

Inquiry into the Benefits and risks of a Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement, as a basis of planning for, and funding of, Australian Defence capability

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Bipartisanship sounds good on paper but it is necessary to understand its purpose and who is likely to gain. The crisis in western democracies, today, is not political but intellectual. Policy-Wonk Tanks, lobbyists and special interest groups work by introducing / bringing their norms (purporting as diversity) into *bipartisan* bodies so as to introduce policy (in their interests), exactly by removing the variety and reflective capacity for alternative, co-adaptive critical thinking in the first place. Their objective is to achieve compromise (rather than concession) in order to control the message and deliver '[their] policies on the run'. Effective *Bipartisanship* is based upon acting in *Good Faith* reflecting high-values and low norms; not high norms and low values. Without this, *bipartisan* bodies are vulnerable to capture by people/organisations wanting an 'ethical' smoke screen for what they are already doing, or intending to do. The introduction of a *faux-bipartisanship* could be very dangerous, exactly by removing the grounds remaining for healthy, ethical debate and contest between the major Australian parties – and, or, preventing the major parties from identifying the common values and interests upon which they might in future negotiate, in *Good Faith*.

A definition of *bipartisanship* may suggest the following:

A values-based political situation, generally found in countries where two-party systems predominate, in which opposing political parties can agree ethically to set aside conflicting ideologies and norms to co-operate in the identification and negotiation of common interests, through compromise and concession.

Politically, there might be parallels between *Bipartisanship* and a commercial *Joint Venture*; in that both may be considered as a journey into the unknown, where *exploration*, *invention* and *innovation* is required that may not be ideologically 'prescribed, ruled or controlled'. *Bipartisanship* (based on high values, with the intent to develop a new set of values and norms) requires a high degree of co-operation and *shared awareness* based upon *Good Faith*; with the implied intent of *negotiating* future *Trusts* that may embody common values and interests. At its heart, therefore, bi-partisanship may necessarily be based upon *Good Faith*¹, which is posited (in this regard) as being:

An expression of implied intent to *explore* the establishment of a *trusting*, collaborative, shared aware relationship between one or more parties involving the temporal suspension of *disbelief* that one party may have towards another party's *raison d'être*, rationale, *modus operandi*, concepts or [ideology]. It especially involves having all parties thinking that the other party's *intentions* are *certain* (within the *kirk* established), benevolent, *trust-worthy*, competent, good, honest or true.²

After Ashby (1957)³ and Mumford (1998)⁴ and as developed by Reay Atkinson (2012)⁵, to solve complex problems one requires a *variety* of different thinkers – those coming at the problem from different meta-backgrounds, which may not be the same thing as different ideological factions from within the same or even different political parties. *Variety* here, is more to do with people's backgrounds as farmers, miners, barristers, scientists, teachers, blue collar, white collar workers etc., – in other words the way people think

¹ Tolhurst and Reay Atkinson (2015) distinguish this concept of good faith from the developing doctrine of good faith in the performance of contracts. Here the concept is used to describe a belief one party has in the other and which is necessary to take negotiations forward in a bi-partisan way. That is, rather than used to express an obligation it is used to express an expectation.

² See: Reay Atkinson S, and G., Tolhurst. (2015) Certainty in joint venture negotiations: a case study. *Commercial Law Quarterly*, March-May 2015, Vol. 3, The Commercial Law Association of Australia: Sydney.

³ Ashby R. (1957) *An Introduction to Cybernetics*, London: Chapman and Hall.

⁴ Mumford E. (1998) Problems, knowledge, solutions: solving complex Problems. *Journal of Strategic Information Systems* Vol. 7: pp. 255-269.

⁵ Reay Atkinson S. (2012) Engineering Design Adaptation Fitness in Complex Adaptive Systems. *CUED EDC*. Cambridge University Engineering Department: Cambridge, UK.



and worked before entering Parliament – than it is to do with their political ideology, *per se*. For bi-partisanship to work, therefore, probably needs three things:

1. *Values-based* parties that can set aside political ideologies, norms and party-rules in the identification and negotiation of common [national] interests;
2. An agreement and critical thinking ability to be trusted to act in *Good Faith*;
3. A *meta-variety* of politicians who (subject to 1., and 2.,) can bring different ways of thinking about complex problems.

An anecdote told [SRA] by his Father-in-Law, Mr Richard Wheeler when he was the Mayor of Colchester (England) in the 1970s, was that he, as a Conservative Councillor ‘could always deal with his Labour opposite numbers (unlike [third-party] councillors) because they had values’. This was a different time. Many then local councillors had served in the military, and some even found themselves as politicians on opposite sides when they had fought together in the same ships and platoons as officers, NCOs and Privates. The point was, that these politicians could work in bipartisan ways exactly because they could act in accordance with 1., and 2., and could bring something different (variety) to the ‘party’, 3.

An examination based upon dynamic network modelling of British Parliaments from the 1950s considered a number of factors, including average age, background and gender. These statistics are produced after each British election – and appear more readily available than for Australia’s Federal Parliaments. Since the 1950s, specifically beginning in the 1970s there has been:

- An increase in the average age of MPs – now into their early 50s;
 - resulting in an increased average ‘tour’ (in safe-seats) in Parliament from two British Parliaments in the 1970s, to up to four in 2015;
 - Up to 20 years in a seat meaning that ‘being an MP’ became more of a professional career – so contributing to the rise of the so-called professional political class / elites;
- Since the 1983 General Election, having been about 3-4% of all MPs between 1951 and 1984, the proportion of women MPs increased to 18% in 1997 (the first Blair Government) and then to 29%, between 2001 and 2015 – in the five elections between 1983 and 2015, the proportion of Female MPs increased by 52% at each election;
- Between 1987 and 2015, MPs from minority ethnic backgrounds reportedly increased from 1% to 6.3%; increasing by 58% at each of the four elections between 1987 and 2015.
- Since the 1950s a reduction in the number of identifiable factions-by-profession in Parliament from six (representing Professional, Business, White and Blue Collar workers) to four (representing Professional, Business and White Collar workers) and drawn from White Collar; Businesses; Political Organisers; Business and Law (increasingly solicitors more so than barristers);
- Considered in terms of the Elite, Established Middle Class; Technical Middle Class; New Affluent Workers; Traditional Working Class; Emergent Service Workers and the Precariat, MPs and factions today are represented by the Elite, Established Middle Class; Technical Middle Class; and New Affluent Workers.
- In 2015, the Elite [Established] Middle Class (comprising at most 31% of the British population) was represented by 60% of all UK MPs.

It may appear antithetical, but just as the diversity of the British Parliament has improved significantly in the last twenty years and continues to improve, election on election, so has the background and bipartisan factional (meta/professional) variety of MPs reduced, election on election. Writing in support of the progress made increasing the number of women and BME (Black/minority ethnic) MPs, Dr Jennifer Hudson (UCL) and Dr Rosie Campbell (Birkbeck), nevertheless concluded:

While Parliament has never been more descriptively representative of women or racial/ethnic minorities, there remains more to do to ensure that Parliament bears more resemblance to the British public it is charged with representing. Britain’s political class has been subject to much criticism in recent years. There is no shortage of evidence suggesting the public view Westminster politicians as out of touch,



insular and unable to understand the concerns of ordinary people. Knowing who stands for, and who is elected to Parliament, may serve to increase the legitimacy of the Commons in the eyes of the public⁶.

On the one hand, it can be argued that the British Parliament has never been as diverse in terms of ethnic representation and the number of female MPs – indeed, by some estimates, as early as a 2027 General Election, 50% of all British MPs could be female. On the other hand, the thematic variety (in terms of *bipartisan* professional/work backgrounds) necessary to solve complex problems is reducing. Returning to the grounds necessary for bipartisanship, the major political parties may no longer be able to satisfy 3., namely having a *meta-variety* of politicians who (subject to 1., and 2.,) can bring different, values-based (as opposed to normative) ways of thinking to complex problems. In fact, increasing competition for the so-called [normative] middle ground may be acting to prevent the setting aside of political ideologies (1.) and so the ability to act in *Good Faith* (2.) It may also be increasingly difficult to identify agreed values (1.) upon which negotiations could occur, in *Good Faith* (2.), in the first instance

The introduction of more rules on norms and more norms upon rules (in the absence of values) may also have the unintended consequence of introducing further conflict into an already highly contested if not hyper-competitive political space. In western democracies, the perceived lack of political values and concomitant emphasis on rule-based order (norms), on the one hand, and over representation of the Elite Middle Class, on the other, has seemingly contributed to the rise of fringe and radical parties. In many countries, for example Australia, the UK, Germany, NZ and to an extent France, this is leading to *stasis* – where no single political party is being given a clear mandate to lead.

The British Parliament is not the same as Australia's but it is suggested that many of the socio-political trends identified are similar in Australia, in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. For example, increasing diversity and reducing professional/work (meta) variety – leading to reductions in identifiable values-based factions. If this is the case, then the grounds for bipartisanship (1., to 3.) may not exist. Indeed, to introduce a bipartisan model when there are potentially few grounds for bipartisanship may actually make the matter worse. It might encourage tokenistic group-think, and so play into the normative biases of powerful lobbyists, political advisers, academics, and policy-wonk tankers – more so than Parliamentarians and the country as a whole. It could potentially be very dangerous, exactly by removing the grounds remaining for healthy debate and contest between the major parties – and, or, preventing the major parties from identifying the common values upon which they might negotiate ethically, in *Good Faith*.

What might be done? It is suggested that at some stage the major political parties will necessarily re-find their leadership role exactly by re-abstracting their values-base and re-connecting with the 75% of the population not currently representative of or by the Professional Political Elites. An upper house – or Senate in Australia's case – could (like the British House of Lords and the Irish Seanad) have greater non-elected, values-based representation of those with wider professional backgrounds more connected with the population as a whole. This may enable bipartisanship and provide the grounds for it. Similarly, candidate selection by Political Parties based also upon bipartisan professional backgrounds may enable increased meta-variety in the HoR and the Senate. But these are long term fixes and will take time to implement. It is also likely that these changes are going to occur politically, exactly as the major-parties re-establish their values-base in order to compete with fringe parties; better represent the electorate as a whole; and be given a clear mandate. Measures can therefore be put in place and a healthy select committee system that could draw on thinkers (outside the Canberra Beltway) may enable a bipartisan approach. But these measures are all downstream and would need to be in place and tested before implementing a bipartisan approach to 'planning for, and funding of, Australian Defence capability'. They are not there yet. Therefore, introducing a *faux-bipartisan* approach at this stage could act to reduce critical thinking capacity, rather than improve it.

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⁶ Britain's Political Class: All Change in the House, Parliamentary Candidates UK (PCUK), 4 December 2015, see: <http://parliamentarycandidates.org/news/britains-political-class-all-change-in-the-house/>, accessed Aug 2016.

