

12. Attack on democracy

A full definition of liberal democracy goes well beyond the right to vote:

It includes a capacity of civics or citizenship activities, participation in public life and the ability of citizens to have some meaningful influence over the shape and role of social and political institutions. In other words, democracy is about activities and capacities of citizens, not just governments.¹

How robust is our democracy?

Who is responsible for making sure it remains healthy and functioning well?

Who might be engaged in manipulating our democracy for their own benefit?

Could the Howard government itself be exploiting weaknesses in our democratic institutions for its own benefit?

Lies manipulate electoral outcomes

An article in the *Herald Sun* before the 2004 elections slammed the Greens for a bunch of extreme policy positions they didn't hold.² It was claimed the Greens backed illegal drugs, would raise company tax by 15 plus per cent, would force people to ride bicycles and eat less meat, would keep out business migrants, would tax the family home, would force farmers off the land, etc. The Liberals were only too happy to ventilate this sort of material wherever a microphone or a reporter could be found. Howard himself said:

The Greens are not just about the environment. They have a whole lot of other very, very kooky policies in relation to things

like drugs and new taxes and whatever, which people never talk about because they try [to] portray themselves as a one-issue party of just being warm and fuzzy about the environment.³

The Greens were dealt a body blow by this treatment, with leader Bob Brown estimating it cost them hundreds of thousands of votes.

The Australian Press Council, which regulates media in Australia, condemned the original article as ‘irresponsible journalism’.⁴ But that term doesn’t begin to address the issues. The Murdoch journalist admitted to the Council that the source of the lies and propaganda had been the Liberal Party itself! The newspaper simply allowed the Liberals to ‘launder’ their own libellous concoctions, so that they did not appear to be the source of them. As dirty tricks go, this has got to be one of the nastiest.

The Murdoch press also made great use of these lies to attack the Greens, repeating them over and over in many guises and painting the Greens as slightly mad or eccentric. For example: ‘The Greens are loopier than any party I’ve seen, and will be much worse than the Australian Democrats ever were’, (quoting a member of a right-wing think tank).⁵

When the government of the day conspires with the most powerful media organisation in the world to disseminate lies in order to destroy the credibility of another political party and its members, we are witnessing a direct attack on our democracy.

Clearly Murdoch and Howard don’t share the fundamental Australian values of fostering an open transparent democracy and a fair go for all. The licence to operate public media in this country comes with responsibilities and should be conditional. We rely on a free and fair media. A media proprietor who tells lies to manipulate electoral outcomes demonstrates his unworthiness to operate in our democracy.

Rather than acting on behalf of the people of Australia to prevent media manipulation of electoral outcomes, Howard exploits it to his own advantage.

While lying about a person can lead to charges of libel, and conspiracy and lying about a product or a company's financial status can bring other charges, no such redress appears to be available to political parties or their leaders. The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) was of little use in this case. It has said that it is not in the business of deciding upon the truth or otherwise of statements made.⁶

It seems you can lie about a party's character with impunity. In the absence of self-imposed standards, we appear to have no choice but to introduce yet more laws; in this case to protect the reputation of political parties from malicious lies, and our democracy from the self-interest of the powerful.

There is now an urgent need for a review of media laws to protect and promote our democracy. Such a review needs to be a high priority for the next government. However, given the Murdoch capacity for retribution, it would be difficult to find a politician or party to lead this reform. Such a review requires the most powerful, credible and non-partisan process available: a Royal Commission.

Exclusive Brethren manipulate voting outcomes

Anyone is allowed to promote a political party at election time. But our Australian democracy requires that those who invest money to influence an election must declare their interest.

When the Exclusive Brethren decided to support the Howard Government in Australia and to attack the Greens they took steps to hide their identity.⁷ Their true involvement in the Tasmanian election of 2006 was only fully uncovered when they were caught running a similar campaign for the National party in New Zealand.⁸ David Marr reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in January 2007 that:

[The Exclusive Brethren's] hate campaign against Greens in the Tasmanian State election was most un-Australian and probably cost the Greens several seats. It appears that the Brethren's behaviour was illegal (not disclosing who was paying for electoral advertisements). It also appears that as a third party

advertising on behalf of a political party, they would have been covered by the requirement to fully disclose their sources of funds. An enquiry by the Australian Electoral Commission simply traced the funding back to a shelf company called Willmac, but went no further to identify who was behind Willmac, who donated to it, and have not (at time of writing) prosecuted.⁹

A month later, he continued his exposé revealing that invoices for some of Brethren's advertising costs were actually paid by the Liberal party.¹⁰ This so-called mistake suggests a closer relationship than the Liberal party is willing to admit.

Anonymous political investments with hidden motives are part of the attack on our democracy.

Secretive hate campaigns against political parties in Australia are now apparently acceptable. The AEC lacks the muscle it needs to protect our democracy. Despite repeated advice, the Howard government has refused to review the AEC's legislation and has kept it ineffective through underfunding.

Australian Electoral Commission ineffective

Ensuring full disclosure of donations to political parties is the responsibility of the AEC.

However, outdated AEC legislation and poor funding has weakened its capacity to do this properly, as the Commission itself has acknowledged.¹¹

An *Australian* newspaper editorial names the problem bluntly:

Unfortunately, the present disclosure provisions in Australia are no more than a façade for a law that is full of loopholes, such as anonymous contributions through third parties, donations from overseas and payments at fundraising events that do not have to be listed. The AEC has pointed out the defects repeatedly but none of the major parties has shown any enthusiasm for making the law work properly.¹²

As we have seen in the United States, big money corrupts democracy. As Howard uncritically follows the United States model, there is a growing perception of secret political donations and secret relationships with the ultra-rich.

Senator Andrew Murray, of the Australian Democrats, says:

The domination of the rich has become so blatant that although some politicians feel quite uncomfortable about it, no federal, state or territory government or opposition seeks to end it.¹³

Secret private funding of political parties in Australia has been allowed to grow unchecked for over a decade. We need to urge the incoming government to reform the AEC in a way that puts the needs of Australian democracy ahead of the needs of major parties and their investors.

A Howard dictatorship?

In a democracy, power is distributed and balanced out amongst a number of entities. This balance is one of the main differences between a successful democracy and a dictatorship. Since mid-2005, when the Howard government got control of the Senate, we have had the least accountable Australian government in living memory. Howard's power over his frontbenchers, backbenchers and the public service has never been stronger. Australia has some of the weakest Freedom of Information legislation in the Western world. Whereas a Labor prime minister is constrained by the caucus, the factions, the ACTU and the national executive, a Liberal prime minister has no such constraints. We have never seen an Australian prime minister centralise so much power on himself.

The frightening lack of accountability this entails is manifest in a shocking history of poor decisions (e.g., Iraq) for which Howard has not had to answer. As long as he maintains party discipline, Howard has powers approaching those of a dictator until the next election. Given the Howard/Textor/Crosby team's ability to manipulate voters in an election campaign, his regime may continue beyond 2007.

Under Howard's dictatorial leadership, the government can force almost any legislative Bill it wishes through parliament without proper scrutiny. Australians deserve better! Howard even uses his powers over government funds (taxpayers' money) to help him win elections.¹⁴

Howard is also building up a record of shutting down dissenting voices across the land: in universities, the research community, non-government organisations, the media, the public service, statutory authorities, the military and intelligence services and the Senate.¹⁵ This is classic dictatorial arrogance, which believes it knows better than all the years of experience and expertise within these organisations. History tells us that privatised government serves the short-term interests of the ruling elite, but ultimately ruins the country.

Not that a Labor government offers a light on the hill in this respect. Labor's tactics, especially at state level, are not that different from Howard's.

Given the fact that both major parties tend to be authoritarian and to a greater or lesser extent in the hands of their investors, it seems that democracy requires us to have a much stronger representation of independents and minor parties. They would serve to 'keep the bastards honest', in the famous words of the late Don Chipp. A ballast of independents and minor party members would mean that a big swing to Labor or to Liberal would always be moderated by a sizeable proportion of candidates who could curb the excesses of authoritarian party.

Clearly, we need to deprive Howard of his two-house majority. If a proportion of independents and minor parties replaced the Liberals, particularly in the Senate, we would reduce the possibility of another 'democratic dictatorship' by either major party.

In this way, the next government could be a Labor coalition government, that is, a Labor government in coalition with minor parties or independents. Given the sorry state of our democracy, this seems the best available tonic. It would bring politics out from behind closed party-room doors and back into the light of public scrutiny. It might

even produce the Royal Commission so urgently needed to update the laws and institutions that support our weakened democracy.

Conclusion

We have seen that Australia's democracy is under attack from without and within. Forces such as big money, media moguls, the social engineers and other secretive groups attack it from without. From within it is attacked by a government that has centralised most power unto itself and disables other voices that provide expert advice and that might hold it accountable. And it has emasculated the AEC.

The Labor opposition has also benefited from weak electoral law. Some State Labor governments undermine our democracy with, for example, their too-close associations with developers who make huge investments in political parties in the expectation of development approvals. Australian democracy has been so weakened by these attacks that it is in danger of becoming more privatised and of sliding into a 'democratic dictatorship' where big money rules. We are seeing increasing signs of corrupt American-style capitalism in Australia as government is seduced away from serving the national interest.

Instead of total domination of our national government by either major party, we need a progressive government that includes greater balance, for example, with more minor parties and independents, that is willing to institute the fundamental reforms needed to secure our democracy.