what has changed. We are a much more diverse and pluralised community. We do not divide along binary lines. To think of ourselves in linear, left-right terms would be a gross distortion. A kaleidoscope is perhaps a better image.

We no longer have powerful party organisations. The remnants are shadows of their former selves. But none of the tasks that they once performed are carried out anywhere else in the political system. The media has filled this vacuum with generally baleful results. Short termism and manufactured difference predominates.

We no longer have two parties divided by a clear programmatic orientation. Rather the major parties agree on many aspects of the broad direction of policy, particularly in relation to the economy. Real disagreement often mostly concerns priorities or important details. You would never know.

Or the major parties may agree and freeze out other voices that have a right to be heard. They may also disagree profoundly about particular issues like gay marriage, environmental protection, euthanasia, education reform etc. But where they do disagree you can't read responses off a central program or ideology. Each case must be taken on its merits.

If this is the reality of political life in the early 21st century, what new challenges does it create for politics and policy making?

One is absolutely central. This is to create a larger capacity to expose real (if broad) consensus and to focus on specific disagreements. This requires new infrastructure. It requires a policy making process that can explore points of consensus and points of sharp disagreement between the key protagonists. A change in the political and policy making cycle is needed. This would be to introduce what might be termed a contemplative phase into this process.

In other words, a key need is to create new infrastructure to manage the strategic or agenda entry end of the policy cycle. This is the key phase for marking out consensual possibilities and points of fundamental difference. This is the phase in which a new issue is recognised and its broad significance and priority assessed. This would represent a new and transparent political phase in the policy making process.

Remember, this is only at the preliminary stage in deciding what to do - it's only at the stage of gaining the degree of agreement possible that there is an issue and (also if possible) a definition of its broad scope. Remember, too, that political leaders mostly work with the grain of public opinion. Sometimes they must confront their publics. But mostly they need to work within an envelope of interest group and community opinion.

A policy structure capable of exposing consensus would be good for politics, good for policy making and good for the community. This needs to occur without compromising the electoral standing of the various parties or the government's right to govern. In fact, procedures that would achieve this end are evident in our own historic experience. Between 1901 and 1909, the electorate returned three parties - the Free Traders, Protectionists and Labor.

Governing required at least two of these parties to reach an accommodation with each other on particular measures. Deakin, the architect of the period, led minority governments. To create sufficient parliamentary support to enact acutely contested measures, he needed to seed a parliamentary (and hence public conversation) at the strategic end of the issue cycle, but before the government's own approach was determined.

To achieve this outcome, he turned to the tried and tested vehicle, committees of the legislature. Indeed the Australian constitution provided him with an ideal structure. The Senate had been conceived as an independent House on the American model. In its initial years most members acted in this spirit.

More recently, the (late) Liberal, David Hamer, recommended converting the Senate to a Committee House. Ministers would not be drawn from this Chamber. Its committees could then become important agenda entry points for new and emerging issues. The adversarial culture, which is now often breached in committee enquiries, would be equally qualified in broader Senate proceedings.

With their scope specifically confined to emerging and strategic issues, committees could be agents of the legislature rather than the executive. They could recommend action - and the legislature would debate their recommendations. Ideally this would be free of the whips. But even with whipped or partially whipped votes, majority, cross-party support in the Senate would provide important guidance for the executive. A more diverse expression of views in the legislature would give the executive more flexibility in response. Following this debate, it would be up to the government to decide what to do.

If government rejects a report, the committee could return to the issue and respond to the executive's argument. If it rejects the latter and the Senate votes to uphold the report, the government could either back down or use the mostly dormant procedures for resolving inter-House disputes. There are numerous imaginative examples from the US.

Within this constraint, the key point would be to shift some of the power in defining strategic policy direction from the executive to the legislature and, via this forum, try to narrow points of agreement and disagreement between the key protagonists. The theatre of parliamentary contention might then unfold in a more positive way. Meantime, the enquiry process and the subsequent parliamentary debates would educate all participants (the political parties, stakeholder interests, the media and the broader public) about the need for action and perhaps also about the most effective forms of action.

At the same time, such a procedure might be expected to have much greater impact on the mobilisation of relevant interests and the broader public. By such means, it might stimulate processes of social learning and the development of public opinion. All this would be designed to create a base in constituency and public opinion for whatever action might later be required.

Is this thought experiment just fantasy? Probably - until the hold of the two main parties is seriously challenged. The present adversarial culture would need to be significantly qualified. Senators would need to approach their task with a more independent spirit. The fact that matters are being considered before decisions are taken by the executive would no doubt be opposed by ministers. It would compromise their powers - but it would be good for ministerial performance.

One path to change involves the rise of minor parties. If the Greens gain a pivotal role after this election, such a change would be in their particular interest. They will need to be able to demonstrate to supporters why they accept particular government measures and how they are

advancing their own program. Backroom deals will not be sufficient. Look at the fate of the Democrats. A strong committee system would make the reasons for such decisions, including the trade-offs that might have been negotiated as part of a compromise, much more transparent.

If the challenge is to reconnect voters to the formal political system, it is hard to see what other approach might be followed. Other responses, like community cabinets or ministerial door-knocks, involve political make-believe where the distance between espoused purposes and actual achievement ultimately fuels public cynicism. The real need is for a process to build public consent for political action. A tilt of the overall political incentive structure from wholly adversarial towards more consensual styles is the only option. In recent decades, the major party structures have calcified and the social base of the two-party system has imploded. But the major parties continue to draw upon and deploy its considerable resources and inertial power. For how long can the assumptions of another era thwart adaptation?

Ian Marsh is a professor at the Australian Innovation research centre, University of Tasmania. The study on which this article is based, (*Democratic Decline, Democratic Renewal: Britain, Australia, New Zealand*) will be published early 2011.