

Distrustful, Disenchanted and Disengaged? Polled Opinion on Politics, Politicians and the Parties: an Historical Perspective*

Murray Goot

We are living at a time, it is widely remarked, when voters are increasingly disengaged from politics, distrustful of politicians and the political process and disenchanted with the major parties. Politics, politicians and the political parties have never been particularly highly praised by the Australian public: reports of ‘widespread distrust’ go back a long way.¹ Indeed, in the view of one political scientist, Dean

* A lecture based on this paper was presented in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 24 November 2000. The author acknowledges the comments of Elizabeth Reid on the penultimate draft. A slightly different version appears in David Burchell and Andrew Leigh, eds, *The Prince's New Clothes: Why Do Australians Dislike Their Politicians*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2001.

¹ Around the time of federation, the New Zealand politician and author William Pember Reeves noted the ‘unpopularity’ of politicians, at least in Australia; W.P. Reeves, *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 1, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1902, p. 54. More recently, Peter Botsman has gone further and argued that distrust of politicians can be traced to federation itself when ‘the people’ were left out of the process; P. Botsman, *The Great Constitutional Swindle: a Citizen's View of the Australian Constitution*, Pluto Press, Annandale, NSW, 2000, p. xii. After the Second World War, Stewart Howard, in the throes of moving from the office of the New South Wales Labor Premier, William McKell, to work for the federal Liberal leader, R.G. Menzies, observed ‘a widespread and expressed distrust, in some quarters despisal of our politicians’; S. Howard, ‘State of Democracy’, *Australian Quarterly* vol. 18, no. 2, 1946, p. 17. And following a series of enquiries into parliamentary salaries in the 1950s—enquiries that generated letters, protests and representations opposing any increase—the low prestige of politicians as a class’ was noted once more; H. Mayer, P. Loveday and P. Westerway, ‘Images of Politics: an Analysis of Letters to the Press on the Richardson Report’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1960, pp. 153–75; S. Encel, ‘Power’, in P. Coleman, ed. *Australian Civilisation*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1962, pp. 209–10; also T.R. Reese, *Australia in the Twentieth Century: a Political History*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1964, p. 218.

Jaensch, the ‘main component’ of Australian political culture has long been ‘a combination of apathy towards politics, and a scepticism, even a cynicism, towards its institutions and political actors’.²

But the present malaise, in which ‘healthy scepticism’ has turned into ‘bleak cynicism’, is presented as palpably new.³ The distinguished journalist Paul Kelly laments that ‘[w]here people previously [in the 1960s] believed in at least some political leaders, today [1994] there is cynicism, mistrust or disgust with leaders and the political system itself.’⁴ And the doyenne of the Canberra press gallery, Michelle Grattan, writes of ‘a growing distrust of and disillusionment with governments and governance’, and of a ‘crisis of cynicism’, as if the condition were so obvious that no specific evidence of it need be cited.⁵ Conclusions of this kind are far from isolated. On the contrary, it is now the common wisdom of political commentary that interest in politics is waning, that the standing of politicians is woefully low, and that for the populace at large it no longer matters which of the major parties wins—a reality whose existence is merely masked by yet another self-serving device of the politicians, compulsory voting.⁶

During the 1998 federal election campaign, voters were widely characterised as indifferent to the electoral process, disdainful of politicians, and disillusioned with both sides of politics. On this, at least, both ends of the media were agreed: the *Daily Telegraph* emphasised that the election had come at a time when voters had ‘shed much of their respect for politicians and most of their attachment to political parties’, while the ABC’s *Background Briefing* averred that there was ‘no respect for our highest leaders’ any more ‘and little interest’ in what they had to say.⁷ In a book about ‘Australia beyond 1998’, published after the election, Mark Westfield, the *Australian’s* business columnist, proffered the ‘electorate’s extreme cynicism towards politicians’ as an explanation for the success of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party.⁸

The rise of One Nation, and of minor party and independent candidates more generally, is certainly one reason why our public spaces have been awash in recent years with this sort of rhetoric. Economic and social reforms—economic rationalism, multiculturalism and so on—said to be driven by elites rather than demanded by the

² D. Jaensch, *Election! How and Why Australia Votes*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1995, p. 146.

³ S. Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, in D. Glover and G. Patmore, eds. *For the People: Labor Essays 2001*, Pluto Press, Annandale, NSW, 2000, p. 182.

⁴ P. Kelly, *Paradise Divided: the Changes, the Challenges, the Choices for Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 2000, p. 110.

⁵ M. Grattan, ‘Editorial Independence: an Outdated Concept?’, *Australian Journalism Monographs*, No. 1, Department of Journalism, University of Queensland, 1998, p. 3.

⁶ See, for example, F. Devine, ‘Freedom gets a vote of confidence’, *Australian*, 9 November, 2000. As with other remarks about the present condition of public opinion, there are much earlier occasions on which the same thing was said; see, for example, C.H. Grattan, *Introducing Australia*, The John Day Company, New York, 1942, p. 17. Compulsory voting has always been a misnomer: what is required of voters is that they turn out.

⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, (Sydney) 13 August 1998.

⁸ M. Westfield, ‘The Business of Balance’, in M. Waldren, ed. *Future Tense: Australia Beyond Election 1998*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 1999, p. 67.

public, are a second reason for the expression of such disquiet. And a sense that the major parties have converged—in terms of their policies, their (in)competence and the backgrounds of their front- and back-benchers—is a third reason for the spray.

On the standing of the parties, in particular, no voice of the people has been more eloquent than the country's most widely respected social researcher, Hugh Mackay. In his best-selling book, *Reinventing Australia*, Mackay insists that in the post-Whitlam years a party contest organised around differences in policy and philosophy came to be replaced by a politics of pragmatism and personality. Ignoring those who have argued that a transformation of this kind was precisely a characteristic of the rise of Whitlam,⁹ Mackay goes on to argue that as a result of the post-Whitlam transformation there developed a growing sense among voters that the two-party system had 'lost its way, or, perhaps lost its point'; and that the electoral cynicism this engendered was 'now so high that it might well stimulate some demand for a redefinition of our political institutions.'¹⁰ On this view, the success of Hanson might best be seen as the rising up of 'the people' against 'the politicians'. Prior to her success, '[n]o amount of complaint about the behaviour of politicians, no amount of bleating about the gulf between political discourse and the concerns of ordinary Australians, and no amount of "swinging", seemed to convince the major parties that they had lost contact with their constituency.'¹¹

Much of the evidence Mackay marshals to sustain such claims derives from his own, quite particular, research method—a variant of focus group research (though he would reject this description), organised around small group discussions—in Mackay's case, groups of friends or workmates, meeting in familiar environments and discussing issues without anyone outside the group directing the conversation or asking any questions.¹²

⁹ See, for example, V. Braund, 'Timely Vibrations: Labor's Marketing Campaign', in H. Mayer, ed. *Labor To Power: Australia's 1972 Election*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973.

¹⁰ H. Mackay, *Reinventing Australia: Australian Attitudes in the '90s*, Angus & Robertson, Pymble, NSW, 1993, p. 169. In Mackay's political novel, *The Spin*, the Labor candidate sees Hanson *mutatis mutandis* as Jung saw Hitler—as 'the loudspeaker which magnifies the inaudible whispers of the German soul until they can be heard by the German's unconscious ear'; H. Mackay, *The Spin*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1996, p. 11. For uncritical academic renderings of Mackay's general argument, see I. Marsh, *Beyond the Two Party System*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 131 note 41; J. Warhurst, *Politicians and Citizens: Roles and Responsibilities*, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, North Sydney, 1996, pp. 6–7; and J. Walter, 'Australian Democracy and the American Century', in H. Bolitho and C. Wallace-Crabbe, eds. *Approaching Australia: Papers from the Harvard Australian Studies Symposium*, Harvard University Committee on Australian Studies, Cambridge, Mass., 1998, p. 213. See also Paul Kelly, who in a 1994 speech argued that Mackay's account of the 'middle class', including its 'loss of faith in institutions', mapped 'superbly ... the psyche of 1990s Australia'; *Paradise Divided*, op. cit., pp. 113–14.

¹¹ H. Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians Choosing Their Future*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1999, p. 286. For a comprehensive analysis of the One Nation vote, based on the 1998 Australian election study, see M. Goot and I. Watson, 'One Nation's electoral support: where does it come from, what makes it different and how does it fit?', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2001. Among other things, this shows that dissatisfaction with the political process was not a distinctive characteristic of the One Nation vote (it was shared by those who voted for the Australian Democrats) and that what was distinctive about One Nation was its leverage of conservative values about Aborigines, immigration and the like.

¹² Mackay, *Reinventing Australia*, op. cit., p. 300ff.

But evidence gathered in this way, while legitimate for some purposes, has fundamental limitations—limitations that go well beyond those that Mackay himself seems willing to acknowledge. First, it is difficult to generate reliable historical insights from such evidence, and impossible to show the extent to which the distribution of opinion has actually changed; the data gathered by this method are restricted to conversations in the present and, at best, untested recollections of the past. Second, it does not readily lend itself to generalisation; to do that typically requires some approximation to random sampling and much larger numbers. Although he insists that ‘each study incorporates the widest possible range of respondents within the practical limits of the project’,¹³ the *Mackay Reports* are based on opinions drawn from ‘the upper-middle to the lower-middle socio-economic strata’, people in their ‘mid-twenties to their early-sixties’, sometimes resident in no more than a handful of suburbs in as few as three cities.¹⁴ And third, while Mackay boasts of the greater explanatory depths plumbed through his research, the things he gleans by his methods are no more than possible explanations—just as they represent no more than possible historical shifts or possibly true generalisations about certain sorts of people—young people, city people, or Australians in general. At every turn, they need to be checked or validated by quite different methods—methods which Mackay not only does not use, but which he vigorously rejects; asking questions of respondents, one of the basic tools of most attitudinal research, being the technique to which Mackay takes strongest exception.

Each of these limitations is easily illustrated; one example will suffice. In *Reinventing Australia*, Mackay argues that ‘the retreat from commitment’, or (as he also puts it) the ‘level of cynicism about politics’, is ‘most starkly revealed in the attitudes of young Australians who are approaching the age when they will be entitled to vote.’ By the early 1990s, he argues, the ‘level of apathy about politics’ had become so great that the Australian Electoral Commission had resorted to advertising in an attempt to convince the young of the virtues of voting.¹⁵ The first thing to say about this interpretation is that it is ahistorical: eighteen year-olds were the bane of electoral officials long before Bob Hawke and the ‘politics of personality’,¹⁶ indeed, according to a Morgan poll conducted in the mid-1960s, before the voting age was lowered to 18, no less than two-thirds of respondents aged 14 to 21 did not want the voting age lowered.¹⁷ Second, while Mackay may be right about apathy being a condition especially marked in the young, his findings do not allow him to show it; he is in no position to compare, with any degree of reliability, the level of apathy (or anything

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 306.

¹⁴ H. Mackay, *The Mackay Report: Keynote*, April 1992, p. 3.

¹⁵ Mackay, *Reinventing Australia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 175, 177.

¹⁶ See, for example, the survey of non-voters by the Australian Electoral Commission, ‘A Quantitative Analysis of Attitudes to Enrolment and Voting’, *Research Report*, Australian Electoral Office, 1983, or Mackay’s own study of young people in 1980, cited in H. Mackay, *The Mackay Report: Leaving School*, No. 96, March 2000, p. 27.

¹⁷ M. Goot, ‘Beyond the Generation Gap’, in H. Mayer, ed. *Australian Politics: A Second Reader*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1969, p. 160.

else) in young people with the level in any other age group.¹⁸ And third, the explanation he offers to explain their apathy—the ‘innate idealism’ of the young turned to cynicism by the pragmatism of their politicians—is only one of a range of possible explanations, none of them testable within the constraints of his own method;¹⁹ sample surveys, a more appropriate method, suggest that Generation X’ers (those born between 1965 and 1980) in the United States are less interested in politics and less informed than earlier generations ‘but *not* especially cynical about politics or critical of political leaders.’²⁰

In this lecture, I want to move beyond both the punditry of journalists and the evidence pulled together from conversations in small groups to look at the findings of large-scale sample surveys—some, though all too few, stretching back 50 years; others, taking us back more than 30 years; the rest dating from the late 1980s or early 1990s. To be sure, the data from these sources also have their limitations: they register as views formed on the spot by respondents who may have no opinion or whose opinions are more ambivalent than their answers allow; they register views shaped by the language of the questions and, sometimes, the order in which they are asked; and they register views from respondents who may seek to present themselves as more politically engaged or less politically cynical than they are, especially where the surveys to which they are responding are sponsored by social scientists within the academy.²¹ Properly understood, however, these limitations are far from fatal.²² And since sample surveys draw responses in equal measure from almost all respondents, not just from those members of a group who choose to speak, they have the inestimable advantage of allowing us to generalise, to detect the presence (or absence) of trends and to test alternative explanations.

The data at our disposal offer only partial support for current concerns about voter disengagement, distrust and disenchantment. They raise questions about whether electoral cynicism explains electoral volatility, the growth in minor party support and the weakening grip of the major parties on the Senate. And they help solve the paradox of why, if the pundits and qualitative researchers are right, informal voting remains remarkably low and support for some political leaders stands remarkably high.

¹⁸ A 1989 survey, conducted in mainland state capitals by Wells Research Services, found respondents aged 18 to 24 *less* likely than those over 45 to be ‘very concerned’ that politicians were ‘more interested in re-election than running the country’; *The Silent Majority II*, Clemenger/BBDO, Sydney, 1989, pp. 9, 25.

¹⁹ The only critiques of Mackay’s work that run to any length are by J. Docker, ‘*Mon Oncle* Hugh Mackay: guide, prophet, seer’, *Crossings*, No. 20, 1994, pp. 31–35 and R. Hall, ‘Debasing debate: the language of the bland’, *Australian Book Review*, no. 178, 1996, pp. 36–39. For an excellent defence of his work against Hall’s often uninformed criticisms, see H. Mackay, ‘Debasing debate: Hugh Mackay’s rebuttal of Richard Hall’, *Australian Book Review*, no. 179, 1996, pp. 20–23.

²⁰ R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000, p. 261; emphasis in the original.

²¹ Some of these limitations are noted by Mackay, but without any acknowledgement that each of these problems, in a slightly different form, might constitute a limitation to his own approach; Mackay, *Reinventing Australia*, p. 300ff.

²² J. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, esp. ch. 4 and 5.

Political Engagement

Let us start with evidence which bears in some way on engagement with the political process. Three types of survey data provide evidence over time: data on the level of interest in politics; data on the level of interest in election campaigns, including the use of newspapers, television and radio; and, more speculatively, data on the level of the turnout, were turnout to be no longer compulsory.²³

All of these data come from academic surveys conducted, for the most part, between 1987 and 1999 after each of five national elections (1987-1998) and the referendum on the republic (1999). Since the data were collected in almost exactly the same way every time (via mail-out questionnaires to random samples drawn from the electoral rolls) whatever biases they contain are likely to be a constant;²⁴ that means any substantial changes in the pattern of response is unlikely to be an artefact of the survey. The vice of this virtue is that we cannot know what responses might have been elicited by differently worded questions, questions asked in a different way (for example, face-to-face), questions asked in a different order or questions asked by non-academic researchers. This is not to say that what these surveys measure is 'unreal'; rather that for many respondents, far from certain of their views on a wide range of issues and with conflicting information to draw upon, what they say depends on the circumstances.²⁵

Interest in politics

That the level of interest in politics declined in the years after Hawke came to office (in 1983) seems doubtful. Evidence from national surveys conducted between 1984 and 1999 suggests that levels of political interest remained remarkably steady. Asked to indicate 'how much interest' they 'usually' had 'in what's going on in politics', roughly a third of respondents (32 percent to 38 percent) in each of seven surveys said they took 'a good deal' of interest; a little under a half (between 44 percent and 47 percent) took 'some' interest; no more than a fifth (15 percent to 18 percent) indicated that they took 'not much' interest; and hardly any said 'none' (Table 1a). In only one survey did the figures fall outside this range and that may well have been because on that occasion (1988) the question on political interest followed a series of questions on citizenship; in those circumstances, not surprisingly, the reported level of political interest was elevated.

What is most meaningful about the numbers from each of the other surveys is not their absolute values; these may have been different had they, too, followed questions on citizenship, or been asked after a question about the political leaders, or been asked

²³ Regrettably, data on political knowledge, arguably the most important variable of all, are only available in the 1996 and 1998 Australian Election Studies, and the 1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey. On the importance of political knowledge, see Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, op. cit., and V. Price and J. Zaller, 'Who gets the news? Alternative measures of news reception and their implications for research', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1993, pp. 133-64.

²⁴ This method itself may bias the sample towards the more politically interested, since the less politically interested may be less likely to respond; certainly the respondents are biased in favour of the better educated; M. Goot, 'More "Relaxed and Comfortable": public opinion on immigration under Howard', *People and Place*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2000, pp. 46-60.

²⁵ Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, op. cit., passim.

after some attempt to fathom respondents' political knowledge.²⁶ What is most meaningful is the constancy in the patterns of response.

Table 1a Interest in Politics, 1984–1999 (percentages)

| | A good deal | Some | Not much | None | n |
|-----------|-------------|------|----------|------|--------|
| 1984 -86* | 32 | 46 | 21 | na | (3012) |
| 1987* | 35 | 44 | 15 | 5 | (1825) |
| 1988* | 42 | 36 | 17 | 5 | (1399) |
| 1990 | 36 | 46 | 15 | 3 | (2020) |
| 1993 | 38 | 44 | 15 | 3 | (3023) |
| 1996 | 32 | 47 | 18 | 4 | (1795) |
| 1998 | 36 | 44 | 15 | 3 | (1897) |
| 1999 | 35 | 46 | 16 | 3 | (2311) |

Note: Non-responses omitted; na = not asked; * = 'Generally speaking' omitted from question
Question: *Generally speaking, how much interest do you usually have in what's going on in politics?*
Sources: National Social Science Survey 1984–86; Australian Election Study 1987–1998; Issues in Multicultural Australia, 1988; Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey, 1999.

If we think of 'political interest' somewhat less vaguely, as *talking* about politics, then again there is no evidence of decline; if all other things about the surveys had been equal, we might actually have argued that the evidence pointed to an increase. In the Australian Values Study of 1983, 11 percent of respondents said that when they got together with their friends they discussed political matters 'frequently'; in a parallel study, conducted in 1995, 16 percent said they discussed politics with their friends 'frequently' (Table 1b).

Table 1b Participation in Political Discussions, 1983–1995 (percentages)

| | Frequently | Occasionally | Never | n |
|------|------------|--------------|-------|--------|
| 1983 | 11 | 56 | 34 | (1228) |
| 1995 | 16 | 55 | 30 | (2048) |

Note: Numbers add to more than 100 due to rounding; no response (less than 1 percent) omitted
Question: *When you get together with your friends, would you say that you discuss political matters with your friends frequently, occasionally or never?*
Sources: Australian Values Study Survey, 1983, Social Science Data Archives, Australian National University, Study No. 375; Australian World Values Survey, 1995, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Study No. I 2790.

Far from representing a decline from some not-so-distant golden age, the level of interest in politics at the end of the Twentieth Century may have been higher than it was a half a century earlier, around the beginning of R.G. Menzies' long period of rule. During 1951 and 1952, in one of the earliest excursions into academic survey research, an academic psychologist noted that only about one in ten (11 percent) of the industrial workers he interviewed in Melbourne thought that politics was important; most regarded politics in Australia as 'a self-contained field of doubtful

²⁶ See, for example, G.F. Bishop, R.W. Oldendick and A. Tuchfarber, 'What must my interest in politics be if I just told you "I don't know"?' *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 2, 1984, pp. 510–19.

honesty', bearing 'no relation at all to the interests or purposes of the ordinary citizen'.²⁷

Again, in the early 1970s, before Whitlam came to office, just one in ten (11 percent) of those interviewed by Australian Nationwide Opinion Polls described themselves as 'very' interested in politics; another four in ten (38 percent) said they were 'quite' interested; exactly half the respondents said they had 'not very much' interest in politics or 'none at all'.²⁸ In the post-1984 surveys, a much lower proportion—no more than about one-in-five—described their level of interest as 'not much' or 'none'. How much of this difference might be attributable to differences in question wording, the order in which various questions were asked or the provenance of surveys, is impossible to say.

What is clear is that the difference is unlikely to reflect differences in the electoral cycle—the 1971 survey having been completed between elections and all but one of the subsequent surveys having been conducted after an election. A survey conducted by Don Aitkin in 1979, more than a year before the double dissolution election of 1980, produced consistently higher figures for political involvement than an earlier survey conducted in 1967, completed almost entirely six weeks ahead of a half Senate election.²⁹ In 1979, nearly half (45 percent) of those interviewed responded positively when asked whether they 'talk[ed] much about politics with other people'; in 1967 only a third (31 percent) did so. In 1979, too, more respondents (51 percent compared to 43 percent) followed 'news about politics much' in the paper they mentioned first as the one they would 'regularly' read; twice as many (32 percent compared to 17 percent) followed news about politics on radio; and about twice as many followed it on television (60 percent compared to 34 percent). On both occasions, the two sets of questions were placed at the start of the interviews.³⁰

Interest in campaigns

What about interest in election campaigns? In September 1998, a few weeks out from the election, AC Nielsen asked respondents how interested they were in the campaign.³¹ Three-quarters said they were 'very interested' (26 percent) or at least 'interested' (50 percent); no more than a quarter said they were 'disinterested' [sic] (14 percent) or 'not at all interested' (9 percent).

These figures don't mean much on their own; again, they need to be understood historically. The way AC Nielsen chose to do this was to ask: 'Would you say you are more or less interested in this campaign than in previous campaigns?' It reported a fairly even split between those who thought they were 'more' interested in this campaign (43 percent) and those who thought their level of interest was the 'same'

²⁷ P. Lafitte, *Social Structure and Personality in the Factory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958, p. 116.

²⁸ ANOP, *Australian Public Opinion Newsletter*, 1 (1), 1971, p. 14.

²⁹ D. Aitkin, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*, 2nd edn, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, pp. 19, 27, 273, 277.

³⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 361, 383.

³¹ *Age* (Melbourne), 11 September, 1998.

(38 percent); relatively few (17 percent) rated their interest as ‘less’ than in previous campaigns.

Which ‘previous campaigns’ did respondents have in mind? Even if we assume that most would have understood the question in the same way (answering it, perhaps, in terms of the 1996 election), their recall may have been poor. A more reliable way of gauging changes in levels of voter interest is to use panel data (where the same respondents are interviewed at different times) or, failing that, to compare the results from different samples at different points in time. Data of the latter kind suggest that respondents were neither more interested nor less interested in the 1998 campaign than they had been in the 1996 one. Asked, in post-election surveys, ‘how much interest’ they had taken in the campaign ‘overall’, about a third of respondents in both 1998 (36 percent) and 1996 (34 percent) said they had taken a ‘good deal’; identical proportions (41 percent) said they had taken ‘some’ interest and similar proportions (21 percent in 1998; 25 percent in 1996) said they had taken ‘not much’ interest or ‘none’ (Table 2). A number of respondents no doubt did change, with some becoming more interested than they had been in 1996 and others less; but massive changes of the kind suggested by AC Nielsen’s poll—changes involving 60 percent of the sample—seem unlikely. Moreover, on the evidence of the surveys conducted after the two elections the movement of respondents in one direction should have been more or less cancelled out by the movement of respondents in the other. On the AC Nielsen data, however, cancelling each other out is one thing respondents did not do.

Table 2 Interest in Political Campaigns, 1969-1999 (percentages)

| | A good deal | Some | Not much | None at all | No response | n |
|-----------------|-------------|------|----------|-------------|-------------|--------|
| 1969 Election | 33 | 37 | 30 | na | - | (1873) |
| 1993 Election | 49 | 35 | 14 | 2 | 1 | (3023) |
| 1996 Election | 34 | 41 | 21 | 4 | 1 | (1795) |
| 1998 Election | 36 | 41 | 17 | 4 | 1 | (1897) |
| 1999 Referendum | 37 | 41 | 18 | 4 | 1 | (2311) |

Questions: *How much interest did you have in the election campaign? (1969)*
And about how much interest did you take in the election campaign overall? (1993, 1996, 1998)
And how much interest would you say you took in the referendum campaign overall?(1999)
Sources: Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, 2nd edn, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, p. 373, for 1969; Australian Election Study 1993–1998; and Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey, 1999.

Evidence from the academic surveys, documented in Table 2, also suggests that interest in election campaigns had not declined in the 1990s compared to the late 1960s; on the contrary, in 1993, the year in which *Reinventing Australia* was published, the level of interest in the campaign was markedly higher than it had been a quarter of a century earlier. In a survey conducted after the 1993 election (when the goods and services tax, along with health and industrial relations were important issues), roughly half (49 percent) of those interviewed said they had taken ‘a good deal’ of interest in the campaign. In 1969, after the election in which Whitlam enjoyed his greatest electoral surge, no more than a third (33 percent) of respondents expressed this level of interest.

To what extent these patterns are also reflected in changing media usage is unclear. The importance of newspapers has almost certainly not grown; in both absolute and

relative terms, newspaper sales since the 1960s have declined.³² In 1969, 58 percent of respondents said they had ‘follow[ed] the election’ in at least one paper they read ‘regularly’. In 1987 and 1990 almost identical proportions (58 percent, in 1987; 57 percent, in 1990) said they had either ‘often’ or ‘sometimes followed election news’ through the newspapers; and after the last four campaigns, between 67 percent (1993, 1999) and 58 percent (1996) said they had paid ‘a good deal’ or at least ‘some’ attention, to ‘reports about the election campaign [referendum] in [the] newspapers’ (Table 3a). Since the response options in the 1969 survey (‘followed’ or ‘not followed’) may have been more stringent than in subsequent surveys (where respondents could categorise themselves under one of three heads, two of which count here as ‘following’ the election), newspaper usage may well have declined.

Table 3a Use of Newspapers during Political Campaigns, 1987–1999

| | Often/ a good deal | Sometimes/ some | Rarely/ not much | Never/ none at all | No response | n |
|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------|--------|
| 1987 Election | 29 | 29 | 17 | 14 | 1 | (1825) |
| 1990 Election | 26 | 31 | 22 | 16 | 6 | (2020) |
| 1993 Election | 29 | 38 | 23 | 9 | 1 | (3023) |
| 1996 Election | 18 | 40 | 21 | 12 | - | (1795) |
| 1998 Election | 21 | 41 | 26 | 11 | 1 | (1897) |
| 1999 Referendum | 24 | 43 | 25 | 8 | 1 | (2311) |

Questions: *And how about newspapers, did you follow the election news there? [Please circle one number in each column] (1987, 1990)*
How much attention did you pay to reports about the election campaign in newspapers: good deal, some, not much, none at all? (1993, 1996, 1998)
In the weeks leading up to polling day, how much attention did you pay to reports about the referendum in the newspapers—a good deal, some, not much or none at all? (1999)

Television usage after 1969 may have grown a little—partly as a result of the growth of households with two or more television sets and partly as a consequence of television’s relative advantage on things like clarity and credibility.³³ Again, however, changes in the survey question make exact comparisons difficult. In 1969, when almost nine out of ten Australian households (87 percent) had a television set,³⁴ nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of respondents said they had followed the election on television. After the 1987 and 1990 elections, four-fifths of those interviewed (81 percent, in 1987; 78 percent, in 1990) said they had ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ followed ‘election news on television’. After the last four campaigns between two-thirds (67 percent, in 1996) and three-quarters (76 percent, in 1993; 73 percent, in 1998) said they had paid ‘a good deal’ or at least ‘some’ attention to ‘reports about the election campaign’ or ‘referendum news’ on television (Table 3b). Of those who gave an answer in the referendum survey, a remarkably high number (27 percent) claimed to

³² On newspaper sales to 1992, see *News & Fair Facts*, Report from the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Print Media, AGPS, Canberra, 1992, p. 134 and R. Tiffen, ‘Media Policy’, in J. Brett, J. Gillespie and M. Goot, eds. *Developments in Australian Politics*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1994, pp. 332–33. For more recent data, which indicate a slight rise in circulation and a higher pass on rate, see Grattan, ‘Editorial Independence’, pp. 16–17.

³³ Productivity Commission, *Broadcasting*, Report No. 11, AusInfo, Canberra, 2000, p. 61; J.S. Western and C.A. Hughes, *The Mass Media in Australia*, 2nd edn, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1983, p. 93.

³⁴ I. Ward, *Politics of the Media*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1995, p. 68.

have followed the ‘Deliberative Poll’ on ABC-TV, with almost as many (20 percent) saying they had seen the *60 Minutes* program on commercial TV. Nonetheless, the post-1993 pattern, if not the post-1987 pattern, points to a decline in the use of television.

Table 3b Use of Television during Political Campaigns, 1987-1999

| | Often/ a good deal | Sometimes/ some | Rarely/ not much | Never/ none at all | No response | n |
|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------|--------|
| 1987 Election | 50 | 31 | 10 | 5 | 1 | (1825) |
| 1990 Election | 42 | 36 | 14 | 6 | 2 | (2020) |
| 1993 Election | 39 | 37 | 15 | 4 | 4 | (3023) |
| 1996 Election | 29 | 38 | 23 | 7 | 3 | (1795) |
| 1998 Election | 31 | 42 | 18 | 5 | 4 | (1897) |
| 1999 Referendum | 26 | 42 | 20 | 6 | 6 | (2311) |

Questions: *During the election campaign, how often did you follow the election news on television, or did you not follow it at all? [Please circle one number in each column] (1987, 1990)*
Did you follow the election campaign news on television a good deal, some, not much or none at all? (1993, 1996, 1998)
In the weeks leading up to polling day, did you follow the referendum news on television—a good deal, some, not much or none at all? (1999)

The medium in which growth is likely to have been most marked is post-1969 radio. In Aitkin’s 1969 survey, fewer than one respondent in five (18 percent) said they had ‘follow[ed] the election’ on radio—a figure that may reflect the fact that the parties themselves, as well as other groups, made less use of this medium in the 1960s than they did not only in the late 1940s, when the longest and most lavish political campaign that Australians had experienced was organised for the Liberals around a radio series spear-headed by ‘John Henry Austral’, but in the 1951 referendum on communism and in 1972 when Labor used radio to help it wrest office back from the Coalition.³⁵ After the 1987 and 1990 elections about half of those interviewed (50 percent in 1987; 48 percent in 1990) reported that they had ‘followed election news’ on radio ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’; and after the 1993, 1996 and 1998 elections similar proportions (47 percent, 1993; 41 percent, 1996; and 45 percent, 1998) said that they had paid ‘a good deal’, or at least ‘some’, attention to ‘the election campaign news on radio’. For the 1999 referendum on the Constitution, the corresponding figure (47 percent) was about the same (Table 3c). While the problem of comparing the data from the 1969 survey with data from subsequent surveys remains real, the difference between the 1969 and subsequent results for radio is much larger than for either the press or TV.

³⁵ I. Ward, ‘The early uses of radio for political communications in Australia and Canada: John Henry Austral, Mr Sage and the man from Mars’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1999, pp. 311–29; L. Webb, *Communism and Democracy in Australia: A Survey of the 1951 Referendum*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1954, ch. 9; and L. Oakes and D. Solomon, *The Making of an Australian Prime Minister*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1973, ch. 7.

Table 3c Use of Radio during Political Campaigns, 1987–1999

| Campaign | Often/ a good deal | Sometimes/ some | Rarely/ not much | Never/ none at all | No response | n |
|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------|--------|
| 1987 Election | 26 | 24 | 18 | 19 | 1 | (1825) |
| 1990 Election | 21 | 27 | 23 | 22 | 6 | (2020) |
| 1993 Election | 18 | 29 | 22 | 19 | 12 | (3023) |
| 1996 Election | 13 | 28 | 28 | 22 | 9 | (1795) |
| 1998 Election | 16 | 29 | 23 | 21 | 11 | (1897) |
| 1999 Referendum | 16 | 31 | 25 | 19 | 10 | (2311) |

Questions: *During the election campaign, how often did you follow the election news on ... radio?*

[Please circle one number in each column] (1987, 1990)

And did you follow the election campaign news on the radio a good deal, some, not much or none at all? (1993, 1996, 1998)

And did you follow the referendum campaign news on the radio? (1999)

Sources: Australian Election Study, 1987–1998; Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey, 1999.

A measure of more active involvement also suggests greater levels of interest in campaigns at the end of the 1990s than at the end of the 1960s. After the 1969 election, two-thirds of those interviewed for Aitkin's study said that they had 'talk[ed] to other people about the election'; in the 1990s, the proportion who indicated, through the Australian Election Study (AES) surveys, that they had 'discuss[ed] politics with others' during the various campaigns was markedly greater: 88 percent in 1993; 82 percent in 1996 and 84 percent in 1998. After the 1999 referendum, three-quarters of those who responded to the Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey said that 'over the last few weeks' of the campaign they had discussed the referendum 'a lot' (33 percent) or at least to 'some' extent (45 percent) with 'family, friends or others'.

Electoral turnout

We can also think about voter interest in terms of electoral turnout; or, in a system where turnout is compulsory, in terms of how many might have turned out had doing so not been compulsory. On this measure, too, it is difficult to discern any decline.

In 1955, the Australian Public Opinion Poll reported that three-quarters (77 percent) of those interviewed would have voted had voting (meaning turnout) not been compulsory.³⁶ More than 40 years later, post-election and post-referendum surveys reported very high proportions of respondents (85 percent, in 1996; 84 percent, in 1998; 86 percent, in 1999) indicating that they would 'definitely' or 'probably' have voted.³⁷ On each of these occasions, two-thirds of respondents said they would 'definitely' have voted; on no occasion did the proportion saying they would 'definitely not' have voted exceed nine percent. While variations in the response options—a binary choice in 1995; a multiple choice in 1996, 1998 and 1999—rule out any direct comparison, there is certainly no evidence here of growing disillusionment with the electoral process.

³⁶ Cited in Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, op. cit., p. 33.

³⁷ For the 1996 and 1998 sources, see Table 1a.

Politicians

Interest in politics may be a sign of trust in the political process, as many of those who worry about a lack of interest tend to assume; it may have nothing directly to do with trust in the political process, with people interested or uninterested regardless of their willingness to trust; or it may signify a lack of trust in the political process, even a ‘bitter disengagement’,³⁸ something that celebrants of political quiescence are inclined to assume.

Political trust, however, is not all of a piece. Claus Offe suggests that institutions may build trust in four distinct ways: by truth-telling and promise-keeping (‘passive’ and ‘active’ forms of a commitment to truth) and by the pursuit of fairness and what he calls solidarity (‘passive’ and ‘active’ forms of justice).³⁹ Institutions may build trust in one way—or build one sort of trust—without necessarily building it in another way. Thus, when Donald Horne observed, in *The Lucky Country*, that Australians ‘both trust and despise’ government, he appears to have been saying that while politicians are trusted to give everyone ‘a fair go’ they are despised for ‘going into politics for reasons of self-interest.’⁴⁰

Australian surveys furnish evidence that bears on each of Offe’s categories: on the reputation of politicians, state and federal, for their honesty and ethics—the longest-running time-series we have; on the reputations of politicians for keeping their promises; on whether government is run in the interests of ‘big groups’ or in the interests of ‘ordinary’ people (one notion of fairness); and on whether politicians can be trusted not to further their own interests but to do ‘the right thing’ (a concept which may be indirectly, if not directly, related to Offe’s idea of solidarity—of institutions acting to equalise life chances ‘structurally imposed by unequal endowments and inescapable constraints’).

Honesty and ethics

In the study of Melbourne workers, undertaken in the early 1950s, half the sample expressed the view that ‘all politicians are crooks’, or some equivalent, ‘without any favourable qualification at all’.⁴¹ A quarter of a century later, following the dismissal of the Whitlam government, the Morgan Poll began asking respondents to rate (as ‘very high’, ‘high’, ‘average’, ‘low’, or ‘very low’) a wide range of occupations for their ‘honesty and ethical standards’. Between 1976 and 1983 it repeated the question every two years; since then, it has asked the question every year. And in the period 1976 to 2000, the proportion prepared to rank politicians ‘high’ or ‘very high’ declined; for both state and federal politicians, the rate of decline was very similar (Figure 1).

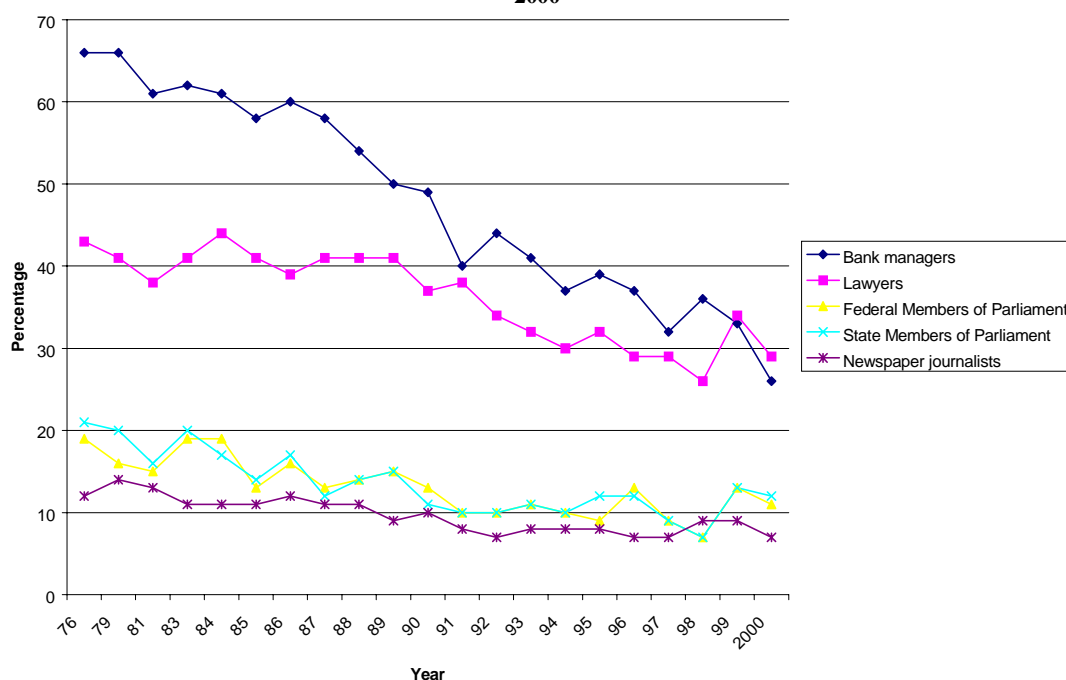
³⁸ M. Lyons and M. Stewart-Weeks, ‘On the Edge: Civil Society in Transition’, A Report Prepared for the Commonwealth Foundation, Centre for Australian Community Organisations and Management, University of Technology, Sydney, 1999, p. 10.

³⁹ C. Offe, ‘How Can We Trust Our Fellow Citizens?’, in M.E. Warren, ed. *Democracy and Trust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 73–75.

⁴⁰ D. Horne, *The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Vic., 1964, pp. 24–25.

⁴¹ Lafitte, op. cit., p. 116.

Fig. 1 Ratings of Selected Occupations for High or Very High Ethics and Honesty, 1976-2000



Between 1976 and 1981, 19 percent of respondents (on average) rated state MPs ‘high’ or ‘very high’ for their ‘honesty and ethics’; through 1982–1987 and 1988–1993, the average slipped, first to 16 percent and then to 12 percent; between 1994 and 2000, the proportion rating politicians ‘high’ or ‘very high’ averaged 11 percent, essentially unchanged. Across the years, 1976–81, 17 percent of respondents (on average) rated federal MPs ‘high’ or ‘very high’ for their ‘ethics and honesty’; from 1982 to 1987 the average was 16 percent, virtually unchanged; but in the periods 1988–1993 and 1994–2000, the average dropped, first to 12 percent and then to 10 percent.⁴²

Before we discuss this decline, three things should be noted. One is that ratings for honesty and ethics are not the same as ratings for occupational prestige as such; in a survey of occupational prestige, conducted in the late 1970s, parliamentarians were rated on a par with bank managers,⁴³ something one would not have predicted from the Morgan data on the honesty and ethics of the two professions. The second point is one that I have made before: the figures reported by polls depend on the question. Asked, in the 1987 AES, ‘Do you feel that quite a few of the people running the federal government are a little dishonest?’, only 44 percent of respondents said they did; the majority said that either ‘not very many’ (45 percent) or ‘hardly any at all’ (11 percent) were ‘a little dishonest’—a far cry from the 1987 Morgan poll in which only 12 percent or 13 percent rated state or federal MPs as ‘high’ or very high’ for their ‘ethics and honesty’. The third thing to emphasise is that the start of a data series should not be confused with the beginning of the phenomenon the series is designed

⁴² Compare the claim that ‘it was during the Hawke-Keating years ... that attitudes to politicians changed most markedly’; Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, op. cit., p. 179.

⁴³ A. Daniel, *Power, Privilege and Prestige: Occupations in Australia*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1983, p. 64.

to measure: just because the surveys date from 1976 does not mean that the decline in the standing of politicians dates from 1976; for all we know, the decline may go back to Whitlam, McMahon, Holt, Menzies or beyond.

What can we say about the decline in the Morgan series itself? The first thing to say is that if the standing of politicians for ethics and honesty was some 40 percent lower at the end of the century than it had been 25 years earlier, the fall had not come off a very high base; a 40 percent decline, from (say) 75 percent to 45 percent would have been rather more dramatic than a decline of similar proportions from 21 percent to 12 percent (for state MPs) or from 19 percent to 11 percent (for federal MPs).

Second, a decline in ethical standing did not affect MPs alone. While not (*pace* Young)⁴⁴ part of a *general* decline in the ethical standing of occupations—the standing of doctors, for example, of school-teachers and of union leaders actually enjoyed a modest rise—MPs did have something in common (as Figure 1 makes clear) with bank managers, lawyers and journalists. Commenting on these data, Richard Eckersley argues that ‘for most of those who wield financial and political power and influence’ public trust fell ‘dramatically from an average of 31 percent [1976] to 17 percent [1997]’.⁴⁵ But to average the data across different occupations is to conceal as well as reveal. The rating of bank managers dropped by nearly two-thirds from 66 percent (1976) to 26 percent (2000); lawyers slid to much the same level (29 percent) but from a much more modest base (43 percent); while the standing of newspaper journalists slipped from 12 percent to 7 percent—a decline which, in proportionate terms, matched that of politicians.⁴⁶

The third thing to say, therefore, is that the decline in the standing of politicians for ethics and honesty may have had part of its cause in things which affected the standing of these other professions, too. What the common factors might have been is quite unclear: changes to banking practices that brought into disrepute both bankers and politicians;⁴⁷ worries about lawyers getting criminals off, or getting them lighter sentences, and a political system that condoned it (the absence of judges from Morgan’s list is a pity); hostility to journalists, either because ‘like politicians’, they are ‘now frequently seen as self-promoting, venal and out of touch with ordinary people’⁴⁸ or, as appears to be the case in the United States, because they focus on the

⁴⁴ Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, *op. cit.*, pp. 172–73.

⁴⁵ R. Eckersley, ‘Perspectives on Progress: Economic Growth, Quality of Life and Ecological Sustainability’, in R. Eckersley, ed. *Measuring Progress: Is Life Getting Better?* CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Vic., 1998, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Cox and Caldwell argue that ‘falling levels of trust in government since 1986’ are ‘only matched by loss of trust in banks’; E. Cox and P. Caldwell, ‘Making Social Policy’, in I. Winter, ed. *Social Capital and Public Policy in Australia*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, 2000, p. 67. However, it is far from clear that the decline in the standing of MPs for honesty and ethics does date from 1986; the figures for 1986 are lower than those for 1976 and (as we note above) the 1976 figures might also have represented a decline from some earlier period.

⁴⁷ J. Carroll, ‘Economic Rationalism and its Consequences’, in J. Carroll and R. Manne, eds. *Shutdown: the Failure of Economic Rationalism and How to Rescue Australia*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 25–26.

⁴⁸ C. Lumby, *Gotcha! Life in a Tabloid World*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1999, p. 154; also, Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, *op. cit.*, pp. 172–77.

game plans rather than the goals of politicians?⁴⁹ All, and more, are possible candidates.

However, some of the factors that go towards explaining the decline in the standing of politicians are sure to be *sui generis*. The televising of the federal Parliament from 1991—more precisely, the inclusion in television news bulletins of excerpts from Question Time—is a possible cause; and although state parliaments have not been televised, there is nothing in the data to say that politicians at both levels might not have been tarred by the same brush. State-owned banks going broke and state-based inquiries into corruption (for example, the Queensland royal commissions in 1987–89 and the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption, operating since 1988) may have tarnished the reputations of politicians *tout court*. The publicity given to their superannuation benefits, the number of parliamentary sitting days and the growth of rorting and branch-stacking, may be part of the answer as well.

Promise-keeping

Some time before the 1969 federal election, a sample of voters in Brisbane was asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposition that ‘the main political parties, if they get elected, try to honour their election promises’; no fewer than three-quarters (75 percent) of those surveyed agreed that politicians did.⁵⁰ Yet long before the 1996 federal budget, when the ABC’s Kerry O’Brien coined the famous distinction of ‘core’ and ‘other promises’ (subsequently dubbed ‘non-core’ promises),⁵¹ the idea that the overwhelming majority of voters might credit politicians with making promises in good faith had become all but unthinkable.

In a 1978 Melbourne survey, conducted partly before and partly after a federal budget in which the Fraser government failed to deliver the tax cuts—a ‘fistful of dollars’—promised at the 1977 election, only a third (32 percent) of respondents said that politicians could be ‘trusted to keep their election promises’, though half as many again had ‘mixed’ feelings.⁵² Given its timing, the survey should have shed some light on the claim that much of the cynicism of the late 1990s could be traced back to that budget; but it didn’t.⁵³ In 1990, a national survey, conducted by Irving Saulwick & Associates, reported a similar level of support (35 percent), to that recorded in 1978, for the view that ‘politicians make promises during election times which, on the

⁴⁹ T.E. Patterson, *Out of Order*, Vintage Books, New York, 1993; and J.A. Cappella and K.H. Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: the Press and the Public Good*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997.

⁵⁰ J.S. Western and P.R. Wilson, ‘Politics, politicians and parties: sweet or sour?’, *Politics*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1970, p. 172; ‘Politics: Participation and Attitudes’, in H. Mayer and H. Nelson, eds. *Australian Politics: A Third Reader*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1973, p. 332.

⁵¹ O’Brien was rephrasing Howard’s boast that the budget had delivered on ‘core commitments’ but not, it seemed, on other commitments; ABC *7.30 Report*, 21 August, 1996 and *AM*, 21 August, 1996. While Howard, himself, did not use these terms, he did not challenge them either. Running the gauntlet on the John Laws Program (Radio 2UE), he distinguished between those promises ‘the people really voted on in the election’ (the ‘core’ promises) and, by implication, those they did not (the ‘non-core’ promises); 21 August 1996.

⁵² C. Chamberlain, *Class Consciousness in Australia*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983, p. 75.

⁵³ This is because the report of the survey does not distinguish pre-Budget from post-Budget responses; indeed, neither the election nor the Budget is mentioned. For the claim, see R. Gittins, ‘The great disappearing tax cut act’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 December, 1999.

whole, they do intend to keep’; and this time, unlike 1978, there was no middle option to deflate the figure.⁵⁴ Five years later, when the Morgan Poll sought a response to the proposition that ‘Federal politicians can’t be trusted to keep election promises’ only half as many as in the Saulwick poll (17 percent) came to the defence of politicians.⁵⁵ But a ‘positive’ proposition, of the kind Saulwick put, may have elicited a less harsh response. Whether there has been a slide since 1978 or since 1990 remains, therefore, an open question.

Looking after the many rather than the few

If there has been a decline over the last 30 years in the proportion of respondents who believe politicians try to stick to their promises, there appears to have been no clear increase in the proportion who believe ‘the government’ is run in the interests of the ‘big end of town’ rather than in the interests of ‘ordinary people’ or of ‘all the people’ (Table 4). And this despite the idea, shared by many, that economic restructuring generated a loss of political faith in all the major parties and provided an opening for One Nation.

In 1969 and 1979, Aitkin asked whether ‘the government in Canberra’ gave ‘everyone a fair go’ or paid ‘more attention to what the big interests want’. Faced with these alternatives, three-quarters (71 percent and 78 percent, respectively) of those interviewed thought the government favoured the ‘big interests’. In the mid-1980s, a clumsier question, included in the National Social Science Survey, asked whether ‘the government’ [sic] was run ‘pretty much by [sic] a few big interests’ or whether it was ‘run for the benefit of most of the people’, generated a more benign response; little more than a half (53 percent) of the respondents thought ‘the government’ favoured big interests. For the 1987 and 1993 Australian Election Study two changes were made to the question, one for the better and one for the worse: was ‘the federal government pretty much run by a few big groups looking out for themselves’ (which may have been interpreted as a question about politicians rather than the interests they served) or was it ‘run for the benefit of all of the people?’ In 1987, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of those who returned the questionnaires endorsed the darker of the two options; in 1993, when respondents were given a chance to say ‘it depends’, only about half as many (35 percent) indicated that the federal government was ‘run by a few big groups’.

In 1996, two-thirds of the respondents in Michael Pusey’s Middle Australia Project (a project focused on a similar demographic to Hugh Mackay’s) agreed that government was run ‘pretty much by a few big interests’, a response not dramatically different (even allowing for the urban bias of Pusey’s sample) from that generated by a very similar question asked in 1984–86 as part of the National Social Science Survey when economic rationalism (on Pusey’s reckoning) had not long been up and running.

⁵⁴ *Age* (Melbourne), 19 March, 1990.

⁵⁵ *The Bulletin*, 12 September, 1995; also in Warhurst, *Politicians and Citizens*, op. cit., p. 24. In 1989, 56 percent of those interviewed for Clemenger (1989: 9) agreed that ‘Politicians never keep their word’; Clemenger, *The Silent Majority II A*, Clemenger Report, Clemenger/BBDO, Sydney, 1989, p. 9. In the next Clemenger survey, conducted by Morgan, this rose to 67 percent; *The Silent Majority III A*, Clemenger Report, Clemenger/BBDO, Melbourne, 1997, p. 15. But whereas the 1989 sample was restricted to mainland capitals, thereby missing non-believers in rural and regional Australia, the 1997 sample was more broadly drawn. The difference in the two results may be an artefact of this.

Table 4 Government for Big Interests or Government for the People (percentages)

| People in government work for ... | 1969 | 1979 | 1984-86 | 1987 | 1993 | 1996* |
|-----------------------------------|--------|--------|---------|--------|--------|-------|
| Big interests | 71 | 78 | 58 | 63 | 35 | 63 |
| It depends | na | na | na | na | 48 | na |
| All or most of the people | 20 | 16 | 43 | 34 | 14 | 37 |
| Don't know | 9 | 6 | - | 3 | 3 | - |
| n | (1873) | (2016) | (3012) | (1825) | (3023) | (391) |

Note: na = not asked; * Respondents from the five mainland capital cities in Census Collectors Districts with average household incomes between the 20th and 90th percentiles

Questions: *Do you think that the people running the government in Canberra give everyone a fair go, whether they are important or just ordinary people, or do you think that some people in the government pay more attention to what the big interests want? (1969, 1979)*
Would you say the government is run pretty much by a few big interests, looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of most of the people? (1984)
Would you say the federal government is pretty much run by a few big groups looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all of the people? (1987, 1993)
Would you say that government is run pretty much by a few big interests, looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all the people? Entirely for the big interests [9 percent], mostly for the big interests [54 percent], mostly for the benefit of all [37 percent], entirely for the benefit of all [0 percent] (1996)

Sources: Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, pp. 379 (1969), 390–92 (1979); National Social Science Survey, 1984; Australian Election Study, 1987 and 1993; Middle Australia Project, 1996.

Doing the right thing

A different set of questions can generate a quite different set of results. In Aitkin's 1969 study, conducted about two years into John Gorton's period in office, nearly half (47 percent) of the respondents said that 'people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves'; roughly the same proportion (46 percent) disagreed, saying that governments could 'be trusted to do the right thing nearly all of the time'. Two years into Malcolm Fraser's second term, the pendulum had swung heavily against the credibility of governments; two-thirds (67 percent) of respondents now endorsed the more sceptical view. A change of government, from Fraser to Hawke, saw a modest swing back; in the 1984-86 National Social Science Survey, just over half (54 percent) sided with the sceptics. After the 1993 election, Labor's fifth win on the trot, and its first under Paul Keating, two-thirds (65 percent) of respondents again took the view that people in government 'usually' or 'sometimes' are too interested in looking after themselves.⁵⁶ But as with Hawke, so with Howard: a change of government in 1996 seems to have produced a swing against the sceptics; in the post-election survey of 1996, half (51 percent) of the respondents—a proportion similar to the one recorded nearly 30 years earlier after Gorton's 1969 win—voiced their distrust of people in government. Within one term the sceptics were back for another turn in the driver's seat; in the wake of the 1998 election, two-thirds (66 percent) of respondents felt that people in government 'usually' or 'sometimes'

⁵⁶ Compare E. Cox, *A Truly Civil Society*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1995, p. 10; she takes the first and last of these surveys and misses those in between. A similar, but not directly comparable, question is included in an AGB: McNair survey for the Office of Multicultural Affairs; 'Issues in Multicultural Australia, 1988', Social Science Data Archives, Australian National University, Canberra, 1989, p. 224.

looked after themselves, a figure which a year after Howard's re-election had barely changed (Table 5a).

Table 5a Whether Governments are Trustworthy or Look After Themselves, 1969-1999 (percentages)

| People in government | 1969 | 1979 | 1984-86 | 1988 | 1993 | 1996 | 1998 | 1999 |
|--------------------------------|--------|--------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Can be trusted | | | | | | | | |
| sometimes/usually/ | 46 | 28 | 37 | 29 | 34 | 45 | 33 | 37 |
| Some do, some don't | na | 2 | na | 29 | na | na | na | na |
| Look after themselves usually/ | | | | | | | | |
| sometimes | 47 | 67 | 54 | 41 | 65 | 51 | 66 | 62 |
| DK/No response | 7 | 3 | 8 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| n | (1873) | (2016) | (3012) | (1552) | (3023) | (1795) | (1897) | (2311) |

Note: na = not asked or not coded

Questions: *In general, do you feel that the people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves or do you feel that they can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time? (1969, 1979, 1988)*

In general, do you feel that the people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves or do you feel that they can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time? Usually look after themselves [43 percent, 1993; 29 percent, 1996; 44 percent, 1998; 41 percent, 1999]; sometimes look after themselves [23 percent, 1993; 22 percent, 1996; 22 percent, 1998; 21 percent, 1999]; sometimes can be trusted to do the right thing [25 percent, 1993; 31 percent, 1996; 23 percent, 1998; 27 percent, 1999]; usually can be trusted to do the right thing [9 percent, 1993; 14 percent, 1996; 10 percent, 1998; 10 percent, 1999]

In general, do you feel that people in government are only interested in looking after themselves, or do you feel they can be trusted to do the right thing?' (1984)

Sources: Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, 2nd edn, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, pp. 379 (1969), 390 (1979); National Social Science Survey, 1984; Australian Election Study, 1993-1998; Issues in Multicultural Australia, 1988; and Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey, 1999.

On the evidence presented in Table 5a, the judgments of respondents about the *bona fides* of politicians appear to be contingent not only on the wording of the question but on the options the questions offer. In 1988, given the opportunity to choose a 'middle' option, over a third of those who (on the evidence of the earlier and later surveys) might have given politicians the thumbs down, chose not to do so. McAllister argues, on the basis of this and the 1979 results—both of which produced the lowest scores for trust in governments 'doing the right thing'—that 'levels of trust in government' among Australian voters are 'low'.⁵⁷ But this conclusion can only be sustained if one ignores the other data in Table 5a available at the time he was writing; if one overlooks the results of a question in the 1987 Australian Election Study which found very few respondents (6 percent) prepared to say they did not trust Canberra 'at all'—a finding not very different to that registered in 1996 by the Middle Australia Project (Table 5b), and if one is indifferent to the fact that of those who did not express their trust in the government in 1988, over a third did not express their distrust (which was their only other option in 1979) but chose instead to say that while some people in government could be trusted to do the right thing some people could not.

⁵⁷ I. McAllister, *Political Behaviour: Citizens, Parties and Elites in Australia*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1992, p. 45.

If, in 1988, trust in government ‘to do the right thing’ could reasonably be described as ‘low’, it seems odd that McAllister should find it unremarkable that in the 1987 Australian Election Study fewer than one in five respondents disagreed with the proposition that government was ‘best for promoting general interests in society’, or that there was a ‘duty to obey laws passed by parliament, no matter how unjust.’⁵⁸

Table 5b Trust in Government in Canberra, 1987 and 1996 (percentages)

| Government in Canberra can be trusted ... | 1987 | 1996* |
|---|--------|-------|
| Almost always/just about always | 3 | 1 |
| Most of the time | 37 | 31 |
| Some of the time | 53 | 51 |
| Almost never | na | 17 |
| Never/not at all | 6 | na |
| n | (1825) | (391) |

Note: Undecided omitted; na = not asked; *Respondents from the five mainland capital cities in Census Collectors Districts with average household incomes between the 20th and 90th percentiles

Questions: *How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Canberra to do what is right? Just about always, most of the time, some of the time, not at all? (1987)*
How much do you trust the government in Canberra to do what is right? Do you trust it almost always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never? (1996)

Sources: Australian Election Study, 1987 and 1990; Middle Australia Project, 1996.

Judgements about the trustworthiness of governments also appear to be a function of the life-cycle of governments:⁵⁹ those new to office are more likely to be trusted than those who have been around for a long time. However, this is a hypothesis that we can test only loosely in relation to federal governments since, while most respondents are likely to have thought about the questions primarily in terms of federal politicians,⁶⁰ none of the survey items in Table 5a to which they responded actually distinguished between people in government in Canberra and people in government in the states.

Confidence in Government

Some support for the view that confidence in government is also a function of how long a government has been in office is provided by a series of surveys conducted annually, from 1993, by AMR-Quantum Harris (subsequently Quantum Australia).

⁵⁸ I. McAllister, ‘Political Behaviour’, in A. Parkin, J. Summers and D. Woodward, eds. *Government, Politics, Power and Policy in Australia*, 5th edn, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 202–203.

⁵⁹ Note that the evidence from 1969 counts in favour of the hypothesis provided we classify the government of the day as the first Gorton government rather than the ninth successive Coalition government; the commonly used phrase for the period 1949–1966, ‘the Menzies era’, together with early reactions to Gorton and the fact that our assumption sits well with the other data in Table 4, provide some warrant for classifying the Gorton government in this way. On early reactions, see M. Goot and R.W. Connell, ‘Presidential politics in Australia?’, *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 2, 1972, pp. 28–33.

⁶⁰ ‘Historians have not yet provided us with the most important date in Australian history’, observed Alan Davies, long before any of these surveys were conducted, ‘the date when state politics became of less interest than federal politics’; A.F. Davies, ‘Victorian Government and Politics’, in G.W. Leeper, ed. *Introducing Victoria*, Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, Melbourne, 1955, p. 286.

While the absolute levels of confidence it reports are quite different from those in the academic surveys, the pattern of shifts is broadly the same with a sharp decline in the proportion expressing ‘little or no’ confidence in the federal government shortly after the change of government in 1996 (Table 6a).

Table 6a Confidence in Federal Government, 1993-1999 (percentages)

| Year | Great Deal | Some | Little/None | n |
|---------|------------|------|-------------|--------|
| 1993 | 4 | 48 | 48 | (2000) |
| 1994/95 | 6 | 48 | 46 | (1204) |
| 1995/96 | 6 | 47 | 47 | (2037) |
| 1996 | 6 | 59 | 35 | (2017) |
| 1997 | 7 | 46 | 47 | (2009) |
| 1998 | 7 | 52 | 41 | (2000) |
| 1999 | 6 | 56 | 38 | (1900) |

Question: *How much confidence do you have in each of the following? Would you say you had a great deal of confidence, some confidence or little or no confidence in the federal government?*

Sources: AMR–Quantum Harris ‘AustraliaSCAN 1995’ (conducted Dec 1994–Feb 1995), AustraliaSCAN 1996’ (conducted Dec 1995–Feb 1996), ‘AustraliaSCAN 1997’ (conducted July–Sept 1996), ‘AustraliaSCAN 1998’ (conducted July–Sept 1997), ‘AustraliaSCAN 1999’ (conducted July–Sept 1998); and Quantum Australia ‘AustraliaSCAN 1999’ (conducted July–Sept 1999).

Our hypothesis about the life-cycle of governments may help explain the reported decline, between 1983 and 1995, in the level of confidence in the federal government. In the Australian Values Study of 1983, more than half (56 percent) of the respondents expressed either ‘a good deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the federal government. Twelve years later, in the World Values Survey, less than half that number (26 percent) did so—a drop of 30 percentage points. The 1983 survey was conducted just a few months after the election of the Hawke Government; the subsequent survey was conducted after 12 years of Labor in office variously dominated by Hawke and by Keating.⁶¹

Between 1983 and 1995, the federal government was not the only institution to be marked down by respondents; less confidence was also expressed in the legal system, the public service, the armed forces, the church, the police, trade unions and the press. In 1983, the proportion of respondents who expressed ‘a good deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the federal government (56 percent) was not very different to the proportion who expressed this sort of confidence in their state government (52 percent) or local government (49 percent).⁶² What figures a similar survey would have thrown up in 1995 in relation to state and local government can only be guessed.

Whatever their numeric values, however, these figures almost certainly would have been similar to the figures for the federal government; not only is this consonant with

⁶¹ Here we assume, on the basis of Keating’s prominence in the Hawke Government, that it makes more sense to talk of 12 years of Labor in 1995 rather than just four years of Keating. By contrast, Gorton (note 59), came to the prime ministership as almost a complete unknown.

⁶² See E. Papadakis, ‘Constituents of confidence and mistrust in Australian institutions’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1999, p. 76, for the 1983 and 1995 data.

the 1983 survey, it is what other surveys reveal.⁶³ In the Quantum surveys, conducted from 1993 to 1999, there is little to separate confidence in one tier of government from attitudes to any other—save that the level of confidence in both federal and state governments (Table 6b) remained rather higher than the level of confidence in local government (Table 6c).

Table 6b Confidence in State Government, 1993-1999 (percentages)

| Year | Great Deal | Some | Little/None | n |
|---------|------------|------|-------------|--------|
| 1993 | 4 | 56 | 40 | (2000) |
| 1994/95 | 3 | 56 | 41 | (1204) |
| 1995/96 | 4 | 53 | 43 | (2037) |
| 1996 | 3 | 58 | 39 | (2017) |
| 1997 | 4 | 50 | 46 | (2009) |
| 1998 | 5 | 55 | 40 | (2000) |
| 1999 | 4 | 58 | 38 | (1900) |

Question: *How much confidence do you have in each of the following? Would you say you had a great deal of confidence, some confidence or little or no confidence in the state government?*

Sources: As for Table 6a

Table 6c Confidence in Local Government, 1993-1999 (percentages)

| Year | Great Deal | Some | Little/None | n |
|---------|------------|------|-------------|--------|
| 1993 | 6 | 59 | 35 | (2000) |
| 1994/95 | 4 | 61 | 35 | (1204) |
| 1995/96 | 4 | 60 | 36 | (2037) |
| 1996 | 4 | 60 | 36 | (2017) |
| 1997 | 5 | 57 | 38 | (2009) |
| 1998 | 5 | 57 | 38 | (2000) |
| 1999 | 5 | 58 | 37 | (1900) |

Question: *How much confidence do you have in each of the following? Would you say you had a great deal of confidence, some confidence or little or no confidence in local government?*

Sources: As for Table 6a

The same pattern is evident in a related series on dissatisfaction with government. Between 1997 and 1999, on Quantum's figures, as confidence in the national government rose, dissatisfaction with it fell (from 67 percent to 52 percent); as confidence in state governments rose, dissatisfaction fell, (from 66 percent to 53 percent); and though confidence in local government remained steady, dissatisfaction fell (from 54 percent to 47 percent).⁶⁴ What may surprise is that on both measures—confidence and dissatisfaction—local government comes off best. But given the importance of federal and state government compared with local government, given differences in voters' expectations and given the publicity each level of government attracts, these findings perhaps should not surprise.

⁶³ See, for example, B. Headey, 'The Quality of Life in Australia', *Social Research Indicators* 9, 1981, pp. 155–81.

⁶⁴ 'AustraliaSCAN 2000 Management Report'.

In the absence of data on other levels of government (or data on banks or journalism), the most striking parallel with the fall in the level of confidence in the federal government between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s is the decline in the level of confidence in the legal system. In 1983, 61 percent expressed ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the law; in 1995 only 35 percent did so. As with the parallel decline in the reputation of MPs and lawyers for honesty and ethics, the slide in confidence in the federal government and the legal system may or may not share a common cause.

Social Capital and Life Satisfaction

What of the possibility that attitudes to politicians have less to do with what politicians do or deliver and more to do with a decline in what the American political scientist Robert Putnam calls ‘social capital’—a decline he attributes to generational change but also to growing work pressures, suburbanisation and the attraction of television;⁶⁵ or with a decline in what another American political scientist, Robert Lane, describes as a change for the worse in how people feel about themselves—a change caused, as the dustwrapper of his book puts it, by the ‘erosion of family solidarity and community integration’?

The extent to which there has been a decline in social capital in Australia—a decline in those ‘features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’⁶⁶—is unknown; compared to the massive documentation of the thesis for the United States, the best known Australian work is thin.⁶⁷ In Western Europe, if not in the USA, social trust appears to have risen since the 1970s. But even if Australia has experienced a decline in social trust, this may not tell us much about political trust; perversely, for the Putnam thesis, ‘political capital’ may affect social capital rather than the other way around.⁶⁸

Lane, sceptical of the argument from social capital, argues that ‘political negativity’ is a more recent phenomenon than the replacement of the pre-war ‘civic generation’ by ‘their less involved children and grandchildren’ or the introduction of television.⁶⁹ Instead, he associates it with the post-1966 period, ‘about the same period as ... the epidemic of depressive symptoms in America and, it seems, in most advanced

⁶⁵ R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, op. cit., pp. 283–84.

⁶⁶ R.D. Putnam, ‘Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital’, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1995, p. 67.

⁶⁷ For the United States, see especially Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. The best known Australian work is Eva Cox, *A Truly Civil Society*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1995, and ‘Measuring Social Capital as Part of Progress and Well-being’, in R. Eckersley, ed. *Measuring Progress: Is Life Getting Better?* CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Vic., 1998. Australian work which takes us further includes V. Hughes, ‘Between individual and state’, *IPA Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1995, pp. 32–38, M. Latham, ‘The Search for Social Capital’, in A. Norton, et al., *Social Capital: the Individual, Civil Society and the State*, Centre For Independent Studies, St. Leonards, NSW, 1997 and several of the contributions to I. Winter, ed., *Social Capital and Public Policy in Australia*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, 2000.

⁶⁸ K. Newton, ‘Social and Political Trust in Established Democracies’, in P. Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, pp. 179–86.

⁶⁹ R.E. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, p. 334.

countries'. In an attempt to explain what he calls *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, he suggests that it is 'life satisfaction' that 'drives political satisfaction—and not the other way around.'⁷⁰ However, if this is true for Australia, research in the late 1970s and in the mid-1980s found no sign of it; levels of satisfaction with federal, state and local government were almost entirely unrelated to self-reported levels of psychological well-being,⁷¹ while satisfaction with 'the way democracy works in Australia' showed almost no correlation at all with overall life satisfaction.⁷²

Parties

Has the decline in the standing of politicians for ethics and honesty, or even an increased scepticism about the willingness of politicians to keep promises, been matched by a decline in the importance voters attach to election outcomes; an increase in the proportion of voters who believe that the parties are ideologically indistinct or that the differences between the two sides of politics have largely disappeared; a decline in the level of voters' 'party identification'; or a reduction in the ability of the major parties to shape popular attitudes to public policy issues?

Caring which party wins and believing in party differences

Hugh Mackay is not alone in arguing that 'real' policy differences between the parties are now a thing of the past. Among political observers, the idea that in recent years the major parties have converged is now par for the course. There is no agreement about when this happened—towards the end of the Whitlam government, after Whitlam (as Mackay asserts), or under Hawke. There is no agreement about why it happened—the forces of globalisation, the power of Canberra's econocrats inspired by the theories of economic rationalism, or the rise and rise of poll-driven politics. But the view that it has happened is widely shared. Thus, James Walter, who dates the change from the end of the Whitlam years, writes of '[p]olitics' having been 'driven off the agenda', by Bill Hayden's 1975 budget (influenced by P.P. McGuinness and Helen Hughes), leaving politics 'devoid ... of issues or principles' and devoted to nothing more than 'a battle for power'.⁷³ By contrast, Dean Jaensch insists that it was a Hawke-Keating 'hijack' that turned Labor into a party like the Liberals—a 'catch-all' party which was "'Labor" in name only'; Peter Beilharz describes Labor, post-1983, as a party 'without any purpose beyond holding the fort'; while Graham

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 197, 214.

⁷¹ Headey, 'The Quality of Life in Australia', *op. cit.*, p. 166; also in B. Headey and A.J. Wearing, *Australians' Priorities, Satisfaction and Well-Being*, Monograph in Public Policy Studies No. 4, University of Melbourne and Department of Community Welfare Services, Victoria, 1981, p. 46; and A.J. Wearing and B. Headey, 'Incomes, Standards of Living and Quality of Life', in R. Eckersley, ed., *Measuring Progress*, pp. 178–79.

⁷² B. Headey, 'The Life Satisfaction and Priorities of Australians', in J. Kelley and C. Bean, eds. *Australian Attitudes: Social and Political Analyses From the National Social Science Survey*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988, p. 172.

⁷³ J. Walter, *Tunnel Vision: the Failure of Political Imagination*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 1996, p. xiii.

Maddox writes of the period under Hawke as nothing less than a 'retreat from two-party politics' itself.⁷⁴

But 'party convergence' was a by-word of political analysis long before this. Soon after the the Second World War, Ross Gollan, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Canberra correspondent, explained to an American audience that if 'a running narrative of Australian political history' contained 'little reference to clash between rival parties over essential principle' that was because 'there has been little such clash.'⁷⁵ Others, however, have argued that the thesis was at 'its most persuasive' only from around the time Gollan was writing.⁷⁶ In the mid-1950s, Leicester Webb declared that 'the parties are in the main what the two-party system makes them ... a system which leaves party debate almost devoid of content and [which] at times results in a two-party conspiracy to avoid the real issues of national policy.'⁷⁷ Towards the end of the Menzies years, Trevor Reese observed that '[h]owever much the political parties might cultivate the notion that they represented conflicting ideologies, it was difficult to discern much practical difference between their policies.'⁷⁸ At the end of the 1960s, Heinz Arndt argued that 'for some decades ... the role of the government in the economy was a central issue in Australian politics', but that 'this phase' was 'virtually over'.⁷⁹ And at the end of the Whitlam years, Ken Turner, like Webb, noted that '[p]arties in two-sided competition find 'me-tooism' irresistible', a phenomenon he highlighted in the contemporary context by noting references to 'Gortlam' or 'Gill Sneddlam' policies or to Snedden's 1974 program as 'Whitlamism at half pace.'⁸⁰

What is striking about these conclusions is: first, the alacrity with which many of their authors jump from claims about particular aspects of public policy to totalising claims about 'party difference' as such; second, that few of the claims are based on a systematic analysis of either the programmatic statements of the parties or the policies implemented by governments, much less an analysis with clearly specified criteria of difference, replicable measures and relevant dates; and third, that those systematic analyses that have been done, though limited, either do not support claims about convergence, uphold them in relation to one broad policy area policy but not another, or show that they hold good for some periods and not for others. Thus, Gruen shows

⁷⁴ D. Jaensch, *The Hawke-Keating Hijack: the ALP in Transition*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p. 154; P. Beilharz, *Transforming Labor: Labour Tradition and the Labor Decade in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 4; G. Maddox, *The Hawke Government and Labor Tradition*, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic., 1989, ch. 5.

⁷⁵ R. Gollan, 'Australian Party Politics', in C.H. Grattan, ed., *Australia*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1947, p. 115.

⁷⁶ B. Head and A. Patience, 'Labor and Liberal: How Different Are They?', in A. Patience and B. Head, eds., *From Whitlam To Fraser: Reform and Reaction in Australian Politics*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979, p. 2.

⁷⁷ L. Webb, 'The Australian Party System', in S.R. Davis, et al., *The Australian Political Party System*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1954, p. 117.

⁷⁸ Reese, *Australia in the Twentieth Century*, op. cit., p. 217.

⁷⁹ H.W. Arndt, *A Small Rich Industrial Country: Studies in Australian Development, Aid and Trade*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1968, p. 6; see also J. Rydon, 'Parliaments and Parties', in C. Osborne ed., *Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific: a Handbook*, Anthony Blond, London, 1970, p. 40.

⁸⁰ K. Turner, 'The Party Contest in the 1970s', in H. Mayer and H. Nelson, eds., *Australian Politics: a Fourth Reader*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1976, p. 463.

that for the period 1970–71 to 1984–85, Labor’s patterns of expenditure and its changes to the tax system were quite different to those of the Coalition’s; McAllister and Moore, looking at policy speeches delivered between 1946 and 1990, map quite different patterns of convergence and divergence for the parties’ social goals and economic goals—patterns which suggest less bi-partisanship on economic matters post-Whitlam than pre-Whitlam; while a more recent investigation of the period 1946 to 1987, by an international team, confirms that Labor and the Liberals had ‘fairly distinct ideological stances’ (having only converged, and then briefly, ‘in the prosperous 1960s’), produced different policy emphases in some areas when in government (especially around welfare, where Labor was the ‘driving force’) and were differentially committed to some of their programs (on education, ‘Labor is the only party whose programs count.’)⁸¹

For their part, respondents in national surveys do not report any narrowing in the ideological differences between the parties—at least, since the election of the Hawke government—and they continue to affirm that whichever party wins does matter.

On the question of ideological difference, respondents in the 1987, 1996 and 1998 Australian Election Surveys placed the Liberal and National parties on the right of the ideological spectrum, and Labor on the left, and judged that the gap between them had not changed (Table 7a). Asked, after the 1987 election, to place the major parties on a ten-point scale (running from 1 on the left to 10 on the right) with a mid-point of 5.5, the median respondents put Labor left of centre (4.4) and the Liberal (6.8) and National (6.7) parties to the right; looking back to 1984, the median respondents thought each of the parties had been slightly further to the left, but the distance between them remained virtually the same—2.3 or 2.4 points still separated Labor from the Liberals and Labor from the Nationals. In 1996 and again in 1998, when the AES shifted to an eleven-point scale (running from 0 to 10, with a mid-point of 5), the median position was little changed: Labor was clearly on the left (3.8, 1996; 3.9, 1998); the Liberals (6.2, 6.5) and the Nationals (6.2, 6.4) equally clearly on the right; and the gap between the two sides, even allowing for the change of scale, remained almost the same (2.4, 2.6).

⁸¹ F. Gruen, ‘The Federal Budget: how much difference do elections make?’, *Australian Economic Review*, no. 71, 1985, pp. 36–49; I. McAllister and R. Moore eds., *Party Strategy and Change: Australian Electoral Speeches Since 1946*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, p. 1ff; H.D. Klingemann, R.I. Hofferbert and I. Budge, *Parties, Policies and Democracy*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1994, ch. 5.

Table 7a How Median Respondents Positioned the Parties, and Themselves, Left-Right Scale, 1984–1998

| | 1984# | 1987 | 1996 | 1998 |
|--------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| One Nation | na | na | na | 6.6 (1369) |
| National | 6.5 (1310) | 6.7 (1360) | 6.2 (1346) | 6.4 (1379) |
| Liberal | 6.4 (1392) | 6.8 (1445) | 6.2 (1438) | 6.5 (1492) |
| Democrats | na | na | 4.3 (1335) | 4.3 (1369) |
| Labor | 4.1 (1477) | 4.4 (1523) | 3.8 (1332) | 3.9 (1360) |
| Greens | na | na | 3.5 (1332) | 3.3 (1360) |
| Self | 5.1 (1532) | 5.2 (1666) | 4.7 (1548) | 4.7 (1598) |
| scale | 1-10 | 1-10 | 0-10 | 0-10 |
| mid-point | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.0 | 5.0 |
| Total sample | (1825) | (1825) | (1795) | (1897) |

Note: # = Respondents' 1987 recall; na = not available; numbers in brackets = respondents.

Questions: *In political matters, people talk about the "left" and the "right". Generally speaking, where would you place your views on the scale? And where would you place the political parties [Liberal, Labor, National] on the left-right scale? (1987)*
Now thinking back to the last Federal election in 1984, when Labor was led by Mr Hawke and the Liberals by Mr Peacock, where would you have placed your views on the left right scale in that election? And where would you have placed the political parties [Liberal, Labor, National] on the scale in the 1984 election? (1984)
In politics, people sometimes talk about the 'left' and the 'right'. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right? Using the same scale, where would you place each of the federal political parties [Liberal Party, Labor Party (ALP), National Party, Australian Democrats, One Nation (1998 only), Greens]? (1996, 1998)

Sources: Australian Election Study, 1987, 1996, 1998

Whatever understandings they bring to the question of ideological self-placement, median respondents placed themselves slightly to the left of centre. Across each of the surveys, therefore, the median respondent's own position remained closer to her or his view of Labor than to his or her view of the Coalition. As Table 7b shows, this was just as evident when Labor was in government (1984, 1987) as it was when Labor was in opposition (1996, 1998).

Table 7b Differences Between the Parties' Positions and the Position of the Median Respondent, Left-Right Scale, 1984–1998

| | 1984# | 1987 | 1996 | 1998 |
|------------------------|-------|------|------|------|
| Labor—Liberal/National | 2.3 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 2.6 |
| Self—Labor | 1.0 | 0.8 | 0.9 | 0.8 |
| Self—LNP | 1.3 | 1.6 | 1.5 | 1.8 |

Note: # = Respondents' 1987 recall

Source: Table 7a

On the question of whether it matters which party wins, far from the proportion falling after the 1960s, it actually increased. In Aitkin's 1967 and 1969 surveys, nearly two-thirds of respondents (59 percent in 1967; 65 percent in 1969) said they 'usually' (1967) cared 'a good deal' which party won a general election, or 'cared a great deal' (1969) which party would win the election. ANOP figures suggest that the outcome of the 'It's Time' campaign was even more widely anticipated: three-quarters (75 percent) of its respondents said they cared 'a great deal' or at least 'quite

a lot' about which party won in 1972. In no subsequent election for which we have data (1987, 1993, 1996 and 1998) has the proportion of respondents caring a 'good deal' fallen significantly below that (Table 8).

Table 8 **How Much Respondents Care Which Party Wins, 1967–1998**
(percentages)

| | A good deal | Not very much | Not at all | No response | n |
|------|-------------|---------------|------------|-------------|--------|
| 1967 | 59 | 39 | na | 2 | (2054) |
| 1969 | 65 | 35 | na | 1 | (1873) |
| 1972 | 75* | 21 | 3 | 1 | (na) |
| 1987 | 77 | 21 | na | 2 | (1825) |
| 1993 | 82 | 15 | 2 | 1 | (3023) |
| 1996 | 74 | 21 | 4 | 1 | (1795) |
| 1998 | 73 | 22 | 4 | 1 | (1897) |

Note: *Includes 'a great deal' (44 percent) and 'quite a lot' (31 percent); na = not asked

Questions: *Would you say you usually care a good deal which party wins a general election or that you don't care very much? (1967)*

How much do you personally care which party wins the federal election on December 2?

Do you care a great deal, quite a lot, not very much or not at all? (1972)

Would you say you cared a good deal which party won the Federal election or that you did not care very much which party won? (1969, 1987, 1993, 1996, 1998)

Sources: Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, 2nd edn, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, p. 388 (1967), p. 379 (1969); ANOP *Australian Public Opinion Newsletter* 2 (4), 1972, p. 17; Australian Election Study, 1987–1998.

If voters think it matters who wins, one might expect them to think of the parties as importantly different rather than essentially the same. And, indeed, this appears to be the case. The proportion of respondents who think it matters a 'good deal' which party wins is not very different to the proportion who think there are at least 'some' party differences.

But voters are discerning. Across those periods for which we have records—the second half of 1940s, the second half of the 1960s, most of the 1970s and the 1990s—the proportion of respondents who report a 'good deal' of difference between the parties increases or diminishes with the issues at hand.⁸² The records suggest two high points: 1948, when bank nationalisation was prominently positioned on the Government's agenda; and 1993, when there were well publicised differences between the parties over industrial relations, health care and a goods and services tax. The low points are almost as widely scattered: 1967, 1972, 1973, 1996 and 1998 (Table 9).

⁸² Head and Patience, who insist on averaging the 1967 and 1969 data, note that 'only' 34 percent of voters saw a 'good deal' of difference between the parties, at a time when the debate over Vietnam was at its height. But it is not clear what proportion of respondents might reasonably be expected to see a 'good deal' of difference between the parties when, according to the authors themselves, there was little else to distinguish them; Head and Patience, 'Labor and Liberal: How Different Are They?', *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 8.

Table 9 Differences Between the Parties, 1946-1998 (percentages)

| | Good deal | Some | Not much | No difference | DK/No response | n |
|-------|-----------|------|----------|---------------|----------------|--------|
| 1946 | 46 | na | na | na | 9 | (2000) |
| 1948 | 46 | na | 26 | 22 | 8 | (na) |
| 1967 | 30 | 21 | 38 | na | 11 | (2054) |
| 1969 | 38 | 27 | 30 | na | 5 | (1873) |
| 1972* | 29 | 31 | 17 | 21 | 2 | (1000) |
| 1973 | 30 | 40 | na | 22 | 8 | (na) |
| 1979 | 38 | 26 | 32 | na | 4 | (2016) |
| 1993 | 43 | 39 | 15 | 2 | 1 | (3023) |
| 1996 | 30 | 44 | 22 | 3 | 1 | (1795) |
| 1998 | 29 | 46 | 21 | 3 | 1 | (1897) |

Note: * Melbourne and Sydney only; na = not asked.

Questions: *Do you think it makes a great deal of difference or only a little difference which political party is in power in Australia? (1946)*

What difference do you think it makes which party governs this country—do you think it makes a great deal of difference, a little difference or no difference? (1948)

In general, would you say there was a good deal of difference between the parties, some difference or not much difference? (1967, 1969, 1979)

Some people say that a change of government, that is, from Liberal to Labor, would make a big difference to the way the country is run. Others say it will make very little difference.

In your opinion, would a change of government from Liberal to Labor make a big difference, some difference, a little difference, or not really any difference at all to the way the country is run? (1972)

Thinking of the previous Liberal-Country Party government, how different do you think present Labor Party policies are? Do you think they are very different, quite different, or essentially the same? (1973)

Considering everything the Labor Party and the Liberal Party stand for, would you say there is a good deal of difference between the parties, some differences between the parties, not much difference between the parties, no difference between the parties? (1993, 1996, 1998)

Sources: Australian Public Opinion Polls Nos. 375–381, Sept–Oct 1946 and 548–558, Oct–Nov 1948; Don Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, 2nd edn, ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, pp. 361, 373, 384; Irving Saulwick and Associates for the Age (Melbourne), 4 July 1972; ANOP *Australian Public Opinion Newsletter* vol. 3, no. 3, 1973, p. 11; Australian Election Study 1993–1998.

To infer from the most recent data that voters ‘no longer see any great differences between the parties’⁸³ is ahistorical and misleading. At the same time, the findings clearly confound the periodisation for party convergence argued by Mackay.

Party identification

Asked in 1996, and again after the 1998 election, whether they thought political parties were ‘doing a very good job, neither a good nor a bad job, a bad job or a very bad job’, only one in five of those who filled out a questionnaire for the Australian Election Study said that the parties were doing a ‘bad job’ (13 percent in 1996; 16 percent in 1998) or a ‘very bad job’ (6 percent in 1996 and in 1998). A figure of around one in five is unlikely to be much higher, if higher at all, than the sort of figure that would have been recorded had the same sort of survey been conducted in the 1960s.

⁸³ Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, op. cit., p. 179.

Nonetheless, the level of party identification (the extent to which voters are prepared to classify themselves as generally Liberal, Labor, and so on) was lower in the late 1990s than it was in the second half of the 1960s, when it was first measured. And the proportion of respondents who considered themselves to be supporters of none of the parties roughly doubled, though from a low base. If we take this last group of respondents plus the much greater proportion who described their party attachments as ‘not very strong’, we can say that at the end of the 1990s the proportion of weak identifiers or non-identifiers was about half as great again as it had been a generation earlier.

A corresponding decline was recorded in the proportion of respondents who felt a ‘very strong’ or even ‘fairly strong’ identification with any of the parties. This decline, as Table 10 makes clear, dates not from the late 1960s, or even the mid-1970s (as Mackay’s account might lead us to expect), but from the mid-1980s; Rodney Smith suggests that it was only then that the inability of both sides of politics ‘to deal effectively with major economic crises’ became ‘sufficiently clear’.⁸⁴ From a high point in 1979, when three-quarters (74 percent) of respondents reported that they were ‘strong’ or ‘fairly strong’ identifiers, the proportion dropped to about a half (53 percent) in 1996 before staging an apparent recovery in 1998 (59 percent). This increase of six percentage points may have been due, in part, to formerly weak identifiers aligning themselves more strongly with Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party; in 1999, however, the proportion of ‘very strong’ or ‘fairly strong’ identifiers had slipped again.

Table 10 Strength of Party Identification, 1967-1999 (percentages)

| | Very strong | Fairly strong | Not very strong | None |
|---------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|------|
| 1967 | 30 | 40 | 21 | 8 |
| 1979 | 31 | 43 | 17 | 8 |
| 1984-86 | 26 | 40 | 23 | 10 |
| 1987 | 19 | 45 | 31 | 5 |
| 1990 | 17 | 44 | 33 | 6 |
| 1993 | 17 | 43 | 28 | 12 |
| 1996 | 16 | 37 | 30 | 17 |
| 1998 | 16 | 43 | 27 | 14 |
| 1999 | 15 | 41 | 29 | 14 |

Sources: Rodney Smith, ‘Australia: an Old Order Manages Change’, in J.K. White and P.J. Davies, eds. *Political Parties and the Collapse of the Old Orders*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998, p. 123; Australian Election Study 1998; and Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey, 1999.

Being persuaded by the parties

The answer to our question about changes in the capacity of the parties to shape the views of voters themselves doesn’t provide much solace for the Mackay thesis either. In the run-up to the 1993 election, for example, the positions adopted by Labor and Liberal respondents on the GST were in large measure the same as the positions taken by the Labor and Liberal parties on the GST. And they corresponded precisely because of the positions taken by the parties. Anyone who doubts this need only look at the massive turnaround in opinion in 1991 after the Leader of the Opposition, Dr

⁸⁴ R. Smith, ‘Australia: an Old Order Manages Change’, in J.K. White and P.J. Davies, eds. *Political Parties and the Collapse of the Old Orders*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998, p. 128.

Hewson, announced his Fightback! package. Before the announcement, nearly half the Coalition's voters, according to the polls, were opposed to a consumption tax; after his announcement, three out of every five Coalition respondents favoured it. On the Labor side the reaction was roughly equal—and opposite. Before the announcement Coalition respondents had been 18 percentage points more likely than Labor respondents to support the initiative; after the announcement they were 45 to 48 percentage points more likely to support it.⁸⁵ Labor and the Coalition respondents were every bit as polarised on the GST as they had been half a century earlier on the question of the banks.⁸⁶ The *Mackay Report* completely missed this polarisation—and with it any chance of noting the historical parallel.⁸⁷

One reason why parties continue to matter is that party leaders continue to attract; the notion that the attitude of Australians towards 'political leadership and significant elites' has typically been 'one of distrust'—noted by Emy after the Coalition had enjoyed 23 years in office—is, in at least one important sense, mistaken.⁸⁸ Favourable leadership evaluations appear to enhance trust. And attractive leaders, especially where the attraction is based on a sense of their competence and integrity, strengthen party support.⁸⁹

For much of his time in office, from 1983 to 1991, Bob Hawke rated well in the polls; on the figures generated by the Morgan poll, he rated better than Whitlam (Labor's 'charismatic' leader in the 1960s) or indeed any other party leader since Roy Morgan started to asking about leaders on a regular basis more than 30 years ago.⁹⁰ In the early 1990s, John Hewson, as Leader of the Opposition, also rated well; while he never threatened Hawke's record, from April 1990 to April 1992 his approval ratings were in the 40s if not 50s. In 1998, both John Howard and Kim Beazley went into the election with approval ratings of over 40 percent.⁹¹ Several leaders in New Zealand, Canada or Japan—some with ratings close to zero—would have killed for such

⁸⁵ M. Goot, 'Fightback in the polls', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 1, 1992, p. 170.

⁸⁶ M. Goot, *Policies and Partisans: Australian Electoral Opinion 1941 to 1968*, Occasional Monograph No. 1, Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Sydney, 1969, p. 27.

⁸⁷ H. Mackay, *The Mackay Report: Keynote*, April 1992.

⁸⁸ H. Emy, 'The roots of Australian politics: a critique of a culture', *Politics*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1972, p. 28.

⁸⁹ B. Graetz, and I. McAllister, 'Popular Evaluations of Party Leaders in the Anglo-American Democracies', in H.D. Clarke and M.M. Czudnowski, eds. *Political Elites in Anglo-American Democracies*, Northern Illinois University Press, Dekalb, 1987, p. 55; C. Bean and A. Mughan, 'Leadership effects in parliamentary elections in Australia and Britain', *American Political Science Review*, 83, 1989, p. 1176; C. Bean, 'The electoral influence of party leader images in Australia and New Zealand', *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1993, pp. 111–32.

⁹⁰ The most accessible guide to these data, to the end of 1995, is in I. McAllister, M. Mackerras and C.B. Boldiston, *Australian Political Facts*, 2nd edn, Macmillan Education Australia, South Melbourne, 1997, pp. 282–89. Among other things, the figures suggest that Whitlam's support declined markedly between 1969, his most successful campaign, and his winning office in 1972; Goot and Connell, 'Presidential Politics in Australia?', p. 31.

⁹¹ According to the final AC Nielsen poll, 52 percent approved the performance of Howard and 53 percent the performance of Beazley; *Age* (Melbourne), 3 October, 1998. Newspoll put them at 44 and 52 percent, respectively; *Weekend Australian*, 3–4 October, 1998. The only other national poll with an interest in the leaders, Australasian Research Strategies, scored it 49 percent for Howard and 52 percent for Beazley; ARS, Media Release, 2 October 1998.

figures. In state politics, where the stakes are rather lower, Kerry Chikarovski (NSW), Denis Napthine (Victoria), and Rob Borbidge (Queensland) would probably not kill for ratings like Bob Carr's (NSW), Steve Bracks' (Victoria) or Peter Beattie's (Queensland); but they almost certainly would be tempted to stab the odd colleague in the back.⁹²

Shifts in the major parties vote

What, then, should be said about the unparalleled period of electoral volatility that some commentators imagine we have been living through; the rise of minor party voting, most notably in the form of support for Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, and the weakening grip of the major parties in the Senate?

Electoral volatility (defined here as the net—not gross—change in party support from one election to the next) was higher in the 1990s than it was in the 1980s (Table 11). But in the 1980s, the level of volatility was lower than it was in the 1970s—the decade in which the Australian Democrats made an initial splash that was bigger than the one made by One Nation 21 years later. And in the 1970s, electoral volatility, especially in House of Representatives elections, was lower than in the 1940s. Indeed, in the House, the net movement in party support was *lower* in the 1980s than in any decade since the formation of the modern party system in 1910.⁹³ There is not much joy here for those who think that a decline in the ethical status of politicians holds the key to political transformations—that *apres* Whitlam *la deluge*.

Table 11 Average Vote for the Major Parties, and Net Volatility, House of Representatives and Senate, 1940s-1990s (percentages)

| | Average vote for the major parties | | Net volatility* | |
|-------|------------------------------------|--------|-----------------|--------|
| | House of Reps | Senate | House of Reps | Senate |
| 1940s | 88.1 | 95.3 | 12.5 | 10.0 |
| 1950s | 94.2 | 92.0 | 4.6 | 5.3 |
| 1960s | 90.5 | 88.3 | 5.7 | 3.3 |
| 1970s | 92.4 | 86.7 | 6.4 | 9.1 |
| 1980s | 92.2 | 84.4 | 3.8 | 6.4 |
| 1990s | 84.4 | 80.5 | 8.4 | 7.0 |

Note: *Half the sum of the differences, across sequential elections, in the vote for the ALP, Liberal Party (UAP), National (Country) Party, (LNP in the Senate), New South Wales or Lang Labor (1937–49), DLP (1955–75), Australian Democrats (1977–), and other parties and independents (taken as one group).

Sources: Scott Bennett, 'The Decline in Support for the Major Parties and the Prospect of Minority Government', *Research Paper*, No. 10, 1998–99, Information and Research Services, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 1999, pp. 2, 4, for the figures on average vote; Murray Goot, 'Class Voting, Issue Voting and Electoral Volatility', in J. Brett, et al., eds., *Developments in Australian Politics*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1994, p. 177 for data on volatility to 1993; and Gerard Newman, 'Federal Election Results 1949–1998', *Research Paper*, No. 8, 1998–99, Information and Research Services, Department of Parliamentary Library, for data post-1993.

⁹² In New South Wales, according to a Newspoll survey, 59 percent of respondents were 'satisfied' with Carr's performance, 29 percent with Chikarovski's; *Australian*, 13 November 2000. In Victoria, according to AC Nielsen, Brack's performance was 'approved' by 74 percent of those interviewed, Napthine's by 24 percent; *Age* (Melbourne), 13 November 2000. In Queensland, Newspoll reported 61 percent 'satisfied' with Beattie's performance and 37 percent with Borbidge's; *Australian*, 21 September 2000.

⁹³ M. Goot, 'Class Voting, Issue Voting and Electoral Volatility', in J. Brett, et al., eds. *Developments in Australian Politics*, op. cit., p. 177.

It is true that in 1998 the minor party vote in the House of Representatives jumped to its highest level since the War; with the combined weight of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, the Australian Democrats and the Greens, the minor parties and Independents managed to win just over 20 percent of the vote. But this may have had less to do with increases in the proportion who distrust the major parties or who are cynical about the political process and more to do with the mobilisation of pre-existing attitudes to politics and increasing concerns about particular political positions that the major parties have failed to represent.

Finally, the vote for the Senate. It is a pity that students of electoral behaviour pay so little attention to this chamber. For it is here, not in the House of Representatives, that the major party vote has been steadily eaten away. The siege of the Senate dates not from the sacking of Whitlam in the 1970s but from the decision to introduce a system of proportional representation in the 1940s. Since then the combined support for Labor and the Coalition has dropped, by an average of 2.8 percentage points, each and every decade. Contrary to the implication of Mackay's work, this decline was just as steady pre-Whitlam as it has been in the quarter of a century since.

Conclusion

One problem with Jaensch's view about the apathy of Australians being of very long-standing, is the way it constructs apathy as a quality rather than a relationship, as a timeless essence rather than as something shaped by political circumstance.⁹⁴ The rise and fall of electoral turnout, and the ways in which this varied across states, prior to the introduction of compulsory voting, offers one window on to this;⁹⁵ changes in the patterns of party competition and in the ability of parties to attract voters—at the end of the 1890s, in 1910, in the mid-1940s, in the mid-1950s, in the late 1970s, in the mid-1980s and in the late 1990s—offers another.⁹⁶

This review of the most recent period, based on the best evidence we have—nationally conducted, time series, survey-based research—provides only limited support for what Grattan has called 'the crisis of cynicism that seems to be enveloping' democracies like Australia.⁹⁷ Voters are no more disengaged from politics now than they were in the years before Whitlam, when, in an overview of the academic research, voter 'disinterest' [sic] was said to be 'qualified by a fatalistic scepticism' and the 'denigration of politicians' was regarded as a commonplace.⁹⁸ If anything, the level of political interest recorded by the polls has been greater since the 1960s. Certainly, the belief in compulsory voting has been no less.

⁹⁴ Jaensch, *Election! How and Why Australia Votes*, op. cit., p. 146

⁹⁵ M. Goot, 'Electoral Systems', in D. Aitkin, ed. *Surveys of Australian Political Science*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, pp. 193–94.

⁹⁶ Goot, 'Class Voting, Issue Voting and Electoral Volatility', op. cit., pp. 177–79.

⁹⁷ Grattan, 'Editorial Independence: An Outdated Concept?', op. cit., p. 20.

⁹⁸ Emy, 'The Roots of Australian Politics: A Critique of a Culture', op. cit., p. 27; S. Encel, *Equality and Authority: a Case Study of Class, Status and Power in Australia*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1970, p. 222.

The data do point to a decline in the reputation of politicians for ethics and honesty, they suggest an increase in electoral cynicism around the credibility of election promises and they document a weakening of attachment to party—things which Jaensch’s view either doesn’t allow or cannot treat. But the idea that an ‘inevitable consequence of massive structural change in Australia’s economy has been a serious erosion of public confidence in the democratic and representative institutions built into the framework of society’⁹⁹ is difficult to sustain. As much as they ever have in the post-war years, voters continue to think that elections matter, they continue to think of the two major parties as different, and they continue to be influenced by the parties in their judgments of political issues—on the big issues of the day, just as dramatically as they were fifty years ago—whether they realise it or not. Mackay’s conclusions on this point may faithfully reflect the conversations to which he is privy; but this in itself doesn’t make his conclusions valid. The conclusion reached by the Constitutional Centenary Foundation, that Australians are unlikely to take an interest in constitutional debate unless they get ‘reliable information, detached from party politics’, however fashionable, is profoundly mistaken.¹⁰⁰

It is one thing to ask ‘ordinary Australians’, ‘middle Australia’ or anyone else about politicians, members of parliament, ‘people in government’, *en masse*; to ask about local members, individual politicians, or cabinet ministers, may be quite another.¹⁰¹ Attitudes to the leaders underline this point: in recent years the approval ratings of a number of party leaders, some in office for more than one term, have been much higher than would have been predicted by the ‘crisis of cynicism’ thesis. Support for the parties has also stood up relatively well: in the House of Representatives (though not the Senate) volatility was clearly greater in the 1990s than in the 1980s, but in neither chamber was the movement in party support as marked as it was in the 1970s, 1940s or 1910s. And, in an electorate which is said to find politics on the nose, informal voting remains remarkably low; it was lower throughout the 1990s than it was in 1984 or 1987.¹⁰²

In the absence of compulsory voting, a number of things would change—support for compulsory voting among them. But it is misleading to think of compulsory voting as masking our discontents. This is partly because the extent of the discontent has been exaggerated and decontextualised; partly because certain forms of discontent are clear, notwithstanding the ‘mask’; and partly because compulsory voting itself may have helped sustain interest in politics and a belief in the political system.

⁹⁹ L. Tanner, *Open Australia*, Pluto Press, Annandale, NSW, 1999, p. 192.

¹⁰⁰ *Report on a Decade of Experience*, Constitutional Centenary Foundation, [Carlton, Vic.], 2000, p. 21. Research conducted during the 1999 constitutional referendum confirms the point: the voices which respondents thought most important were those of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition; G. Gray, ‘Campaigns and Elections’, *Sydney Papers*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2000.

¹⁰¹ On attitudes to local members, see Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, op. cit., pp. 367–68 and 390; on attitudes to individual politicians, see Lyons and Stewart-Weeks, ‘On the Edge’, op. cit., p. 10; and on attitudes to cabinet ministers, Daniel, *Power, Privilege and Prestige*, op. cit., p. 64.

¹⁰² McAllister, *et al.*, *Australian Political Facts*, pp. 81–82; *Electoral Pocket Book*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, 1999, p. 45.



Question — What do you think of the notion that declining turnout in places that don't have compulsory voting is an index of declining interest in politics, etcetera? And secondly, what do you think of Putnam's thesis about decline of social capital?

Murray Goot — Decline in turnout elsewhere may have to do with decline in interest, but it may also—as Hugh Mackay suggests—have to do with frustration amongst those who have ideals and are worried that their vote counts for nought, or that the choices are very narrow. There are several possible explanations for decline in turnout, of which decline in interest is just one.

The Putnam thesis concerns social capital, by which he means the connectedness that we have, largely through voluntary organisations. The famous article he wrote was called *Bowling Alone*. His concern was that, increasingly in America, people were not joining groups, working in neighbourhoods or associating with friends as much as they used to. People had become individualised, isolated and withdrawn from the political process, and that increasingly people who were moderate in their political positions would withdraw from politics and leave politics to people who were very interested but who represented the extremes—whether they be right or left, feminist or anti-feminist or whatever. This seemed to him to be a worry.

The immediate question is, to what extent (a) has the phenomenon which he identifies in the United States happened in Australia, and (b) if it has happened, to what extent does it really explain anything very much? Compulsory voting is obviously one of the things which would make a considerable difference in seeing any political consequence in Australia of the *Bowling Alone* phenomenon.

If people in Australia were less interested in politics just because they were less interested in community matters—whether it be scouting or Rotary or, indeed, tenpin bowling—they would still find themselves on election day having to vote. And they would find themselves, certainly these days, with a wide range of choice, as we saw in 1998. Eighty percent of them voted for the major parties, and in almost every seat (bar nine) they could have voted One Nation, and in the Senate they could have voted One Nation or Democrat. And even in those circumstances the minor party and Independent vote only got up to 25 percent.

They could also have voted informally and spoil their ballot paper—and it is remarkable how few people do this. Obviously part of the explanation is that people do think that compulsory voting means that they have to actually indicate some clear, formal vote. But there are enough people out there, I suspect, who think that they can get away with not filling out the ballot paper or writing some rude comment. Some people no doubt vote *and* write a rude comment—the rude comment is ignored and the vote is counted. What I'm impressed by is how little informal voting there is.

The vote for Hanson and for the Democrats was inflated in a way. On the best evidence we have (the 1998 Australian Election Study), they both represent protest votes and disenchantment with the democratic process. But of course at that point they depart. The Hanson vote is very much a vote against the sort of politics that Paul

Keating represented, in terms of what's often called 'new class values', most obviously to do with immigration and multiculturalism and the like, but also a wider set of values to do with capital punishment, homosexuality, and issues of that kind. One Nation voters are overwhelmingly opposed to the rights of homosexuals to have any role in public life, or to teach. They are very strongly in favour of capital punishment. They stand out on all those sorts of issues, and I suspect that if Hanson herself had not been the leader of the party, they would have stood out on anti-feminist issues as well.

The Democrat vote is a very different vote. The people that were mobilised in the election campaign on the basis of discontent with the economic system, globalisation and protection, declining terms of trade in the rural area, did not vote One Nation—they voted Labor. And the relationship between feeling good about your economic circumstance and voting Labor or Liberal is extraordinarily high. People who feel very good about interest rates, their own circumstance and so on are very likely to vote for the Coalition—at the moment at least, because they're in government. People who feel discontented about interest rates, costs of living, their own employment prospects, and so on, are overwhelmingly likely to vote Labor. The curves in the 1998 election data are just beautiful to behold.

If you look at the One Nation vote and plot respondents according to their increasing economic discontent or pressure or insecurity, the vote for One Nation remains absolutely flat. The vote for One Nation goes up as people indicate that they don't like government policy on Aborigines, they don't like multiculturalism or immigration, and they don't like the way democracy works. And I think this is code for saying they think the politicians no longer represent, for this particular group of One Nation voters, the good old values that they stand for.

Question — Regarding your comment on the similarity in the votes for the minor parties in the 1970s and the 1990s, looking at One Nation versus the Democrats, my concern was that a lot of the vote for the Democrats in the 1970s reflected a split, and they actually took a large chunk of the major party constituency with them. Whereas the One Nation phenomenon was less of a split within the existing parliamentary parties, and more of a new protest movement.

Murray Goot —There are similarities actually, more striking than you perhaps concede, between the origins of the Democrats and the origins of One Nation. Chipp and Hanson were both members of the Liberal Party. If you go back and look at those early Chipp speeches there is this feeling that both parties are 'on the nose', and that what he's trying to do is establish a constituency for people that don't like either side. Now, he took Liberal and Coalition supporters (more than Labor supporters) and Hanson, contrary to early expectations, did the same.

There were a lot of people in 1996 saying that the rise of Hanson was very bad news for Labor. You'll recall that the seat that she won was a Labor seat—Bill Hayden's former seat of Ipswich. Gary Morgan, who did some very early polling work on this, predicted that what Hanson would represent was a re-run of Labor's nightmare of the 1950s. That basically this was a new split in the making, and that she would take with her the blue collar Labor vote that was disenchanted with the 'Paul Keating agenda'

which represented the professional middle-class in the cities, to put it crudely. And that they would pay a terrible price as people gathered to Hanson around these issues.

That judgement proved to be dead wrong, although it was also predicted by at least one analyst who looked at the 1996 election study and thought that Labor was very vulnerable on questions of Aborigines and immigration. Well this turned out to be quite wrong.

The Hanson vote has been dogged in a way that the Chipp vote or the Democrat vote wasn't. That is to say, there was more coherence within the Democrats, less of the *Fuhrer prinzip*, and that was very evident in One Nation—whatever the leader said, went. The Democrats organised in a much more democratic way—and they still are in many ways the most internally democratic of all the parties. Now this was *verboten* in the One Nation Party from the very beginning. It was run by highly authoritarian people in a very 'top down' manner and the party organisation was crypto-fascist. This is quite different from the Democrats. And of course the sort of people that rallied to the Democrat flag from within the Liberal Party ranks were, in socio-economic terms, very different from the One Nation people. The One Nation people came from the Liberal Party, but most especially they came from the National Party—the party most damaged by One Nation.

Question — Is there any data on the religious affiliation of One Nation voters?

Murray Goot — Yes, I think they're not churchgoers, on the whole. This surprised me, because I thought of that constituency as partly picking up the old Bjelke-Petersen constituency in Queensland. But it also relates to the earlier question about Putnam, because church attendance and affiliation with church groups is one of the things that Putnam talks about as building social capital. And if you find these people are below average in their church attendance, that would be grist for the mill that in fact these people are in some ways alienated from social groups.

This was a very fashionable thesis in political sociology in the 1950s, after fascism and after Nazi Germany in particular—the notion of isolated individuals who were there to be mobilised, the importance of secondary groups as a bulwark in a liberal democratic state, and that if you didn't have people owing allegiance and being involved with secondary groups, what you got was a condition in which a demagogue could mobilise people. The Putnam thing is a bit of a re-run of that, although he doesn't talk about that sort of literature, which was very fashionable in the 1950s and 1960s.

Question — You seem to have found that there is widespread voter disenchantment with politicians' honesty and ethics. Is that reflected in people's voting intentions or in political pressure between elections? Do voters punish politicians for that?

Murray Goot — If you think all politicians are pretty terrible and you have to vote for one of them, it doesn't help to distinguish between those who are worth supporting and those who aren't, except when you have someone coming from outside the system. That was one of the attractions of Hanson—although she had some relationship to the Liberal Party, it was pretty marginal. People ask the question: 'Why wasn't Graeme Campbell able to mobilise this vote?' Of course, he was very

frustrated that although he stood for a lot of the things that Hanson stood for, he couldn't get the support of the voters.

I think there were a couple of reasons: the fact that Hanson was a woman and generated a certain sort of sexual electricity was one thing—which was quite important given the sort of people she attracted. And secondly, although she did have some association with the Liberal Party, it was pretty marginal, certainly compared to someone like Graeme Campbell, who'd been in Parliament for much too long to attract this sort of constituency. So she came along and was available to people disenchanted with the system. But so, traditionally, were the Democrats. And if you look at the data you'll see that both the Democrats and One Nation pull these sort of voters—people who think that democracy doesn't work very well, and that the parties are pretty terrible. They're pretty disillusioned. But of course these are very different voters, the ones who vote Democrat and One Nation.

So yes, if you have someone from outside the system, this is the way to mobilise the vote. And Hanson, in my view, would have done rather better to have pushed this sort of thing and to have pushed her opposition to class values, than to have got on to things like tax. The problem with her tax policy was that; (a) it was silly—voters aren't that stupid and they realised it was implausible; and (b) they weren't interested in tax. If they were, they'd vote Labor if they weren't going to vote Liberal.

Question — Could you comment on the relationship between the two phenomena of the Putnam thesis: the decline in social capital, and the loss of rating by such a large number of professions which previously have been among the 'pillars of society', people to whom society in general have traditionally looked up to? It seems that there might be a relationship between these two things.

Murray Goot —Some of the professions have not changed a lot, like judges and so on. Others, like lawyers and bankers, have changed. We can all think of particular reasons that don't seem to have to do with social capital. Banking is the most obvious profession to think about, in terms of the deregulation of the banking system, withdrawal of banking services, the increase of user-pays within banks, and enormous bank profits. Of course, the banks would say these profits are a miserly return on the capital invested, but for most people these are huge profits, and I suspect that's part of it, with banks.

Lawyers are a bit more puzzling. It could be a sense that increasingly lawyers are paid out of the public purse to no great end, at great cost. In many instances—in terms of inquiries and so on—it's now commonly said that the only people who will benefit through public inquiries are the lawyers who turn up in their serried ranks to represent the various parties involved. In New South Wales we have just completed an extraordinary inquiry into the Mt Kosciusko disaster, which went on for five years at huge public expense. If each of the families of the people killed had been given half a million dollars and sent on their way the state would no doubt have saved a lot of money.

So you can think about particular professions without actually thinking in terms of the Putnam thesis about social capital. That's not to say that there's nothing in the social

capital thesis, but it's not the most obvious explanatory framework in which to think of these declining ratings.

Question — Do you have any information about whether journalists have become more cynical over the years, and whether this drives our attitude to tall poppies in general? I have a feeling that journalists are more cynical and there has been more deep investigative journalism, where they pursue parliamentarians to the last degree. Do you think there might be some connection?

Murray Goot — There is an argument, particularly in America, that journalists have moved more into 'campaign mode', and that political journalism is full of analysis in terms of seeing policies as manoeuvres in the game for political advantage between the various parties (or, in the United States, between potential presidential candidates). They don't focus on the policies themselves and their merits, or telling readers about what is being proposed and what the strengths and weaknesses are. The argument is that people are not particularly interested in this, and they are being turned off, and they don't think much of journalists for this. They then lose interest in politics, because what they really want to know about is the merits of the policies.

There is also a feeling that journalists have moved into much more personality-based writing about politics and pursuing politicians' private lives, and have moved way from talking about public policy issues. So there is a disenchantment with American journalists, and a feeling that the public aren't learning things, as they ought to be. This in turn turns them off politics.

Question — Can you comment on the voting on the referendum issue, and the fact that the rural area was obviously conservative but that was also possibly a protest vote, and the blue collar workers were another group that seemed to vote against the referendum.

Murray Goot — I haven't looked closely at the referendum. I never thought it would pass, and went on the record on this in 1994. In my view it was never going to pass because the necessary pre-conditions were never established. One pre-condition is bipartisanship, and I always thought that what would happen on the pro-change side was that there would be a split between those that wanted a direct election and those who wanted something else.

I thought that people like Donald Horne—back in the days of *The Lucky Country* and subsequently as a founder of the republican movement—had always misunderstood the issue, and we've now come full circle on this. Horne had argued that what you needed to do was simply have a referendum on the republic, and the question of what *sort* of republic would be a secondary matter. This is now a thing that Beazley and other people are running with, and I think it is utterly mistaken. I said at the time that to think that the form of republic was a secondary issue, and that what really mattered was whether you became a republic or stayed as a constitutional monarchy, was profoundly mistaken. So I never saw the republican movement as likely to succeed.

In terms of the pattern of voting that you identify, the most obvious explanation is that it's a case of new class values writ large—that there were a lot of people that saw this particular model as a model represented by the 'new class elites'. But there were also

a lot of people that were strongly pro-monarchy. The Hanson vote is a strongly conservative, anti-republican vote. There are others of course who would simply prefer the monarchy if they can't have direct election—the last thing they want is the republican model that was put up. So, it didn't surprise me. The patterns of voting, the strongly class-based patterns, is a bit more surprising, but I think this does have to do with wider terms of new class values and a protest against those.

Question — We've seen quite a bit in the media about where the one million One Nation voters are going to go. Based on your work, can you make any kind of prediction about where they will go in the next election?

Murray Goot — I never make predictions. I'd say that they are a vote that can still be mobilised on the same sort of basis as 1998 in terms of public policy, which is along immigration and Aboriginal lines. That's much more likely to be done by the Coalition. Their values correspond much more closely with Liberal and National Party values than with Labor values.

If you look at the Australian electorate in terms of where people stand on Aboriginal and immigration issues, as you get progressively more sympathetic to immigration and Aboriginal issues in particular, more people are likely to vote Labor and less likely to vote Liberal.

So Liberals are in a better position, as they were in 1996, to mobilise this sort of vote—and indeed Howard did mobilise this sort of vote. The slogan 'for all of us' was clearly related to research done by the Liberal Party and/or Howard's own instincts on these matters—not happy with multiculturalism, not happy with the 'privilege' of Aboriginal people. Howard in 1996 won the constituency largely that subsequently became the Hanson constituency. And the challenge and the opportunity there is for him to hold on to it or win it by going back to some of those issues.

I think for Labor the chances of winning the Hanson vote would be greater if they could convince the Hanson voters that what really needs to be leveraged amongst their values are questions of economic disadvantage and those sorts of issues—race, immigration, Aboriginal matters—things that Labor would steer away from in trying to attract the Hanson votes. But these issues would still play well, I think, for the Coalition in that constituency.

Question — Would you mind clarifying your comments on the republic referendum? I gathered that back in 1994 you were convinced that the referendum would fail. Since the model that was developed was not known until 1998, what was the basis for your decision in 1994 that any referendum would fail? The question that Mr Beazley is proposing has never been tested, so I'm unclear on how you can reach the conclusion you did.

Murray Goot — The question that Beazley proposes is tested, and is widely supported. That is to say, most people want a republic. But in the course of a campaign, the issue would not be whether we want a republic or not, it would automatically become 'What sort of a republic do we want?' And the fundamental mistake made by people who think it's only a matter of a republic, is to think that a republic is an issue like taxation, where people prefer none to a lot, and if they can't

have none, they'll settle for a little. The republic issue is not like that. People who want a direct election will not necessarily vote for an indirect model just because it's the next closest option. This is what was demonstrated in the referendum.

So I was very confident in 1994 that the republicans would split on this issue—whatever model they came up with. I was sure that while you had a Liberal leader that would not support a model with the Labor side, that that also would count strongly against it. We've never had a referendum in Australia passed in which both sides have not agreed. It's not sufficient, but it's certainly necessary, and I didn't think the republican vote would be an exception.

I took the view that the republic issue is not an ordinary issue. It's a bit like the issue of Telstra, where some people think that Telstra should be either totally privately owned or totally publicly owned, and that the worst possible thing would be for it to be in-between. So there are people who think it should either be a monarchy or their own form of republic, but the worst possible thing would be a form of republic that wasn't *their* thing, and they'd much rather vote for a monarchy than to vote for what they would regard as a 'second best' republic.

My view is that in the course of the campaign, whoever runs on this as a plebiscite will be under enormous pressure to clarify what they stand for, and therefore will create a split. But even if the referendum or plebiscite were to get up, we would still be back to *exactly* the situation we were in in 1999. What is a model that will carry the key players, and in turn might carry the electorate? I said in 1994 that before the referendum carries the people, it has to carry the Parliament. So there has to be a proposition to which both sides are committed. If we've got a proposition to which both sides are *not* committed, the referendum is almost certainly doomed, in my view. And if we have a plebiscite in which most people do put up their hand for a republic and the politicians have got away with not saying what sort of republic they want, we would be *exactly* back to square one: that is, what sort of republic? And when that goes up to referendum, people will almost certainly only be able to vote for one thing in the end—our tradition is that we vote for one thing. Whatever that one thing is, it has to be something agreed, because if it is not agreed, a lot of those people will vote for the status quo.