

Corporate-serving UNREPRESENTATIVE Major Oz parties Ignore Public's Wishes/Democracy

by Waleed Aly via gail - Brisbane Times *Thursday, Jul 9 2015, 1:04am*
international / prose / post

Politics is about persuasion but both parties neglect the public's views

Both sides of politics offer people outrage or seek to assuage them. Neither side tries to engage voters with persuasive arguments.



Undemocratic corporate puppets, Bill Shorten and Tony Abbott

About the same time Barnaby Joyce was not appearing on Q&A, Australians were largely not digesting an opinion poll from that morning that made diabolical reading. Most simply, it was diabolical for our major political leaders, both of whom are plumbing historic depths of unpopularity and disapproval.

More broadly, though, this whole snapshot is diabolical for the very idea of Australian political culture. Our disillusionment with politics is now complete. It is real. It is not mere nostalgia for a better time that never existed. It is a kind of socialised disgust at the cynical offering with which voters are now stuck. Joyce's forced boycott (and now, Malcolm Turnbull's) partly explains this nadir.

"Both major parties ... try to outrage us - preferably directing that rage towards their foes. They will try to assuage us. But they almost never try to persuade us."

Not because democracy cannot function without Q&A, or even that Q&A cannot function without the Coalition. But because a cabinet boycott of this kind symbolises the state of civil debate in this country; a debate now so thoroughly decomposed it barely resembles its origins as the central pillar of democracy. This saga stands as an emblem for the way in which we do public discourse.

Both major parties contribute to this mess, though in opposite ways. The Coalition pursues niche convictions that have little to do with public sentiment; Labor pursues public sentiment but with little conviction. What neither do is engage us on contentious matters of importance, and mount a coherent, sustained argument. They will try to outrage us - preferably directing that rage towards their foes. They will try to assuage us. But they almost never try to persuade us.

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To be sure, each party has its populist terrain, on which it naturally embodies public instincts. The

Coalition has national security and boats. Labor has anything that can be dubbed "fairness" and (if the Coalition dares raise it) industrial relations. But so ingrained are our uninspiring habits that even on these issues there is nothing approximating leadership.

Labor's best moments arrive when the Coalition steps on a landmine and offends the electorate. From here, Labor simply amplifies the damage. It does not start these conversations and take the country with it. It waits for the country to declare its outrage, then rides it. So it was with the Abbott government's disastrous first budget, as it was with WorkChoices before it. Where other issues fall its way - like say climate change or even same-sex marriage - it simply mangles the argument.

It is Labor - through Kevin Rudd's ETS cowardice and Julia Gillard's "citizens' assembly" policy void, which led her ultimately to break her promise by negotiating a carbon tax she had specifically ruled out - that has made a serious climate change policy politically impossible. And when it does mount a visionary idea - like, say, Gonski - it fails to explain why these ideas are more important than the debt they will impose, leaving them susceptible to a fiscal dismantling.

The Coalition, meanwhile, finds itself unable to resist overdoing its advantages. Tony Abbott's recently belligerent focus on national security has lacked any of John Howard's subtlety, and delivered no discernible benefit in the polls. He's pursued this so wildly that his most high-profile cabinet colleague - and greatest internal threat as leader - now feels comfortable building his capital by being more measured on terrorism. Abbott may be the first leader to have found a way to exhaust the political advantages of national security, which is no piffling achievement. The same is probably not quite true of asylum seeker policy, but the problem with boats is that once they stop coming, Australians stop fearing them, meaning their political bang has a natural limit. Unless, of course, the issue can be somehow revived.

That thought petrifies Labor, which is precisely why Bill Shorten will be dreading its upcoming national conference, where Labor's factions will tear at each other's throats over whether or not to support Abbott's policy of turning back boats. A significant portion of the party would find this scandalous, but Shorten knows that if he fails to adopt it, the Coalition will hammer its political advantage mercilessly. And that's why he's manoeuvring to capitulate. It's a study of how Labor behaves on issues where public sentiment runs against it.

If Labor struggles to press home a popular argument, it has long since abandoned hope of mounting an unpopular one - which is why it spent most of its last term pretending it could deliver a surplus. And right now, any kind of restraint on asylum seeker policy is about as unpopular as it gets. Shorten would need to counter the torrent of anti-boat people hysteria that has gripped the country since Paul Keating. That's unlikely, so we can expect Labor to acquiesce.

And it is here that Labor's differences with the Coalition are sharpest. Faced with its own idiosyncrasies, the Coalition chooses neither to acquiesce, nor to persuade, but rather to bludgeon. We're seeing that from some of the Coalition's hardest warriors on same-sex marriage and renewable energy, for example. And we're certainly seeing that with Q&A. Abbott is playing to a crowd - both within and without his party room - whose incandescent hatred of the ABC long predates Zaky Mallah's infamy.

The trouble is that crowd is very small. The ABC remains vastly more popular than any government, and the broader electorate simply has no interest in seeing a Prime Minister treat it like some enemy of the state that is on the wrong "side". Abbott's running against public sympathies here, on an issue with almost no mainstream resonance. He's doing it with all the vigour Labor doesn't, and none of the touch someone like Howard did.

These are our times. Labor refuses to prosecute a difficult argument. The Coalition cannot prosecute one without finding an enemy to prosecute along with it. But no one is inviting us into a civil exchange. Perhaps with our instant online outrage and shallowing media cycle we're not the best guests. Sure, I'll accept that. But politicians aren't merely self-interested combatants. They're custodians of our political culture. And on that score there's a problem because it's never been easier to win politically by destroying politics.

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[However, the solution is simple, withdraw ALL support from UNDEMOCRATIC major lackey parties and vote REPRESENTATIVE INDEPENDENTS INTO BOTH HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT.]

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