

The Big Picture

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"News to use & amuse"

Editor: Mike Bolan



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Controlling the government

When John Howard decided to sell Australia's telecommunications system to the private sector, we were all assured that this wouldn't represent any decrease in service, indeed service levels would increase. We don't appear to be getting any better service, indeed the service appears totally inadequate in many areas.

We can see how important communications are from a report in [The Age](#) about Victoria's bushfire zone.

TELEPHONE breakdowns are emerging as a key issue in fire-ravaged communities, with the Busfires Royal Commission hearing once again that fixed and mobile networks failed on Black Saturday. "The landline went out and we get no mobiles," a witness said.

It turns out that there were mobile phone and radio black areas in which people got no services. Is this situation a revelation to the Royal Commission? To anyone?

How long have rural residents been complaining about that situation?

As if to show the real value of privatisation of services, this gem was presented in the Mercury the other day.

Telstra wants to axe 29 public phones in Hobart, and the Southern Midlands will be left with just three payphones to cover the whole region. [Mercury](#)

Who stands for the community? Who is representing community needs and requirements?

What exactly is the government doing?

Age Reporter Kenneth Davidson reports

THE GLOBAL financial crisis is about power, not money. According to a brilliant article in the latest issue of *Rolling Stone* by its chief political reporter, Matt Taibbi, financiers who caused the worldwide economic meltdown and then put their hands out for the bail-out that followed were involved in a "kind of revolution, a coup d'etat".

"They cemented and formalised a political trend that has been snowballing for decades: the gradual takeover of government by a small class of connected insiders, who use money to control elections, buy influence and systematically weaken financial regulations." [TheAge](#)

According to Davidson..

The most egregious financial innovation in Australia has been the expansion of financing erstwhile public infrastructure by public-private partnerships, which substitute expensive and highly geared private finance for low-cost public borrowing.

There are areas, such as garbage collection, where contracting out, franchising or PPPs are appropriate. But for the most part, the rationalisations offered for more expensive financing of infrastructure such as schools or hospitals are largely bogus in terms of the service offered,

the cost compared to public borrowing and the risk transferred to the private sector.

Ultimately, the greatest potential cost of PPPs is the cost to good government: the secrecy involved in the contracting process in the name of "commercial in confidence" hides the extent of the financial rip-off, thereby providing scope for bad government and eventually, corruption. [TheAge](#)

Elements of the private sector have effectively taken over much of government, also inserting themselves into those QANGOs and other groups that provide governments with 'impartial' advice and information, such as ABARE, as revealed by Guy Pearse in New Matilda...

Knowing that the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) would be relied upon from the mid-1990s as the principal internal source of greenhouse economic advice, a "who's who" of fossil-fuel producers, burners and users bought chairs on an ABARE steering committee. (That is, they literally bought them: the price was \$50,000 per year, and payers included the Australian Coal Association, the Australian Aluminium Council, BHP, CRA, the Business Council of Australia, the Electricity Supply Association of Australia, Exxon Corporation, Mobil Australia and Texaco). This committee oversaw the creation of the economic models on which crucial assessments about emission cuts were based.

Though the ensuing analysis showed how easily affordable such cuts were, the presentation was consistently spun to create the opposite impression. Given that ABARE's mission was to "enhance the competitiveness of Australia's agricultural and resource industries" (rather than the broader national interest), the quarry-friendly take on climate change was unsurprising. However, the carbon lobby took no chances, spending large sums on commissioning extra ABARE greenhouse policy work (hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent in one documented case involving the Minerals Council, the Aluminium Council and the Electricity Supply Association of Australia). As a senior carbon lobbyist involved in that work told me:

"ABARE has a requirement to meet certain earnings targets so you can do that through outside consulting. So we commissioned [another party] to do some work ... and they got the modelling done by [another party] and ABARE, alright? To our assumptions." [NewMatilda](#)

There you have it, our democracy totally subverted.

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Editorial

Both of our political parties are getting their information from the same sources, both are struggling to appeal to the same voters for the same reasons and both are appearing progressively self similar.

Here's UK Labor MP Tony Wright's comments ..

...his scorching analysis took no prisoners. He laid about the "adversarial pantomime" in the chamber that grows more shrill the less difference there is between parties. Synthetic arguments mean conflict wherever possible and agreement only where unavoidable, with government held impossibly responsible for everything, legislating compulsively and careless about liberty. A pernicious media prevents new thinking when all debate is a "split" and any new direction a "U-turn". [GuardianUK](#)

The locked in state of our polity is covered admirably by Peter Henning in 'Caucus Curse' presented below.

Meanwhile our governments fail the citizens in multiple ways. I am personally struggling to support my wife, alone up in Sydney battling to care for her mother who is dying at home of pulmonary fibrosis.

You can't apply for a high care nursing home place unless you're desperately sick as the government has to do an assessment. Once approved as sick enough, the victim can then fill out a wad of Centrelink forms requiring total personal account details to get permission to join a waiting list. Of course, Centrelink offers no guarantee of data privacy and security – all that information is provided at the sick person's risk.

It turns out that government 'planning' has left us with far too few nursing homes or places, so getting actual care can take months or years, depending upon the location.

Just to get into low care homes on the mainland can take hefty deposits of around ½ million dollars requiring massive restructuring of personal finances and living arrangements before the fact. For those without – too bad.

Meanwhile, the patient struggles to breathe and requires oxygen 24/7 just to stay conscious.

What government 'help' there is appears limited to requiring forms to be completed, answering phone calls at awkward times and otherwise complying with bureaucratic fancies. Government web sites return 'address not found' when contacted by email.

Overall there is very little actual service from the 3 levels of government save for the embattled firefighters, nurses, police and others who are constantly faced with new administrative requirements and restricted budgets.

According to [Sir Humphrey](#), when budget cuts are required, government should start with essential services to remind taxpayers of the importance of government and to jolt them into paying more taxes.

With a recession just around the corner, I guess that means we can expect plenty of assaults on our valued government services as is occurring in Tasmania with education.

Look out for a democracy in action response about the planned elimination of Adult Education at a forum at the Launceston Tailrace centre at 7 pm on 16 April starring Peter Cundall and Dr. Frank McGill.

Show the government you care and be there if you possibly can.

In case you missed it

Financial mess

Captured by the debt spider [ICH](#)

Governance & spin

Deals that are shrouded in secrecy [TheAge](#)

FOI law change [SMH](#)

State of secrecy [TheAustralian](#)

Democracy should be freedom to know: Faulkner [SMH](#)

Customs rebrand costs millions [SMH](#)

NSW creates new senior bureaucrat jobs [SMH](#)

PR segues into nuanced iteration [SunHerald](#)

Environment/food/water/forestry

Cheap chips may cost jobs [Mercury](#)

Climate

Flaws in emissions scheme must be fixed [TheAge](#)

Ditch ETS compo: Garnaut [TheAustralian](#)

ETS to shrink regions [TheAustralian](#)

Vic emissions cuts futile [TheAge](#)

UK chief scientist warns of perfect storm of problems [Guardian](#)

Has the coal lobby captured Rudd? [NewMatilda](#)

Labor's dirty coal dependency [SMH](#)

Health/education revolution/communication/defence

Tas Tomorrow reforms creating problems [Mercury](#)

RCH design blunders costly [TheAge](#)

Airport security alarm [TheAge](#)

Comms problems compound fire risks [TheAge](#)

Tas public phones disappearing fast [Mercury](#)

iiNet pulls out of internet filter trials [TheAge](#)

Economy/social/shelter/transport

Doing better for the unemployed [TheAge](#)

World

Tent cities sprout in US [TheAge](#)

Community thoughts

A local couple, Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert, started the ball rolling. An artist and an architect, they recently became the proud owners of a one-bedroom house in East Detroit for just \$1,900. Buying it wasn't the craziest idea. The neighborhood is almost, sort of, half-decent. Yes, the occasional crack addict still commutes in from the suburbs but a large, stable Bangladeshi community has also been moving in.

So what did \$1,900 buy? The run-down bungalow had already been stripped of its appliances and wiring by the city's voracious scrappers. But for Mitch that only added to its appeal, because he now had the opportunity to renovate it with solar heating, solar electricity and low-cost, high-efficiency appliances.

Buying that first house had a snowball effect. Almost immediately, Mitch and Gina bought two adjacent lots for even less and, with the help of friends and local youngsters, dug in a garden. Then they bought the house next door for \$500, reselling it to a pair of local artists for a \$50 profit. When they heard about the \$100 place down the street, they called their friends Jon and Sarah.

[Op-Ed Contributor - For Sale - The \\$100 House - NYTimes.com.](#)

A fascinating story of community re-growth demonstrating the power of the green revolution. It also demonstrates the importance of cheap land and the creativity that is possible when such opportunities occur.

Readers of this site may be aware that all the community's hard work will soon be taken away from them and profiteered by others who contributed very little to the community spirit. The ethos of community gardens, artist run spaces and the coolio grafitti that is probably already there will see land values start to rise.

Some say our home city benefited greatly from the early 90's recession. Access to cheap land and the ease of late night liquor licencing saw Melbourne become a cultural hot spot back before we attracted the World's Most Liveable city award (2002 & 2004) and it's accompanying speculative curse.

In time the inevitable predators that are land speculators appear. They will be watching Mitch and Gina's efforts in Detroit and silently buy up homes nearby. Any bets since this NY Times story appeared, the price of land has already jumped upwards in their little community hive.

This increase in land price, the economic rent, should be recycled back into community coffers so that:

- a) the community can look after itself,
- b) deadweight taxes that harm small business and thus wages can be abolished,
- c) speculators are deterred from hiking up prices so that
- d) the creatives that re-invented this community aren't ushered out by the high rents their trendiness attracts?

Caucus Curse

A Blind for Labor-Liberal Corporatism

28 March 2009 by Peter Henning

“Politics is now replete with careerists who lack the education, training, and political character to deal with issues of substance”.
(Dr Peter McMahon, Murdoch University, 24/3/09)

Some years ago in a public lecture Tasmanian feminist, academic and visiting professor of Australian History at Harvard University, Marilyn Lake, talked about the difficulties associated with writing in a way which communicated the intended meaning of the writer, which inhibited the ability of others, readers and critics, to distort the intended meaning, to corrupt it or to totally misinterpret it.

That of course, is the enduring fate of any and every piece of writing, because people will inevitably take what they want, like selecting from a supermarket shelf, without necessarily seeing the writer's intention. There will always be sections of a writer's work which might resonate, and sections which don't, however closely interconnected and interdependent those sections might be in the writer's intent.

This difficulty is particularly pronounced when it runs up against ingrained beliefs and values held by the reader who immediately rejects, without any intellectual engagement, the ideas, arguments or evidence they don't want to hear.

We all do this. We are hard-wired into being stubborn, disliking change, liking to be comfortable and seeking stability and certainty in our lives. The ancient Greeks understood this very well, as they did most other matters of profound importance to survival in their real world. Their notion of Cassandra, the Trojan princess in their Homeric tradition of the interplay between the supernatural and the human, who refused the sexual advances of the god Apollo, only to be condemned to a knowledge of the future that always would be ignored by those she warned, is a morality tale on many levels, not least that of people who don't see what is happening around them, whether from ignorance, denial, neglect, expediency, or sheer stupidity.

It is within this frame of the difficulty of constructing new ways of seeing things (how do you change the behaviour of the Easter Islanders from their path to destruction?) that I suggest the political party system in Australia and the way it works is moribund and contributing to our failure as a society. If any place on earth is headed for the fate of the Easter Islanders, Australia is it, and for much the same reasons.

At a recent public forum in Launceston, one of Australia's leading public intellectuals, historian Henry Reynolds, lamented that in Australian political debate there are essentially only two main views allowed space in the public arena, and they are the views of a small number of executive officials in the two main political groupings, Labor and Liberal.

While it is reasonable to contend that there is really only one voice, that of a thoroughly corporatised executive across the increasingly opaque political party divide – and more of that later – the point Reynolds was making about executive control is crucial to an understanding about the current Australian political system. Whatever comparisons we might make about executive authority and control exerted by dominant party leaders in the past, such as Billy Hughes, Robert Menzies, Gough Whitlam and others, it has only been in the last 30 years or so that there has been a real systemic shift of power and authority to the

executive, at the expense of broader participation of any kind, whether in internal party processes or in the wider public domain.

It is illustrative, for example, that federal ALP conferences, once an annual centre-piece of media attention for exposing internal debate about key policy areas, are now largely ignored, for good reason. Decisions are made elsewhere higher up the chain. Conferences are now applause galleries, a gathering of the faithful to bask in group-think reinforcement and refreshment, a time to glad-hand and pay homage to the leadership. No one takes them seriously.

On the other side of the ever-narrowing political divide, it was not too long ago that Liberals everywhere deplored unceasingly, ad nauseum, the notion of ALP caucus solidarity, once known as the “pledge”, as undemocratic, destructive of such fundamentals as individual conscience and freedom of speech, and indicative of “faceless” men pulling the strings behind the scenes. That is no longer the case, and there is now little difference, in practice, between the two main parties – although they would both beg to disagree about that, as they have when opportunity allows. To differ, to deviate, to dissent from the party line, invites excommunication, vilification, ostracism, and sanctimonious outrage from colleagues, Labor or Liberal.

“Caucus solidarity”, “discipline”, “towing the party line” – is arguably the single most important characteristic of the Australian party system, because it defines the whole nature of political discussion and debate in society, in the nation, in the states and in local communities.

There is a history to all this, of course, a history which is central to so much of importance in our national story, to who we are, to the very basis of our bedrock political assumptions and beliefs. It is a history with roots stretching back to multiple origins, some home grown, many imported at various times by different waves of migrants, both involuntary and voluntary, and well before the Australian colonies federated in 1901.

The notion of caucus solidarity was already alive and well (in the emerging ALP) when the first federal elections were held at the beginning of the 20th century. One very important reason for this was the massively destructive impact of the 1890s depression on trade unions, and the decision by labour leaders to focus on obtaining legislative power to reform, rather than relying so heavily on industrial action.

In essence, the young ALP transferred the union principles of collective bargaining and solidarity on the factory floor in the fight for wages and conditions, to the parliamentary arena. This was dramatically successful in the decade prior to World War I, and Australia probably led the western world in the implementation of (some types of) progressive social reform at the time – interestingly, until 1910, without the ALP forming a majority federal government in its own right.

The main reason for this was that the early anti-Labor political groupings were split on the issue of trade policy, (Deakinite protectionists versus Reid free-traders) enabling Labor to “offer support in return for concessions” (as NSW Labor politician George Black described the tactic in the 1890s) to Deakin's liberals.

It is also worth remembering, in this context, that Henry Higgins, a non-Labor minister in Australia's first federal ALP government in 1904 (short lived), was a liberal, and was the architect of Australia's minimum wage concept, which formed

the basis of conciliation and arbitration in wage setting for most of the 20th century.

But the value of the “pledge” prior to World War I was a no-brainer. Union membership was over 500,000 in a population of just three million before 1914. Caucus solidarity was the name of the game – if you could maintain the game.

The caucus system has held firm and strengthened, the anti-ALP parties gradually moving towards a mirror-image of the ALP, especially in recent years under Howard’s leadership between 1996 to 2007.

This trend is exemplified by the main exceptions to caucus solidarity in Australian political history. It is hard to imagine that any issue could shape a conscience vote within the contemporary caucus rigidity of Labor-Liberal as the conscription issue did (within the ALP) during World War I and the DLP split did during the 1950s over the role of communism in the union movement.

These ruptures splintered the ALP for years.

On the anti-ALP side, the trend has been much more obvious because they had further to travel, and through much of the 20th century, especially in the early years of the federation, for many liberals opposition to the ALP was based on a conscientious opposition to caucus rather than opposition for the need to address issues of social justice through legislation (Higgins and Deakin are both good examples of this).

As a result, the story of the Liberal Party (including its changes in nomenclature) has less coherence than the ALP, undergoing various collapses and reorganizations on several occasions before 1945, and then containing within it a long conflict between the Deakinite liberal tradition (more recently the wets) and the conservative tradition (increasingly dominant, with various fluctuations), culminating most memorably in Don Chipp’s break with the Liberals to form the Democrats. The Democrat experiment only hastened the trend in the Liberal conversion to stronger strictures of caucus conformity.

In essence, the establishment of a caucus mentality in anti-Labor occurred through a process of slow strangulation and elimination of Deakinite liberalism, virtually completed in the last decade of the 20th century. The deep hostility to Malcolm Fraser, (in his reincarnation as a Deakinite liberal in recent years) within the current Liberal Party establishment is testimony to this.

Parallel with the strengthening of the caucus system, the safety-valve mechanism of the “conscience vote” evolved, freeing MPs from the shackles of caucus solidarity on rare occasions. This has mainly been a concession to intra-party religious tensions, confined to irreconcilable differences (identified by the party hierarchy), and labeled as moral and ethical issues of conscience.

In a very real sense the complaint Henry Reynolds makes about the restriction of political debate in Australia has been with us for generations. It is ingrained. It is part of the collective psyche. Not just in Australia, but throughout the western world, more or less, incorporating much of Europe, Canada and the United States as well.

But especially in Australia.

Caucus now, more than ever, determines how parliaments operate in practice. At the same time, caucus now, more than ever, is tightly controlled by the executive. In some cases, such as the Tasmanian Lennon government, where the cabinet was effectively the caucus anyway, the executive control was

narrowed to a smaller group consisting of a minority of cabinet members, perhaps two or three.

With minor variations this is the way the business of state is carried out in all Australian parliaments. Parliamentary party leadership determines policy without regard to party rules and platform, parliamentary processes are regarded as tools to be manipulated, truncated and weakened – “Dorothy Dix” questions, shortened debate, less sitting days, deliberate obfuscation, and so on – and the good ol’ caucus “numbers” vote as they are told.

The most obvious example of this in Australia is the federal senate. Carefully designed by federationists to represent all states (now territories as well) equally, with an electoral system to allow (in theory) a broad base of political views from within each state, it has failed dramatically to fulfill that purpose. With some rare exceptions, when independents have been able to play important roles in framing legislation, the senate has been simply an extension of party caucuses.

And of course the federationists never considered the possibility that the electoral system for the senate would be so manipulated by party controls, to the extent of persuading people that their vote should be made on their behalf (just vote above the line and you don’t have to worry about selecting carefully between all the candidates) by a party. That is how, ironically, Victorian senator Stephen Fielding came to be elected, although he attracted less than 2% of the primary vote. Democracy? You must be joking.

Akin to this issue of the role of the senate, or any upper house in Australia, is the notion of “representative democracy”, and whether it actually works in practice where an executive controlled caucus rigidity dominates political practice. I would suggest that is not possible. Just as the senate is in no way a guardian of states’ rights, except by accident from time to time, so the House of Representatives is in no way representative of the interests of individual electorates, because caucus prevents that occurring. Instead, as we all know, electorates are just a mechanism for determining which political party will gain a majority of seats to form government. This is a far cry from the notion of “representative democracy”. In Australia representative democracy only exists at state or federal level when an independent is elected (for example, Tony Windsor in NSW) who deliberately seeks to represent the multi-faceted interests of his/her electorate. Under the caucus system, “representative democracy” is a farce and a lie.

This has been the case for many years, but it is only in more recent times that it has attracted serious public attention and prompted public discussion – almost as if it was a new phenomenon. This can be explained.

For much of the 20th century electors knew when they went into the ballot box at state and federal elections what they were voting for, and what they were voting against. Policies were much more explicit, at least in general terms. It was capital versus labour. Employers and workers on opposite sides of the political fence. The choices were transparent, articulated and understood.

I realize this is a generalization, but it holds true when broken down into smaller components at different times. For example, the 1950s ALP split created the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) which appealed to those who identified with the working class but were scared of “communists under the bed” within the union movement. It gave these people, especially working-class Catholics, at the strong urging of a politicized clergy (led by

Mannix and others) and the intellectual leadership of B.A. Santamaria in particular, an alternative “labour” option in the ballot box.

That element of clarity of difference was all pervasive, and persuasive beyond thought or challenge for almost all Australians through most of the 20th century. This was democracy in action, unquestionably, in the collective psyche. The choices were clear, unambiguous and resonant. We now use the term “rusted on” to describe what was much more entrenched in the past.

Much of that is no longer the case, and is shifting more rapidly now than at any time since the 1930s. The transformation began during the 1960s, as the baby-boomers gained the vote, and a whole swathe of generational voters whose parents-grandparents had voted anti-Labor crossed over, (Vietnam was crucial in this, but not the only factor) and continued to vote Labor for several decades – and many still do.

The ALP was transformed during the 1960s. The transformation splintered traditional notions of class interest and occurred gradually, but took off during the Hawke-Keating administration, preparing the ground for the convergence between Labor-Liberal which accelerated during the 1980s.

I would challenge anybody to articulate clearly any *really* important differences between Labor-Liberal at state and federal level in the current Australian polity which are more than marginal and confected, so difficult to discern across the policy spectrum as to be meaningless – and this includes industrial relations.

It is no accident that the transformation occurred in conjunction with an ideological convergence, which incorporated the slide of “liberalism” (in the Deakinite social justice mould) from the anti-Labor parties, and its replacement by free-market fundamentalism, in lock-step with the views espoused by the Chicago school of economics, led by Milton Friedman, and championed by Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom.

On the Labor side, the slide was from a battle with capital to an accord with capital, a welcoming of the key elements of neo-liberalism - privatization, deregulation and breaking the collective power of labour.

How was that possible? In the event, it proved remarkably straight-forward. In essence, it meant persuading workers that they were better off not being involved in collective bargaining, by persuading them not to be unionists, or by persuading unionists (especially union leaders) to identify with the interests of those who opposed redistribution of wealth from the top to the bottom. The Tasmanian branch of the forestry section of the CFMEU is a classic example of this in recent times.

Once this occurred the corporatisation of the Australian political system was in the bag. Aspiring politicians were now tossing coins about which party would best serve their careerist ambitions, a la Brendan Nelson, or even the republican-minded Malcolm Turnbull. All the state parties now have their “either-or” clones. If you can tell the difference between this and the AFL (Australian rules football) merry-go-round of coaches and players, while supporters are supposed to stay rusted on, I probably won’t believe you.

By the end of the 1980s this convergence was well underway. It became more and more difficult to differentiate Labor from anti-Labor on the basis of policy. Privatisation, deregulation,

stripping the unions of power and membership, fire sales of public assets, gradual scaling back of funding for public education and health, and from other infrastructure which was not of benefit to corporate interests, were the shared hallmarks of Labor and Coalition governments at both state and federal levels.

The name of the game slip-slided into carefully confected differentiations, with more and more focus on style rather than substance, on presenting a “small target”(Kim Beazley perfected this art, to the point of representing nothing at all) of refusing to talk about policy even during election campaigns, of waiting for the verbal “stumble”.

Political debate in Australia, historically rancorous and rude, but once sharply edged with policy differentiation, is now largely concerned with personal squabbles between executive officials, again usually meaningless assertion and counter-assertion, reported breathlessly in the mainstream media as “news”. Debate and discussion, inside and outside parliaments, is by no means discursive, but simply “parliamentary performance”, point-scoring, ego-driven rhetoric, centred on the personal and the careerist, the never-ending small-minded jockeying for position.

Corporations drive political decision-making in Australia irrespective of the “party” in power. The only real difference between the main parties now is their historical roots, and the odd quirk of organizational difference which flows from that. As their efforts at differentiation on anything at all become more extreme the closer they get to agreeing about everything anyway, the more they resort to the trivial. Any real differences between Kevin Rudd and Malcolm Turnbull in ideological terms are difficult to identify. How are their confected disagreements any different to the differences between their own colleagues within their own party rooms? Rhetorical attempts at difference are strident and aggressive, but minor, marginal and essentially meaningless in reality.

It is instructive that exactly this point is raising concern about the British party system, but, unlike in Australia, is being articulated from within the system as well as from without. The British Labour MP Tony Wright earlier this month voiced his concern about the “adversarial pantomime” in the House of Commons that (as reported in an op-ed by the Guardian’s Polly Toynbee) “grows more shrill the less difference between parties. Synthetic arguments mean conflict whenever possible and agreement only when unavoidable.”

As Toynbee comments of the UK, “thirty years of governments tying their fortunes to the chariot wheels of deregulated markets have led us to the worst crash in living memory... and blind pursuit of growth no longer looks economically, ecologically or politically sustainable”.

Toynbee writes of the “moribund party structure”, the roadblocks to democratic engagement, producing an anger about the state of politics which is resulting in the formation of alternative grass-roots organizations, such as the “formidable” London Citizens movement, and the “growing attendances at meetings organized by myriad groups”.

The main difference between the Australian party caucus system and that of the two countries we inherited or copied from, Britain and the United States, is the stronger rigidity of the Australian system. It is possible, in fact common, in both the US Congress and the British House of Commons, for MPs to break party ranks without being expelled. This creates intra-party

tensions and antagonisms, to be sure, but it also creates healthier debate than occurs in the Australian system.

This is not to say that there is not a certain ubiquitous character to the narrowing of the line between mainstream political parties, (nor to argue that it has not been characteristic of the US for many more years than in Australia) and that a caucus conformity is a curse in all. (One very interesting question about the US now is whether the election of Obama will see sharpening differentiations, reflecting the resurgence of democratic participation in the primaries, in fund raising and in voting for Obama, but the signs are not good).

But it is to argue that the caucus system in Australia, so productive as a worthwhile means to a social democratic reform agenda in the early Australian Commonwealth, has become a hindrance. It has been transformed into a threat to democracy, a tool which has outgrown its usefulness and now increasingly prevents effective political action in the interests of society.

There is no particular reason why we should label our system as a "representative democracy". The signs are everywhere that this is not the case. To cite one important recent example in Tasmania, Launceston resident and concerned citizen, Geoff Smedley, wrote this about the problem of the destruction of the Tamar River:

"Michelle O'Byrne, while holding (the federal seat of Bass for Labor) for a short stint, certainly was made aware of all the known problems associated with the Tamar's demise, including the massive catchment problems. Attempted recourse action on the matter was sought ...on several occasions at the time and while assurances were given, any degree of delivery failed. Now reappearing as a recycled state member and obeying the party line, there are set answers for any out of depth questions to avoid embarrassment while being programmed..."

If this is not evidence enough, not just about caucus considerations of personal position and conformity, but also about the myth of representation, just consider the notion of Scott McLean (Tasmanian boss of the CFMEU) even considering seeking Labor Party endorsement for election at any level of government (whether he does or not). He has been vociferous in his support of the pulp mill being built in the Tamar Valley, irrespective of its potential negative impact on workers and their families across a whole range of industries in northern Tasmania. He has labeled the residents of the Tamar Valley who oppose the pulp mill on the basis of all sorts of reasonable social, economic and environmental grounds as "terrorists".

McLean epitomizes so well the deliberately contrived "appearance" of the Labor Party as representing workers' interests, to shore up the "rusted on vote". But he has more in common with Robin Gray and John Gay. McLean strenuously supported John Howard in the federal election of 2004, helping him to be re-elected. He is the classic model of union-capital accord in the interests of corporate power and wealth, of the convergence between Labor-Liberal and their support for neo-liberal free market fundamentalism (except when corporations need their losses socialized), clearly seen whenever Gunns has decided to shed labour. If he voiced any criticism of Gunns when this occurred I would be interested to see it. Has he suggested, for example, that perhaps Gunns' directors and managers be paid less than Australia's Prime Minister at a time when Gunns is shedding jobs? Ask yourself this: what is his real role as state secretary of the CFMEU? For workers or capitalists?

The point is that Tamar Valley people are not terrorists. They do not have political representation by the Labor-Liberal accord. That is why they are labeled. This in itself is a powerful indication and indictment of the caucus system as it now operates. But it is also an indication of how the political party system has become democratically dysfunctional, self-serving and corporatised, against the interests of the people.

In this context, caucus solidarity should not exempt MPs from personal political responsibility, nor shield them from moral and ethical considerations in the decisions they take. Politicians have a choice in maintaining caucus solidarity or breaking it, by crossing the floor. Their own conscience would tell them if they should oppose a "bad" law or allow due process to be trashed without taking a stand.

These moral and ethical considerations range from impacts on the health and safety of people, and the well-being of existing communities and businesses, to questions about the probity of government relations with a major corporation, the probity of planning procedures, the very processes by which parliament operates in practice, the use of public money for subsidies and promotion, and the behaviour of politicians in carrying out their public duties.

If individual politicians maintain caucus solidarity, or allow themselves to be gagged, knowing there is strong evidence in the public domain from medical authorities, scientific experts and existing experience in other places, including foreign countries, that peoples' health or safety could be jeopardized, but choose to ignore that evidence, they are threats to society and enemies of real democracy.

Individual politicians should not be able to hide behind caucus solidarity when they know there is strong evidence that the citizenry could be harmed by their vote.

In the UK and the US there is now much stronger public debate about this, and much greater pressure being placed on elected "representatives" than in Australia. In the UK there are now some vigorous efforts to break the shackles, by rethinking how political representation can be achieved, by forming umbrella groups of like-minded organizations, a framework structure rather than a party organization.

In the US, as mentioned before, the success of Obama was not based on the old party ways of doing things, but on a much more democratically-based and organized involvement of people at the local level. This is already producing a virulent backlash from the old political-corporate alliances determined to reassert the grip of neo-liberal policies.

The question for us all in Australia, and very importantly for us all in Tasmania, is whether the convergence between the main parties continues on the path it is currently going, strengthening executive authority and confirming parliamentary processes and institutional structures as merely useful tools for those seeking political power. The existing nature of caucus and the way it works here, if unreformed, will ensure that the interests of the people will become more and more separate and distant from the interests of those sitting in parliaments.

This trend is dangerous, but is more and more apparent.

There is a clear and compelling need for Australians who are interested in strengthening democracy to resist the constant call for more of the same, for a reinforcement of one voice in the public domain. That call will get louder as the economic problems worsen, as climate change issues become more

compelling. We are seeing it now with the Labor-Liberal accord in Tasmania flatly rejecting minority government, demanding “stability”, a catch-cry for more power in the hands of an executively-controlled caucus, “especially on the part of those in power and those who benefit most from the existing order”

In a recent article in the *New Statesman* by Neal Lawson and John Harris (“No Turning Back”, 5/3/09) about the need for political change in the UK, they said this:

“The catalyst for what must happen next is that we must simply refuse to go back. We know the consequences of a desired return to “normality”: house-price bubbles, personal debt, boom and bust, insecurity and long hours at work, anxiety on the streets, stress in our homes, and fears about the survival of our planet

What all of us who want a more equal, sustainable, democratic and liberal Britain and, indeed, world now have to recognise is that we can no longer go on trying to cope with the symptoms of market fundamentalism. It is time to address their causes. And to succeed in that, we have to work together. Isolated measures on the environment or inequality are not enough; single issues have to be joined up

What this means is the creation of a politics that transcends tribal party lines... It is time for like-minded people to listen and speak to one another.

We can build a mixed economy in which the industries and services that the nation relies on to function are socialised, not privatised. We can allow markets to flourish, but know we are better served by more plural and diverse means of production – such as social enterprise, voluntary organisations, mutuals and co-operatives. We recognise that more democracy is nearly always the answer to the problems we face, not just in government, but in our workplaces and communities. We can close the gap between the rich and the poor. And we must put the needs of the planet before the blind pursuit of profit

Once in a generation you have an opportunity to change society in profound ways. For all the hardship and insecurity bound up in recent events, we are lucky to live in such a moment. What seemed infallible until recently – the essential credo behind the last 30 years of economic history – has crumbled, like communism before it. Yet this is not a crisis of capitalism, but a crisis of a society and democracy that have failed to regulate the market. It will become a crisis for our planet, too, unless we resolve it.

A caucus mindset cannot deal with these issues. It can only make them worse. Andrew Wilkie has put his hand up in Tasmania. As have Ted Sands and Peter Wish-Wilson. These people are like-minded, but not likely to be swayed by corporate interests above the intertwined social-environmental-economic interests. Perhaps, just perhaps, this is the start for something better

One thing is very clear. The rigidity of a caucus system which is designed for the personal, the careerist, the Labor-Liberal-corporatist alliance, must be broken if Tasmania is to have a healthy and prosperous future

We have a political party system designed in the 19th century which has not really changed much since 1901, except in increasing caucus conformity and party rigidity ever since. This is unhealthy at best, but much more likely to be increasingly more destructive (exponentially even) the longer it lasts.