

# The Big Picture

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“News to use & amuse”



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## Bureaucracy in action

More and more authors in the mainstream media are recognising the depressing facts behind Australia's outmoded system of governance...

THE bureaucratic ineptitude being revealed at the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission is at once extraordinary and infuriating. The lessons have implications for every aspect of government in Australia and demand a radical rethink about the dominance of politicised bureaucracies within our lives...

What emerges is a layer of self-styled bureaucratic intelligentsia devising policies that became sacrosanct in themselves regardless of their original purpose.

Ideological processes left no room for common sense, pragmatism or compassion, and opportunities to help vulnerable people were wasted.

Policies bore testimony to the assumption that the population was so imbecilic as to need greater protection from itself than from raging wildfire. [Australian](#)

Governments and politicians are sleepwalking through our requirements, fussing about false emails while our costs of government are going through the roof. Citizens are losing their lives, health, wealth and property due to hopeless government methods and an almost complete lack of principled leadership.

The winding trail of (bushfire) blunders growing from stubbornly centralised remote control defies the imagination. Emergency call centres were overwhelmed while extensive volunteer networks lay idle. [Australian](#)

The same problem repeats on other levels...

This lesson (on internet censorship) for the Rudd Government is a straightforward one: Authoritarian imposition of top-down policy has had its day. Citizens know more about their own communities than bureaucrats, and more about society than politicians. This age of ever-increasing connectivity obliges the Government to interact constructively with the community *before and during* policy development, rather than continuing the practice of dreaming policies up behind closed doors and only releasing them for public comment after the decision to implement them has been made. [NewMatilda](#)

Labor appears to be repeating the mistakes made by the Soviet Union and other places that have wanted 'social engineering'. Big centralised policies that are supposed to cause everyone to behave the same way, particularly in complying with authorities.

Yet Labor Ministers appear bemused when citizens react poorly to being told how to live their lives by bureaucrats and politicians living high off the public purse.

Day after day, emergency service tsars present themselves to the royal commission as though they are the stars atop the tree of knowledge...

The CFA seems genuinely bamboozled that a handful of head office executives did not prove to be wiser than its thousands of volunteers who have intimate knowledge of

local roads, properties and personalities. [Australian](#)

So it is with our politicians. They think the problem is the public, just as many collapsing industries thought their problem was ungrateful customers.

Governments need to revise their worldview and recognise that Australia is made up of Australians, each with a unique perspective and unique sets of needs. Each Australian contributes in many different ways to our country and each deserves reasonable consideration in exchange for their taxes and other sacrifices (e.g. military service). Furthermore each of them is probably the best person to understand their situation.

Of late Conroy has gone quiet on the censorship front, probably because even he knows that every time he's forced to open his mouth he [says something stupid](#). My advice to Rudd would be to keep Conroy in his box and take a lead from Lundy - bringing expert members of the public into open policy development by means of the consultative, inclusive process that she has been pioneering. That sort of approach will add real substance to the Prime Minister's famous rhetoric about the value of evidence-based policy, and is bound to make the Government look more like they know what they're talking about. [NewMatilda](#)

Such ideas stand in stark contrast to state Labor governments that, all around Australia, are busy removing the public and businesses from planning processes. By doing this they are exposing local businesses and communities to incompatible industries and projects, while scaring off legitimate investors by creating an unstable investment environment.

As one worker at ACL bearings that badly needs help has said...

"We feel that we have been abandoned, forgotten, cheated and then treated as political pawns in some poor excuse of a chess game in which everyone will ultimately lose if attitudes don't change quickly." [Examiner](#)

Now we read of another bureaucratic 'initiative'...

The House of Representatives economics committee will examine the key factors influencing the rate of productivity growth in Australia, with particular focus on why it has slowed since the rapid expansion of 1990s. [Telegraph](#)

Nothing like another committee to increase our productivity!

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## That was the week that was

### Governance & spin

Bureaucratic failures fuel fire losses [TheAustralian](#)  
NSW tender process too expensive [SMH](#)  
Cost rises loaded onto Tasmanians [Mercury](#)  
NSW centralised purchasing costs more [SMH](#)  
NSW govt receipts down – just increase fines [Telegraph](#)  
Stimulus (n): a huge amount of money spent on crap [TheAge](#)  
Call for apology to 500,000 kids abused in State 'care' [SMH](#)  
Public service a disservice to democracy [TheAustralian](#)  
Mal needs to lose 'born to rule' style: Costa [TheAustralian](#)

### Forestry/Food/Agriculture

ASX grills Great Southern on yields [Stock&Land](#)  
Forest industry boost [Mercury](#) [Official statement download](#)  
Food Inc screening worries big Ag [HuffingtonPost](#)  
Labor backs Gunns mill [TheAustralian](#)

### Climate/water/energy/environment

Plastic bags damage environment [TheAge](#)  
Canberra deals third body blow to solar [TheAge](#)  
Vic water policy a shambles [TheAge](#)  
No water – no food [TheAge](#)  
Vic water bills set to skyrocket [TheAge](#)

### Health/education revolution/communication/defence

2,000 NSW teachers face axe [Telegraph](#)  
Superbug outbreak at Royal Hobart [Mercury](#)  
Metering issues cause massive BigPond bills [TheAge](#)  
Panadol for broken neck [SMH](#)  
Australia risks repeat of asbestos tragedy [NewMatilda](#)  
Vic mental health system in crisis [TheAge](#)

### Economy/social/shelter/transport

Tackling the tax system [TheAge](#)  
Haneef lessons create rule change [TheAge](#)  
Spending spree threatens probity [TheAustralian](#)  
Slumlords symptom of ailing system [TheAge](#)  
Organised crime infiltrates our wharves and ports [TheAge](#)  
Super fails Australians [HeraldSun](#)  
Jail rates soar after Death in Custody report [SMH](#)  
25% of pensioners living in poverty [ABC](#)  
Rail versus road figures don't add up [TheAge](#)  
Welcome abolishment of detention debts: Georgiou [TheAge](#)  
Treatment of delinquents wastes lives of our young [SMH](#)  
The shocking amounts spent on lobbying in the US [ICH](#)

## Frivolous debate ignores vital issues

[TheAge Letters](#) June 24, 2009

PARTISAN debate rages in Australia over how many emails were sent by government officials in support of a pro-Labor car dealer. Vastly more important is the worsening climate genocide (global warming contributes to 16 million excess deaths annually).

Top British climate scientist Dr James Lovelock has estimated that fewer than 1 billion people will survive global warming this century. This constitutes a prospective climate genocide that will kill 10 billion non-Europeans.

Australia is the world's biggest coal exporter and a world-leading greenhouse gas polluter. Australia's domestic and exported annual per capita greenhouse gas pollution is 54 tonnes carbon-dioxide-equivalent per person per year - 10 times that of China, 25 times that of India and 60 times that of Bangladesh.

Yet pro-coal Rudd Labor policy means that Australia will increase its domestic and exported greenhouse gas pollution to 80 per cent above the 2000 level by 2050. GP Mcleod

## Wealth transfer – from us to ?



AUSTRALIAN households have lost an extraordinary 36 per cent of their financial wealth since the economic crisis began...

"It's the result of the collapsing sharemarket," said Savanah Sebastian, a Commonwealth Securities economist. "Australians are more exposed to shares than the citizens of virtually any other country." [SMH](#)

## Parties are our problem

Imagine that we had a representative democracy,

**Representative democracy** is a form of government founded on the principle of elected individuals representing the people. [Answers.com](#)

Were that the case then our politicians would represent the diverse views of the electorate.

But that doesn't, and cannot, happen because the parties dictate the policies of the politicians. Instead of candidates finding out what we want, and then striving to find ways to deliver those things, we have a choice of A, B or C from various parties. We vote for the least worst of the choices.

Our problems appear structural and we are unlikely to get any real representation from our politicians as long as the party system holds sway.

## The Scandal is Empty Scandals

By Ben Eltham © [NewMatilda](#) 23 Jun 2009



The 'Utegate' affair wasted our time, robbed real issues of oxygen, and further eroded faith in our system. Now, while Turnbull's paying for it, many others are guilty too.

"Resign!"

"No, YOU resign!"

"No, I won't."

"Well I won't either."

And that, pretty much, is all the OzCar, or "Utegate", affair is about.

Although it features dramatic Senate Estimates testimony, a forged email, reciprocal calls for resignation and some extraordinarily vicious and emotional parliamentary debate, not to mention a protagonist with a name out of a Dickens novel giving a performance out of an Artaud play, the OzCar debate is not about anything as real as actual policy. It's not even about integrity. It's about tactics. In other words, it's not really about anything substantial at all.

But tactics and the cut-and-thrust of parliamentary attack and counter-attack seems to be what most politicians and political journalists care about in this country. For the media, it's politics as a football game, complete with armchair coaches and half-time analysis. For both Labor and the Opposition, it seems, this affair is evidence that politics is really about manipulating the political process, rather than about the policies you propose to implement. The result is that in a week when emissions trading legislation is to be finally voted on in the Senate, Australia's legislature and a large part of its senior public service have been consumed by a circus.

Let's go over the facts. When the global financial crisis hit the international automotive industry hard last year, car dealers found they were suddenly unable to secure finance for their show-room vehicles. In parallel with his other — surprisingly successful — efforts to keep the Australian economy from collapsing, Treasurer Wayne Swan investigated policies to prop up Australian car dealerships with Government [finance guarantees](#). The Government decided to investigate setting up a \$2 billion fund for this purpose, a so-called "special purpose vehicle" which would be run out of the Treasury department for the purposes of guaranteeing finance to motor dealers.

Ipswich car dealer John Grant heard about the scheme. A friend of the Prime Minister and the donor of one clapped-out Mazda ute to his local election campaign, Grant approached his local MP, Bernie Ripoll, who referred the matter on to the Treasurer's office. Grant's case was then raised by members of Wayne Swan's staff with Treasury public servants — including the now

famous Godwin Grech — who were putting together the OzCar program. Grant's name was apparently specifically mentioned by Grech in a meeting between Treasury officials and Ford Credit.

No money was ever dispensed. In fact, OzCar has not even been voted for by Parliament. But the Opposition thought it smelled a rat. Apparently, Malcolm Turnbull was aware of the existence of an email from the Prime Minister's Office, which would implicate the Prime Minister in pressuring Treasury to arrange finance for John Grant. Liberal Senator Eric Abetz determined to question Treasury about the matter in Senate Estimates hearings.

Last Friday, the unfortunate Godwin Grech was called to appear before Estimates, where he gave his now infamous testimony, complete with stuttering answers and riveting existential anguish. Grech claimed that he was under the impression that Grant was an important person, not just your average constituent, and that this matter was of significant interest to the Treasurer. Grech also said he might be wrong, but that it was "recollection" that he had seen an email — somewhere, somehow — from "the PMO" about the matter in question.

In the wake of Grech's testimony, which looked very bad indeed on Friday night television, Turnbull called for Wayne Swan and then Kevin Rudd to resign. Whether it was wise to do so, it certainly pushed the scandal into overdrive. By Saturday, the BBC and major news outlets globally were reporting the resignation call as major news. The story of course dominated the Australian news media over the weekend.

So began the hunt for the "missing email", first leaked to Steve Lewis from *The Daily Telegraph*. Turnbull arguably alluded to it in his [strange conversation](#) with Andrew Charlton at the Mid-Winter Ball. The Prime Minister and Treasurer sent staff scurrying back to their email servers to scour their records for it. Nothing turned up. The Australian National Auditor and the Federal Police were called in.

And then it all unravelled. The Australian Federal Police raided Godwin Grech's house yesterday, and quickly determined that an email on his personal computer was indeed the email in question — and that it was forged. The email was a fake, just as Kevin Rudd said it was.

Suddenly, Malcolm Turnbull's own position looked grave. The Opposition Leader had pressed his attack too far. Now everyone realised he had done so with falsified evidence. Last night, he was forced to admit he had never seen the fake email. This morning, he was forced to admit Rudd had no case to answer.

The scale of the Opposition's overreach is staggering. On the basis of little more than a report of an email and one bad afternoon in Senate Estimates, Turnbull and his front-bench had called for the Prime Minister and the Treasurer to resign. The Government responded by calling for Turnbull to resign. Needless to say, that won't happen either.

It's worth discussing the Westminster convention of resignation briefly. In British politics, and in ours supposedly also, ministers who mislead Parliament are supposed to resign from their appointments. Of course, this rarely happens. In fact, it hasn't occurred in Australian Federal Parliament in the last generation. Whether or not they actually lied, Peter Reith and Alexander Downer certainly "misled" Parliament over the children overboard and AWB scandals when they were the ministers for Defence and Foreign Affairs respectively. Both relied on weasel words and bureaucratic denial to tough it out. Neither resigned.

Wayne Swan's misdemeanor, if he even did commit one, is far

more minor. His contention that John Grant didn't receive any "special treatment" is essentially true: Grant received no more attention than countless other party donors, big business lobby groups and special pleaders of all stripes receive every day in every government department in the land. At a time when billions are being given to foreign-owned car corporations, and billions more are promised to polluting fossil fuel companies, John Grant got his request followed up with a few emails. He hasn't received a cent.

That doesn't mean this scandal hasn't hurt the Government, and particularly Swan. It has. But it has hurt Turnbull and his credibility far more. This kind of scandal blackens the name of all politicians. But it makes Turnbull in particular look grubby and cheap. It's the sort of thing that reinforces the view of many voters that politics is a game played by shouting men over trivial matters. In sum, it's bad for democracy.

The media is equally culpable. Although there are outstanding exceptions like the *Australian Financial Review's* Laura Tingle, as a group the Canberra press gallery seems unwilling — perhaps unable — to engage with policy particulars. This makes them all the more susceptible to reporting politics as a horse race or sporting event. The glee with which political journalists pounce on any "scandal" and attach the suffix "-gate" to it is a perfect example. Journalists for the Murdoch newspapers are merely the most visible enthusiasts for the trend; the flaw is collective and widespread.

For Turnbull and the Liberals, this is a disaster. If he had simply expressed concern and argued for a thorough investigation, Turnbull would be insulated from the blow-back he is now experiencing. It's all the more puzzling given that the Coalition was starting to gain traction with its relentless attack on Government spending and debt, and had scared Labor enough to provoke personal attacks against Turnbull's previous career as a lawyer and merchant banker. It's tempting to conclude that Anthony Albanese is right when he argues that Turnbull has opted for the "low road".

What would principled conservatism in this country look like? It might start by acknowledging (as Turnbull has but his broader party has not) the scientific reality of climate change. Then the Liberals could work to shape a policy response framed by the principles of small government, economic freedom and personal liberty that they hold dear. For instance, the Opposition could be working to develop an emissions trading scheme far more transparent and less distorting than the one Labor has given us. A principled conservative opposition might also develop a suite of alternative policies to achieve Liberal goals, and a realistic alternative budget that could pay for them.

Unlike a nasty smear campaign, all this requires hard work. Until the Coalition is ready for this hard work, it will struggle to regain government.

## In Search Of Rank And File

By Aron Paul © NewMatilda

23 Jun 2009



The non-Labor parties are looking to democratic reform as a means of boosting their decreasing membership.

On election day it is not simply the party with the best ideas that wins.

A political party, to be a viable force, must have more than policies and parliamentarians. It also needs to have a critical mass of activists who are members or supporters of the parliamentary party. These are the people who mobilise at election time to help the parliamentarians and candidates, as well as being the talent pool from which the parliamentarians and candidates are primarily drawn. The labour movement parties in Australia and in the other comparable democracies pioneered what came to be known as "the mass party", consisting not only of prominent backers and parliamentarians but also of "rank and file" members who would have a stake in its future.

Its key to electoral success was its effectiveness as a democratic organisation binding the parliamentary party to the people. In its early history the rise of the labour movement parties was meteoric, and they smashed the old informal parliamentary groupings.

In Australia, it was Robert Menzies who organised non-Labor into a mass party with a vibrant and loyal membership to rival Labor. Now, with Labor in the ascendant and the Liberals out of office everywhere but Western Australia, non-Labor is looking to democratic ideas once more as it seeks ways out of its current crisis.

In Victoria — once the heartland of Menzies's Liberals — moribund branches and membership threaten to undermine the critical mass necessary for the Liberals to win elections. Meanwhile the National Party, perpetually under attack all over the country from the major parties and independents, is now taking an even more radical step to populate their ranks or perish, by introducing US style "open primaries" into their preselection process.

Non-Labor is in a race to change itself, and its success or failure at democratic reform now will play a major role in determining the fate of future elections.

At stake is not merely the colour of future governments, but also the way in which citizens participate in Australian democracy. Successful democratic reform within one of the major parties will revolutionise Australian politics, as a successful party will by necessity lead all others down the same path. Based on recent trends, such a revolution will likely bring Australia closer to the American experience of politics.

The Liberals and Nationals attribute their current malaise to an

underlying decline in the democratic health of their organisations. Reformers in both parties see increased democratic engagement as the road back to victory.

In their "Liberal Renewal" project (2008), the Victorian Secretariat headed by State President David Kemp undertook "an intensive enquiry into the reasons for our failure to win elections". At its base was the recognition that "both our organisation and our parliamentary team depend on the support of a vibrant and effective grassroots party".

The project's conclusions were that the Liberal Party did not have the members and resources to match on the ground the forces of the Labor Party and the ACTU. Current trends in membership and resources are also in "the wrong direction", it reported, especially in terms of the need to recruit "thousands of new members in the younger and middle age groups". While the median age of the Victorian electorate is 43, the median age of the Victorian Liberal Party is 62. A party organisation that boasted 50,000 members in 1949 now has a little over 13,000 members concentrated disproportionately around the federal seats of Kooyong and Higgins. In 1977, 67 Liberal branches had over 100 members, compared to just seven such branches in 2007. Retention is as serious a problem as recruitment, with a churn of nearly half the members and average membership span of just 18 months.

Liberal Renewal reported that the key to attracting members and supporters is "to provide members with a party where they feel they are listened to ... where they can feel significant satisfaction with their involvement in politics". As well as a rejuvenated local Party organisation, there needed to be greater connectedness between MPs and supporters.

It is these findings that are behind the push to democratise. Internal consultation picked up "a sense that pre-selections and elections within the party at higher levels are 'closed shops' — the results are tied up beforehand and that ordinary members do not have the say and influence they were seeking when they joined". Among the solutions proposed by reformers were "pre-selections for lower house seats to be conducted by plebiscites of all Party members in an electorate", including for the senate.

Previously, democracy in the Liberal party has been of a far more indirect nature, with branches electing delegates to councils. With far fewer active members and branches however, the party believes that a shift towards more direct democracy will not just empower members, but eliminate much of the bureaucratic process within the local party organisation and free up energy for activist activity. Liberal Renewal sees the internet as a particular tool of such democratisation, urging "the establishment of a state of the art internet web platform" for the party to be a key plank in democratising the party as well as attracting younger and more activist members.

There has also been a significant cultural shift in Australia since the foundation of the Liberal Party. Where popular culture goes, so politics must follow. Australians have recently become far more exposed to direct democracy due to the rapid explosion of reality TV voting and to the high coverage given to the highly democratised practice of American politics during the 2008 primary season. Voting has in both cases also proven a highly effective impetus to money raising. The interactive nature of internet culture and its high prevalence among the younger generations has also laid the groundwork for a radically democratised political culture. It has raised expectations among those who join political parties that they should be able to participate, particularly through voting.

The National Party leader Andrew Stoner and party chairwoman Christine Ferguson have seen this potential and taken democratic reform a step further than the Liberal reformers by opening the party not only to "empowering members", but the broader voter base. The Nationals are already a democratic mass party with a large membership. This has been a key to their longevity despite all the prophecies of doom levelled against them by the city. But it remains a party besieged particularly by the trend towards Independent voting in regional areas. The proposal to open its preselection to the broader electorate is a way of building and retaining a connection between the local community and the eventual National candidates. The Nationals have seen the writing on the wall and are trying to head it off.

Both reform movements in the Liberal and National parties demonstrate the potential resilience of the party system at a time when Labor is looking hegemonic in its financial, organisational and political dominance. Whether these reforms will be seriously under way or bearing fruit within the current electoral cycle however looks doubtful.

Non-Labor is not yet ready to win again, which is why they are in no hurry for an early election. The current "loss of critical mass and vibrancy" threatens the very viability of the Liberal Party as a party of government. In terms of talented candidates, diversity of ideas and fundraising capacity, the Liberal party has fallen behind Labor. Of course, many of the entrenched elites of the non-Labor parties would rather sit it out and wait for Labor to fail. That is the main reason they are not yet ready to lead.