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## **Incumbency Dominance: an Unhealthy Trend?\***

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### **Introduction**

The Australian public, whether at federal or state elections, has been a reluctant trader of government horses. It's a crude measurement tool, but nonetheless instructive to note the average length of incumbency of the last five governments (including the present incumbent) federally and in each of the states. In making this calculation, I am collapsing together sequential prime ministerships of the same partisan stripe, for example at the Commonwealth level aggregating the periods in office of the Menzies, Holt, McEwen, Gorton and McMahon Governments, and the Hawke and Keating Governments, while in quantifying the term of the current incumbent measuring their period of occupation up until the next time they are due to visit the polls. Given that on present expectations several of these governments are likely to be returned, the resulting figures have, if anything, a bias to understatement rather than inflation. The average incumbency federally is eleven years and six months, while for the states the corresponding figures are: Queensland nearly fifteen years, New South Wales a little over thirteen years, Victoria approaching eleven years, South Australia just short of eight years, and Western Australia and Tasmania trailing a little behind at roughly seven and a half years.

In other words, once elected governments are usually guaranteed tenure equivalent to at least two electoral cycles, with 'oncers' very much the exception in all jurisdictions (the only cases in the past two decades are the Field Government in Tasmania, 1989–

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92, and the Borbidge Government in Queensland, 1996–98). Various factors contribute to the relatively slow rate of government alternation, including, first, the near universal employment of single member preferential electoral systems for the houses of government (the exception being Tasmania) which encourages majoritarian outcomes (that is, stable partisan majority governments); second, a remarkably durable two major party system, Labor versus non-Labor (it is no coincidence that in Victoria, where a two party system did not effectively congeal until the 1950s, the state experienced a chronically disordered local political scene in the first half of the twentieth century that was characterised by minority ministries of largely fleeting tenure); and, third, until recently, a high level of major party partisan identification among voters.

Incumbent governments have also been advantaged by other more intangible factors such as a sober, practical-minded (some would say conservative) national temperament that is sceptical of change. And, needless to say, incumbency has its built in advantages in the form of the resources, visibility and prestige that accompany office. In this lecture I want to elaborate on the advantages of incumbency to argue they have been augmented over recent decades as a result of systemic changes in governance to the extent that the playing field between governments and their oppositions is becoming unhealthily unbalanced. What makes this phenomenon all the more disturbing, I will go on to suggest, is that it is occurring in parallel with a growth in authority of those situated at the apex of executive power—a trend in itself potentially inimical to democratic governance.

### **Patterns of incumbency, past and present**

Before turning to the contemporary setting, I should say that there have been previous eras where the political landscape has seemed to freeze over—when we have had a collection of simultaneously heavily entrenched incumbent governments, politically and electorally ascendant in their respective jurisdictions. The post-war era springs to mind, with the Menzies hegemony having coincided with the age of the so-called ‘boss’ premiers in the states, when the likes of Henry Bolte in Victoria, Thomas Playford in South Australia and Eric Reece in Tasmania appeared to become institutionalised in office. Indeed, juxtaposed against the post-war era, when federally and in all of the states there were examples of governments surviving for more than a decade and in some cases much longer, the contemporary political scene hardly seems sclerotic. Having said that, I think many of us today would shrink at the scenario, which became something of the norm in several states during the middle quarters of the twentieth century, where one party (or coalition of parties) effectively became the de facto party of government and its opponent(s) the permanent opposition.

What then of the present political landscape? We have at the federal level, of course, a Liberal-National Coalition government now into its second decade in office and in a strong position (despite the overblown rhetoric of the effects of the Australian Electoral Commission’s proposed redistributions in New South Wales and Queensland) to extend that tenure toward fifteen years at next year’s election. At the same time, the federal Coalition government is encircled by, or encircles, uniform Labor governments in the states and territories. The oldest of these is the Carr-Iemma Government in New South Wales, which predates the Howard government by one year, having come to office in March 1995. The youngest is the Rann Government in

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South Australia, which came to office as a minority administration in March 2002. All of these governments, federal, state and territory, have been re-elected at least once; in fact, since early 2002 there has been an unbroken sequence of 11 elections at which governments have been re-endorsed by their publics. What is particularly striking is how incumbents have flourished in their return visits to the ballot box, most gaining rather than shedding fat.<sup>1</sup> Those in this category are:

- the Howard Government federally, which has increased its margin at both the 2001 and 2004 polls
- the New South Wales Carr Government increased its primary vote at both the 1999 and 2003 elections and has maintained nearly 60 per cent of the seats in the Legislative Assembly
- in Victoria at the November 2002 election, the minority Bracks Government built on Labor's substantial swing of 1999 to secure what has been described as the Victorian ALP's first genuine landslide victory in the state's history, as well as becoming the first Victorian Labor government to control the upper house
- similarly, in March 2006, the Rann Government in South Australia increased its primary vote by 8.85 per cent and in doing so went from minority status to a position of controlling nearly 60 per cent of the lower house seats
- the Gallop Government in Western Australia also followed this trend, building on its February 2001 election victory by gaining an additional 4.65 per cent of the primary vote in February 2005.

Election results in the territories have also been a bonanza for incumbents. In October 2004, the Jon Stanhope-led Labor administration increased its primary vote by over 5 per cent; while in the Northern Territory Clare Martin's progress has been still more spectacular, with her government's share of the primary vote jumping by 11.3 per cent in June 2005, increasing the ALP's seat share in the NT unicameral parliament from 52 to 72 per cent. Only in Queensland and Tasmania have the state Labor governments conceded ground in their most recent electoral outings (February 2004 and March 2006 respectively), but in each case the voting share lost was minimal and both administrations maintain commanding positions in their legislatures. In Queensland, Premier Beattie is now seeking a third term and most pundits believe Labor will be re-elected, albeit with a reduced majority.<sup>2</sup>

Taken together these figures clearly paint a picture of prospering incumbents. We don't have to rely solely, however, on election results to illustrate this ascendancy, or its flipside opposition desperation. Take, for example, some of the strange goings-on in relation to opposition party leaderships over recent months. In my home state of Victoria, such has been the predicament of the state Liberal Party confronted with opinion polls suggesting that the Bracks government might further add to its majority at this year's November's election, that in May not only did its leader, the hapless Robert

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<sup>1</sup> The following election result data is drawn from the Australian Government and Politics Database, <http://elections.uwa.edu.au/>

<sup>2</sup> As it turned out, the Beattie government's share of the primary vote remained virtually steady and it emerged with only one less seat in the 89-seat Legislative Assembly than held before entering the election (Labor had conceded three seats in by-elections between the 2004 and 2006 general elections).

Doyle, fall on his sword but his demise unleashed a brief media frenzy over an (aborted) second-coming of Jeff Kennett (endorsed no less than by the normally ultra-realistic Prime Minister Howard) in which it was seriously proposed that Kennett would ride back into Spring Street and single-handedly restore the fortunes of the state Liberals, the same party he left in such a mess in 1999.<sup>3</sup> The second example was a tale not of the resurrection variety but of the coming man genre. Following his high profile media performances during the Beaconsfield Mine Rescue, and against the background of continuing angst about the poor poll showings of Kim Beazley, there were front page newspaper reports of a campaign emanating from the New South Wales Labor Right to accelerate AWU National Secretary Bill Shorten's entry into parliament, install him in the federal Labor leadership whereupon, according to the theory, he would vanquish all comers (Howard or Costello) at next year's federal election.<sup>4</sup> Notably, neither Kennett nor Shorten had a seat in parliament when being touted as would-be political saviours.

Nor are these instances of fanciful indulgence in messiah politics the only measure of the collective parlous condition of oppositions across the country. During May, the Queensland state Liberal and National parties announced their intention to merge. A bird that was never going to fly (it was predictably thwarted by the parties' federal counterparts), its proposal was widely attributed in media reports to the 'desperation' of the non-Labor parties to find some means of breaking Peter Beattie's near decade-long political dominance in Queensland.<sup>5</sup>

If then it is the case that incumbent governments are generally thriving in Australia today, while their oppositions languish, why is this so? The most obvious explanation for the resilience of the current batch of incumbents is their good fortune in occupying office during a period of sustained prosperity. Once more we can discern a parallel here with the post-war era, although it's worth noting that the current period of economic expansion, while not matching the growth rates achieved during the peak years of the post-war boom, is now of longer duration. The post-war boom did not gain momentum until the mid-1950s (there was Fadden's 'horror budget' of 1951) and was rudely interrupted by the credit squeeze recession of 1961. By comparison, Australia is currently enjoying an economic growth cycle that has extended for some fifteen years. While there is considerable variation in the budgetary positions of the states, the cumulative years of economic growth have generally meant that governments have had ample financial reserves from which to draw to offer sweeteners to the public, especially during election years. We need look no further than the 2002 and 2004 federal elections for evidence of this: on both occasions the Howard Government has spent prodigiously to shore up its support stocks.

Another theory that has been postulated for the stable configuration of a Liberal-National Coalition federal government surrounded by wall-to-wall state Labor governments is that Australians have become comfortable with this arrangement (the discrepancy in voting behaviour is especially stark in Queensland where the ALP holds

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the *Age* 5 May 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the *Daily Telegraph* 16 May 2006.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, 'Coalition parties mull action against QLD merger plan', *The 7.3 Report*, 30 May 2006, transcript accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2006s1651370.htm>

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71 per cent<sup>6</sup> of Legislative Assembly seats but only 21 per cent of the state's House of Representatives seats). Whether by conscious calculation or intuition, voters are hedging their bets in something of a variation of the 'split ticket' phenomenon whereby some electors, desirous of the check and balance provided by governments not controlling both houses of parliament, vote one way in the House of Representatives and another in the Senate (a notion dented but not exploded by the 2004 result). In this case, it has been hypothesised that, it is not only a matter of voters opting for a de facto method of devolving partisan political power, but that they are happy with the policy equilibrium produced when the conservative parties have stewardship of the 'big' issues of the national economy and national security while Labor governments are entrusted with (or relegated to) the 'softer' social issues of health and education at the state level.

Yet perhaps there are other systemic or institutional forces in operation that are favouring governments and disempowering oppositions that go beyond the good economic times or a new dispensation of the coalition running the nation and Labor managing the states, or for that matter the fallibilities of opposition leaders. It is to these I now wish to turn. By no means an exhaustive list, I intend to focus on three major areas.

### **The human armoury of incumbents**

The first of these is the density of the human armoury shielding governments, by which I mean the proliferation of partisan ministerial minders or advisers at the disposal of incumbent governments. If there is a moment when the 'modern' era of Australian politics dawned and when so many of the abiding preoccupations of contemporary political discourse crystallised then it was with the election of the Whitlam Government in 1972. The social movements or cultural rights agenda was placed on the mainstream political map, while as the Whitlam experiment unravelled by 1974–75 the shift began from the Keynesian to neo-liberal paradigm of economic management. What is less often remarked is that the 1970s were a point at which a revolution in governance models also started to take shape—the emergence of the now ubiquitous political adviser class is an important part of that story. The Whitlam Government's decision to establish a rudimentary ministerial staff structure was driven, as much as by anything else, by Labor's 'suspicion of the public service elite' it regarded as 'conditioned in a policy sense by 23 years of working with the Liberal and Country Party coalition'.<sup>7</sup> Labor's courtiers were to provide an alternative source of policy advice to the government. By the time the Whitlam Government was defeated in 1975 its ministerial staff ranks had expanded to nearly 200, though many were seconded from within departments.<sup>8</sup>

From this sapling has grown a sturdy oak. The increase in numbers of ministerial staff plateaued during the Fraser era, but in a portent of another future trend Fraser concentrated his government's adviser resources in the prime minister's office. The growth in numbers of advisers was renewed during the Hawke-Keating Labor years,

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<sup>6</sup> This dipped to 66 per cent following the September 2006 Queensland state election.

<sup>7</sup> James Walter, *The Ministers' Minders: Personal Advisers in National Government*. Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53–4.

climbing towards 300 by the early 1990s. The Howard Government came to power pledging to cut back on ministerial staff but, in practice, has done the reverse. Recent figures indicate the number of ministerial staff is now in the vicinity of 450, with the Coalition government also employing a record number of departmental liaison officers (some 71).<sup>9</sup> The 100 per cent plus increase in ministerial staff since the Whitlam era is mirrored in the doubling of the number of staff employed in the prime minister's office: it was about 20 under Whitlam while Howard's private office boasts around 40 members. The cost of employing the Howard Government's ministerial and liaison staff is running at about \$52 million per annum.<sup>10</sup>

Not only have numbers increased but the functions of ministerial staff have diversified and their authority grown. If originally conceived as 'policy wonks', they now fulfil a variety of functions including interface with the public service, media and relevant stakeholders, as well as helping to drive the strategies and tactics of permanent political campaigning. In Victoria, we recently got a glimpse into the world of one senior ministerial adviser to the premier Steve Bracks when his notebook found its way into the hands of the Liberal Party. His jottings revealed that, among other things, he was spending his time crafting tactics to improve the public presentation of government ministers during parliamentary question time, and devising plans for digging information on the private financial interests of the newly appointed opposition leader, Ted Baillieu.<sup>11</sup> These activities might sound rather pedestrian, but they exemplify the twin modus operandi of the ministerial staffer: that of loyal defender of, and attack dog for, the executive. Or, as one writer has evocatively described ministerial advisers, they are 'the "junk-yard attack dogs" of the political system: the hard men and the hit men'.<sup>12</sup>

In the aftermath of the 2001 Children Overboard Affair, a raft of literature was published lamenting the lack of accountability of ministerial advisers (disquiet had been sharpened by the Howard Government's decision to block ministerial staffers from appearing before the Senate Select Committee inquiry into the affair).<sup>13</sup> Those concerns are well founded and in that context we should welcome the various recommendations that have been proposed for improved scrutiny of ministerial staff activity. The conventional argument that these private office staffers are accountable to the parliament and ultimately the people via their minister is unsustainable, given their burgeoning ranks, the enhanced authority they enjoy and evidence their actions are increasingly autonomous of close ministerial oversight. Yet, while suggestions for the implementation of a code of conduct and associated accountability mechanisms are important, greater accountability will not in itself address the growing density of ministerial advisers and the fact that their proliferation and expanding activities is potentially arming incumbent governments with a distinct advantage in firepower over oppositions (as well as shielding executives from other institutions we rely upon to maintain a check on government). For instance, while the Howard Government has a

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., ch. 4; *Age* 25 June 2006.

<sup>10</sup> *Age* 25 June 2006. See also Megan Kimber, 'Ministerial Advisers: Guardians or Usurpers of Responsible Government?' Refereed Paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Adelaide, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> *Age* 16 June 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Weller, *Don't Tell the Prime Minister*. Melbourne, Scribe Publications, 2002, p. 72.

<sup>13</sup> For a good summary see Kimber, 'Ministerial Advisers', op. cit.

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small army of 450 advisers, the Labor opposition has, by comparison, about 90 staff allocated to it under the Members of Parliament Staff Act.<sup>14</sup> That is, a ratio of five to one. Another example of imbalance (and here I again turn to Victoria) is that, according to figures recently cited by the *Age's* state politics editor Paul Austin, the Bracks Government's media unit is 22-strong, whereas there are only about 18 journalists, print and electronic, reporting Spring Street politics.<sup>15</sup> In short, the government's media minders outnumber the press gallery.

### **Asymmetry in non-human resources**

My second point relates to the substantial and growing financial resources that incumbent governments are able to exploit in promoting their policies and programs to the broad community and in a targeted fashion within individual electorates. In a replica of the refrain regarding ministerial advisers, over recent years political oppositions have continually banged the table about the urgent requirement for curtailing the amount of taxpayer money devoted to government advertising and insisted that there ought to be stricter regulation of that advertising. Once in office, however, the major parties have shown little will to follow through on such pre-election high dudgeon. As opposition leader in the mid-1990s, John Howard pledged that the Liberal Party would instigate tough guidelines for government advertising, including a requirement that campaigns be vetted by the Auditor-General. Those strict guidelines never materialised. In 1998 the Australian National Audit Office developed a set of guidelines for government advertising but they have not been adopted; while the Coalition Government also ignored the findings of a 2005 Senate Committee inquiry into Commonwealth government advertising that recommended tighter controls through the auspices of the Auditor-General.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, the Howard Government has presided over a growth in government advertising, and in doing so continued a trend evident under its Labor predecessors. In another parallel with what occurred during the Keating prime ministership, the past decade has witnessed a series of sharp spikes in government advertising prior to elections: in 1998, 2001 and 2004.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, we look set for another pre-election splurge next year. At Senate Estimates Committee hearings in May it was revealed that at least \$250 million had been allocated in the 2006/07 Budget for government advertising campaigns, with the lion share of that spending timed for the lead up to the 2007 election.<sup>18</sup> Such a level of expenditure would make it the biggest year on record for Commonwealth government advertising spending exceeding 2000/01, a year in

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<sup>14</sup> *Age* 25 June 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Austin, State Political Editor of the *Age*, addressing the Victorian Parliamentary Internship program, 4 August 2006, Parliament House, Victoria.

<sup>16</sup> Sally Young, *The Persuaders: Inside the Hidden Machine of Political Advertising*. Melbourne, Pluto Press Australia, 2004, p. 125; Colin A. Hughes and Brian Costar, *Limiting Democracy: the Erosion of Electoral Rights in Australia*. Sydney, UNSW Press, 2006, p. 63; 'Federal government advertising 2004-05', *Research Note*, No. 2, 2006-07, 20 July 2006, Parliamentary Library, accessed <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rn2006-07/07rn02.htm>

<sup>17</sup> 'Federal government advertising', *Research Note*, No. 62, 21 June 2004, Parliamentary Library, Department of Parliamentary Services; 'Federal government advertising 2004-05'. op.cit.

<sup>18</sup> '250 million and counting—Estimates reveal pre-election government advertising binge', Media Release—Australian Labor Party, Kelvin Thompson, Shadow Minister for Public Accountability, 24 May 2006. Also see *Age* 24 May 2006.

which the Commonwealth government had the dubious distinction of being the top spending advertiser in the country, eclipsing the nation's biggest commercial giants.

It is telling that, when the Coalition's projected government advertising expenditure for 2006/07 came under fire from the Beazley opposition, the Liberal's Finance Minister Senator Nick Minchin retorted that Labor governments were engaged in their own advertising sprees in the states (a you-tooism defence that the then Special Minister for State, Senator Eric Abetz, also resorted to when the Coalition's government advertising attracted public criticism before the 2001 federal election).<sup>19</sup> The Liberal senators have a point. According to University of Melbourne political scientist Sally Young, state governments collectively spent an estimated \$423 million on government advertising in 2001. Moreover, among the worst offenders were the Labor governments in New South Wales and Victoria, despite their leaders having promised to rein in this growth industry before being elected to power.<sup>20</sup> That there exists this consistent yawning chasm between what political parties say they will do about government advertising when in opposition and their behaviour once in office is no mystery. Quite simply, it is a case of being unable to resist one of the prime spoils of incumbency. To quote Young: 'Government advertising has become one of the greatest benefits of incumbency ... Both federal and state governments have used their incumbency advantage to mount massive, publicly funded "government information" campaigns'.<sup>21</sup> While we may argue about the efficacy of some of those campaigns, the fact that governments of all persuasion have succumbed to the practice, suggests the major parties are in no doubt about the political salience of government advertising and that it does deliver a significant edge over challengers.

Incumbents (and here I am speaking specifically about the situation that applies federally) are also the chief beneficiaries of the generous and growing postage and printing entitlements provided to members of parliament. In 2005, the maximum postage allowance for members of the House of Representatives was increased from a little over \$4 million per annum to in excess of \$6.5 million per annum, meaning that over a three-year term the total available pool is nearly \$20 million or the equivalent to an average maximum allowance of \$44 042 per annum for each member.<sup>22</sup> If the Howard Government gets its way, the printing entitlements for House of Representatives MPs is also about to be substantially raised. In 2001, the government introduced a so-called printing allowance 'cap' of \$125 000 per annum for each member, that had the effect, intended or otherwise, of giving license to a surge in printing expenditure.<sup>23</sup> Two years later, the Senate stymied an attempt by the Coalition to inflate the cap to \$150 000 per annum. With that barrier now effectively removed, the government has not only moved to proceed with the increase, but to also permit MPs to roll over 45 per cent of their unspent entitlement, creating a scenario in which in the 2007 election year a member will have at their disposal as much as \$217 500 for

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<sup>19</sup> Age 24 May 2006; 'Government advertising in question', *Lateline*, ABC Television, 18 June 2001, <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/stories/s314955.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 122 and 128–9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123–4.

<sup>22</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, House of Representatives, 17 August 2006, pp. 91–2, accessed <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/rep/dailys/dr170806.pdf>; Hughes and Costar, *Limiting Democracy*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, p. 74.



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printing expenses.<sup>24</sup> The upward spiral in postage and printing entitlements has coincided with the availability of new technologies enabling electorate offices to more effectively exploit those funds for direct mail-out campaigns within constituencies. While direct mail campaigning remains relatively unobtrusive compared to electronic media advertising, party insiders and close observers of politics concur that it is an increasingly important (permanent) campaign tool—a tool which also relies on electorate profiling information that the major parties are collecting on their databases.

The relevant point here is that incumbents are best situated to pursue these campaigns courtesy of their generous postage and printing allowances (as well as being best placed to compile information on constituents to feed into party databases and to utilise those databases through the human and technological resources in electorate offices). When the increased postage allowance was announced in mid-2005, the NSW Labor MP Daryl Melham pointed out that, because of the Coalition's large preponderance of members in Queensland, the increased allowances would translate into an extra \$947 354 per annum for government MPs compared to \$274 914 for opposition members.<sup>25</sup> A similarly disproportionate effect will flow from the move to raise printing entitlements. To put it another way, the advantage of these public-funded expenses goes to all sitting MPs but that advantage compounds for the government, especially where its electoral ascendancy is most pronounced. The principle seems to be: to those who have more will be given.

### **The collapse of mass political parties**

The imbalance in resources, human and financial, available to governments and oppositions is exacerbated by the collapse of 'mass' participatory parties in any meaningful sense. This is the third systemic factor to which I wish to give attention. There was a time when the major parties in Australia resembled social movements; they had a life force and *raison d'être* transcending the objective of winning and holding executive office. Those days are all but gone, the parties dying from the head down. It is a crisis afflicting both of the major parties, Labor and Liberal, though it is the travails of the former that over recent years have been the subject of the most intense self-analysis (as one of my Monash University colleagues Professor Jim Walter recently observed, the ALP has spawned a veritable 'cottage industry' of books devoted to its problems since 1996, most written by present and former Labor parliamentarians<sup>26</sup>). Membership figures do tell a sorry story for Labor. While its federal structure makes it difficult to accurately gauge the party's nation-wide membership, informed estimates put it at around 40–50 000, which is a far cry from its mid-twentieth century peak of some quarter of a million) and a figure rendered still more dismal by assertions by party elders that, if one subtracts the stackees, the 'legitimate' rank-and-file figure is closer to

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<sup>24</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, House of Representatives, 17 August 2006, pp. 91–2, accessed <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/reps/dailys/dr170806.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 June 2005, pp. 162–4, accessed <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/reps/dailys/dr150605.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> A recent example is Barry Jones (ed.), *Coming to the Party: Where to Next for Labor?* Carlton, Vic., Melbourne University Press, 2006.

20 per cent of that number (about 8–10 000).<sup>27</sup> This collapse in membership has left the ALP increasingly vulnerable to manipulation by factional or feudal warlords, unrepresentative of the wider society, short on ideas and with attenuated capacity for creative policy-making, and dominated by a so-called political class or nomenclature.

While the ALP has loomed largest in contemporary tales of political party dysfunction, neither are things particularly rosy in the Liberal garden. For instance, a recent *Four Corners* investigation into the affairs of the NSW Liberal Division showed that it too is suffering a contracting base—a former president claimed its membership had fallen from some 40 000 members in the mid-1970s to around 15 000 of which only about 3000 or 20 per cent were ‘active or non-stacked’ (a proportion that corresponds with the estimate of nominal/non-legitimate versus legitimate members in the ALP).<sup>28</sup> The same program documented the fierce factional struggle between moderates and the hard right in the NSW Liberal Party, while its Victoria counterpart has experienced a long and debilitating rivalry between the Michael Kroger/Jeff Kennett camps. Still on the Liberal Party, it is interesting to note that Wayne Errington and Peter Van Onselen, otherwise largely sympathetically disposed putative biographers of John Howard, recently identified as a major oversight of the Howard prime ministership that ‘he has not lifted a finger’ to reform the Liberal Party’s weak structure and predicted this will be recipe for the party to ‘flounder once again when next in opposition’.<sup>29</sup>

And therein lies my point. The infirm condition of the major parties is not so much a problem when they are in office. Indeed, it can be an advantage with few pesky members to call governments to account or harass them about departures from party doctrine. Moreover, when in government, parties are propped up by public infrastructure. It is when deprived of that apparatus upon losing office that their fragilities are fully exposed. In other words, left to their own devices, they have little in the way of human resources (nor increasingly of an ‘embracing ideology’<sup>30</sup>) to sustain them or upon which to draw for renewal. Accordingly, parties are vulnerable to freefall in opposition as happened to the Liberals between 1993 and 1996 and has been Labor’s fate since 1996. Thus I would suggest the hollowing out of the major parties and the fact that executive office has become their *sin qua non* to the exclusion of much else is another factor skewing the political playing field in favour of incumbents and disabling oppositions. Paul Kelly neatly summed up this point in his 2005 Cunningham Lecture:

The major parties are weak, beset with falling membership, decline of voter loyalty and ideological confusions. In oppositions these weaknesses are crippling ... The purpose of these parties now is to provide a structure and a leader to capture executive power. Without executive power, they look non-viable. In government, weakness

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<sup>27</sup> Former New South Wales Labor government minister Rodney Cavalier has offered a still direr analysis of the state of the ALP’s grass roots. See, for example, ‘Labor in Crisis’, *Background Briefing*, ABC Radio National, 5 February 2006:

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s1560765.htm>

<sup>28</sup> ‘The Right Stuff’, *Four Corners*, ABC Television, 17 July 2006:

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2006/s1688866.htm>

<sup>29</sup> *Age* 12 July 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Rodney Cavalier, ‘Could Chifley Win Labor Preselection Today?’ in Jones (ed.), 2006, op. cit., p. 62.

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becomes strength, demoralisation becomes empowerment and a modest leader becomes a giant killer.<sup>31</sup>

### **Prime-ministerial dominance**

Kelly's observation about leaders metamorphosing into 'giant killers' once surrounded by the trappings of office provides a convenient bridge to my final point. I have argued that the advantages of incumbency are being buttressed by systemic forces operating in the political system, but this is also occurring in tandem with what some of the most respected observers of Australian politics such as Paul Kelly, Ian McAllister from the Australian National University and James Walter have identified as a trend towards greater concentration of authority in executive governments, and more particularly, in the office of prime ministers (and by extension that of premiers and chief ministers).<sup>32</sup>

According to these writers, this centralising of power is itself a product of evolving patterns of governance and related institutional trends (indeed, in several cases these trends overlap with the forces that I have suggested are bolstering incumbent governments). Thus, for example, reforms to the public service of recent decades designed to make the bureaucracy more responsive to the government of the day have enhanced the capacity of the executive to dictate and drive policy agendas, while the proliferation and entrenchment of a like-minded adviser class (densest in and around the prime minister's office) is another development funnelling power to the top of the executive as well as potentially choking off alternative ideas to governments. Another factor implicated in this trend towards hyper-powerful executive leaders is the hollowing out of the major political parties that once constrained parliamentarians and the related fact that, against the background of the decline of mass participatory political parties, leadership preferment has become all the more important to the advancement of the career paths of subordinates. In turn, dwindling levels of voter attachment to, or partisan identification with, the major parties has meant leaders have become an increasingly significant agent for mobilising voter support. As the major parties lose ideological coherence, leaders became a surrogate for party identity and ethos: they are their chief marketing weapon. Nor should we forget, as one senior Labor shadow minister reminded me when I wrote an article discussing these themes for the *Melbourne Age* recently, that the media is a willing accomplice in the presidentialisation of our political system by routinely concentrating on the utterances of leaders to the exclusion of much else.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude: it could well be that the current period of incumbent ascendancy is a passing trend. A downturn in the economy or some unanticipated catalyst for a major

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Kelly, *Re-thinking Australian Governance: the Howard Legacy*. Cunningham Lecture 2005, Occasional Paper Series 4/2005, Canberra, Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.; Ian McAllister, 'Political Leaders in Westminster Systems' (draft), in Technical Report Seminars, Political Science Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, at <http://eprints.anu.edu.au/archive/00002580/>; James Walter, 'Why Howard goes too far: institutional change and the renaissance of groupthink', Refereed paper to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Adelaide, 29 September–1 October 2004.

shift in the voting public's mood may thaw the currently frozen-over political map. Even so, the benefits of incumbents that I have outlined in this lecture, when combined with what Paul Kelly has dubbed the trend to 'prime ministerial governance', or what James Walter calls prime minister 'predominance', are troubling. If incumbents gain too many advantages over their challengers, we have a situation that lends itself to the institutionalisation of governments. Equally, if too much power is concentrated at the top end of governments—if leaders become too untrammelled—then this plainly compromises the notion of democratic governance. We are better served when power is held lightly, when those in whom it is entrusted are necessarily cognisant that it is a transient gift, and when its exercise is contested, mediated and checked. In the United States, the 22<sup>nd</sup> amendment to the Constitution limits a president to two terms of office, the fundamental rationale of which is that longer tenure might result in excessive concentration of power in the executive. This is not a perfect comparison I know, and no-one is suggesting that in Australia we ought to have a sunset clause for governments or indeed prime ministers. But we should be vigilant that we are not headed down a path in which our institutions and systems of governance are progressively being tilted in favour of incumbents, for once governments become impervious to challenge, we have a recipe for bad government no matter of what partisan stripe, no matter who leads them.



**Question** — My view on the situation is that it's been so from very beginning, this situation. Alfred Deakin, when he went to negotiate for the Australian Constitution, had a couple of observations on British government. One of them was in essence that there was a waste of talent on the opposition benches. The other thing, which he admired, was the basic retention of the feudal and aristocratic nature of the government institutions, and that's basically what we've inherited. I would see that really in essence we still have the kingship feudal framework that was there before and that is why it comes as no surprise to me what we have at the moment. Given that situation I was wondering if you were aware of any alternatives.

**Paul Strangio** — I don't think we've quite grasped the ramifications of things like the change to the political parties and what consequences that has for our political system. There is a lot of political science work about the march from mass political parties to electorate professional parties to cartel parties, but the parties remain absolutely essential to how a political system works and should operate. The parties are in crisis and yet they remain central to the process. I'm not here today to provide a map forward for great institutional change but I do think that there are changes occurring but we haven't quite grasped the consequence of them.

**Question** — Can you see any benefits to the current arrangement? It seems to me that you do get a check and balance. You get a very strong political party at one level of

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government and you get a very strong political party at the other level of government. You get party operatives gravitating towards the party in power so they get fulfilling, challenging opportunities, they get to maximise their input. You get a pluralistic debate happening, you get both parties getting represented in the media whether in national broadsheets or what not. I noticed that when Howard first got into power the COAG meetings seemed to go nowhere. Huge efforts were put into getting all the premiers and the prime minister together, and Jeff Kennett led a walkout. Now they're all Labor premiers they have these very cordial meetings where they slap each other on the back and they come out with announcement after announcement after announcement of things they're going to achieve and things they have achieved. I'm wondering if you can see any advantages to the current system, or is it all negative?

**Paul Strangio** — I don't see it as all negative. I think the Australian voting public, whether intuitively or consciously, sees some advantages in that sort of partisan check that's occurring with Labor and the states and federally with the coalition parties. What I would say is that clearly for the Labor Party, they would trade the states for the commonwealth, I would imagine, any day. It does raise all sorts of issues too about the convergence of their ideologies. If you go back to the post-war era, when Menzies was in operation, Bolte often felt constrained, and he would have liked to bang the table even more as a state parochial, but because he had a Liberal prime minister there was some constraint. So it has always been the case that actually, oddly enough, the states and the commonwealth sometimes work better when there are parties, governments, of different persuasion.

**Question** — There isn't that much difference between the political parties. If you've got good functioning political parties, governments can govern at the state level and governments can govern at the federal level. We've gone through the worst drought in a century, we've gone through an Asian financial crisis, we're going through an oil shock at the moment. For the first time ever in Australia's history America went into recession and Australia didn't follow. Things are working pretty well in the country; we have the longest period of economic growth out of any country in the world. Basically things are working pretty well. There seems to be an upside to it all.

**Paul Strangio** — Perhaps, but I would still come to my fundamental point, that I think it's unhealthy when governments last too long. We have to be concerned when governments start to get institutionalised in office, and I think that there is a point at which when that occurs, the system benefits from being broken open occasionally. Creative chaos.

**Question** — What is the alternative for a government to lose? It seems from what you've said that from the factors which are behind strengthening incumbency, external factors such as the state of the economy and those sort of things, are the ones that are going to undermine the security of a government. In fact it seems to me that the dictum: 'Governments lose, oppositions don't win' is even truer that it ever was. One wonders what you see as the factors for: 'It's time for a change.'

**Paul Strangio** — Mark Latham said around the time of the launch of his *Diaries* that in reality federal Labor's best chance was to hope like hell for a recession or something that cracks the current stability. But the issue is the natural tendency of government incumbents to grab more power over time, to insulate and institutionalise

themselves in office. Those factors that I've referred to, those institutional factors, are the ones that I think we need to be most concerned about. Incumbents are tilting the playing field towards themselves as they always have done. We need to be mindful of those things, and they need to be contested. They are the things we need to be conscious about, not hoping for an economic downturn for those who don't want the Howard government to continue. That's not really the argument. It is about those other things I was discussing.

**Question** — I just wanted to make a comment. My grandfather was one of the founders of the Liberal Party. He's been dead 50 years and I guess I have a dialogue with grandfather from time to time when I see what's happening at the moment, in terms of the political scene today. The Nobel Prize laureate Jose Saramago has written a book called *Seeing*. It's a novel, a work of fiction, in which he asks: 'What is democracy?' I think that's perhaps a question in terms of the whole political scene at the moment. It's an interesting read.

**Question** — Would you say that John Howard really has been lucky? He was pretty shaky before *Tampa* came along and he was pretty shaky before Latham self-destructed.

**Paul Strangio** — All prime ministers, all governments will always rely on elements of good fortune to maintain them in office. John Howard went close to being a oncer. The fact that he went close to being a oncer has often been suggested as a problem for the Labor Party, because they deluded themselves about how easy the road back into power was after 1998. No, I don't think that Howard has been just lucky. I think most people would agree he's a very astute, perhaps the most astute political leader that we've had in this nation's history. I don't know if we've quite had a political leader who's been troubled less by power. Most other prime ministers have seemed to have been worn down psychologically and even physically by the burdens of office. Office is a difficult thing; it wears out executives. In something else I have written recently I've suggested that another potential danger of executive power being concentrated in executives, and governments going on too long, is what damage it does to those in office. Paul Keating recently observed how difficult it is to preserve an 'inner soul' when you are in executive government. I'm not going to say anything about our prime minister in that regard.