

The election we 'had to have'? Scratching a little below the Surface

The federal election has provoked more than the usual dose of post-mortems and soul-searching. Journalists, academics and pundits of various kinds have all been struggling to make sense of the unexpected scale of Labor's defeat, the government's likely control of the Senate, and the inability of the Greens to stamp their authority as a new emerging force in Australian politics.

For all those who were hoping for a shift towards a more far-sighted politics, the election result has been especially disappointing. While there is much to explain, most of the analysis thus far has tended to deal with appearances, symptoms, and the obvious. There has been a general reticence to ask probing questions, to diagnose the ailment which afflicts not so much this or that leader, this or that party, or this or that election strategy, but the entire *body politique*.

Explanations have concentrated on such factors as Latham's youthfulness or 'inexperience', the ill-judged last minute release of new policies, especially on Tasmania's forests, the effectiveness of the government's advertising scare campaign, the reasonably good shape of the Australian economy, and Family First's unexpected success at the expense of the Greens, based in part on the bizarre allocation of preferences in the Senate vote.

No doubt all this explains something of the result, but very little of the mood of the nation, or the health of our political processes and institutions. A deeper analysis would begin not with political parties, their leaders, strategies and tactics, but with the electorate itself. If we look at present-day Australian society, we soon discover a widespread sense of *insecurity* or unease about the future, which is not to say that the future is perceived in the same way by different sections or strata of society. The relationship between these deeply felt anxieties and election campaigns is often tenuous, except for code words and subtext.

Australian insecurity has many elements, both old and new. Australians of European origin have long experienced in their relations with people-of-colour a mixture of insecurity and discomfort. This experience continues to shape as much our relations with Aboriginal Australia as it does with Asia. We are still a long way from developing the knowledge, confidence and sensitivity needed to nurture relations based on reciprocal trust and sustainable dialogue.

Nor can we lose sight of the economic dimensions of insecurity. Australia's rapid integration into increasingly deregulated regional and global markets has produced both winners and losers. Hence, the sharp inequalities that separate the 20 per cent at the bottom of the wealth and income ladder (Howard's 'battlers') from the 20 per cent at the top. And for the remaining 60 per cent, endless anxiety about how to move higher (the so-called aspirational class) or at least how not to come down lower. It may well be that for many the ladder of aspiration is more the treadmill of desperation.

Compounding all of this are other troubling questions. How will we cope with the continuing influx of Asian migrants (who take jobs away and may weaken our 'Australianness'), with possible new waves of boat people (an unpleasant reminder of the large pools of human misery within reach of our shores), and terrorists who can strike any place at any time (Bali may have left a deeper scar on the Australian psyche than is generally acknowledged).

And difficult questions too for those with responsibilities for the raising of children: Can our schools deliver them pathways to material security? And, what of the pitfalls of drug addiction, depression and other increasingly frequent psychological disorders?

It is not unreasonable to argue that it has been Howard's great skill to read this psychological undercurrent and to harness it for political ends. Was it not he who prior to his first election victory promised to deliver a society where Australians could feel relaxed and comfortable? His message ever since has been essentially the same. The alliance with the United States, the treatment of asylum seekers, the 'children overboard' affair, the very notion of 'border protection', and the threat to take anti-terrorist pre-emptive action in the region are all meant to reassure, to convey the same promise of safety.

By identifying so closely with the great and powerful friend, Howard offers many Australians the comfort zone they so desperately seek. Dependence on and support for the United States – in Iraq, the 'war on terror', the UN, on issues of global warming, the free trade agreement, relations with Southeast Asia and the Islamic world – are just the premium that has to be paid for this most valuable insurance policy.

Though they did not feature prominently in this election, these positions nevertheless provided a good deal of the subtext for it. The words and images, not to speak of the policy record, conveyed with crystal clarity the Howard government's cultural and psychological message. To this was added another potent symbol – the stability of interest rates. What was at issue here was not the technical capacity of the government to prevent a future rise in interest rates, but the impression that it was sympathetically disposed to those Australians saddled with large mortgages. The commitment to border protection (i.e. erecting a solid fence around the nation) was now complemented by the tantalising promise of another kind of protection (which would deliver a safe financial fence around one's own home).

If one turns to the parties of change – the ALP, Greens and Democrats – the message was much less clear. Not much can be said about the Democrats as they were scarcely visible, not just in this election campaign but for the best part of three years. What can we say of Labor's response to Australia's profound insecurities? Medicare Gold, a slightly fairer system of funding for Australian schools, a promise to bring Australian troops back from Iraq, and a last minute pledge to do something about Tasmania's forests. What exactly did all this add up to? Not a lot. How effective an antidote to the pervasive experience of anxiety? Not terribly.

As for the Greens, they signalled that when it came to issues of environment, peace and justice, they were generally on the side of the angels. But did they have alternative policies as distinct from an alternative wish list? More importantly, what were the implications of these policies for our relations with the United States, Indonesia, and the Islamic World, for the economy, and for the prospects of economic growth? Most importantly, what was the intended message for the 'anxious nation'? How were Australia's fears and insecurities to be handled?

To say all this is not to denigrate those who campaigned for the preservation of forests, an end to military involvement in Iraq or a more civilised approach to the stranger, be it the Asian immigrant or Arab asylum seeker. It is to ask, how well equipped the parties in question are to address the underlying malaise, not to say ailment, that afflicts much of contemporary Australia.

The issue here is partly one of vision, but just as importantly one of diagnosis. To go down this path is, of course, to invite serious exploration of the complexities of our predicament, which is not in any case exclusively Australian. The issue is not simply what happens inside Australia, but how Australia situates itself in the world. Whether we look at trade, investment, interest rates, oil prices, refugees, environment, global warming, terrorism, or security, we are dealing with events, trends, relationships and institutions that are often regional and almost always global in scope. It is difficult to see how any diagnosis of the problem can avoid these connections.

For political parties the problem is structural. Regardless of the personalities, they lack the infrastructure needed to diagnose, let alone to prescribe remedies. Not surprisingly, the content of what they have to communicate is at best flimsy. So is the medium of communication. What quality of discussion can be generated by any election campaign, where the accent is on cosmetic presentation of leadership styles, tedious point-scoring, the 30-second media grab, and costly and mindless advertising?

It is at least arguable that a significant fraction of the electorate, including many who voted for the coalition parties, are disconcerted by the gap that separates contrived electioneering from the reality of their lives. Many would be more likely to respond positively, if they were offered forums and institutions willing to engage their concerns and fears about the future. At the end of the day, any meaningful diagnosis cannot be the preserve of experts, however clever or well meaning they may be. Sooner or later the political community, or at least a significant cross-section of it, must participate in the process.

To say this is to envisage a new kind of public discourse, a new way of posing questions and seeking answers, new ways of conversing. Most importantly, it is to create new forums for a conversation that is widespread, prolonged, and multifaceted. In such a conversation we may soon find that what is in question is not just this or that policy, but this or that way of thinking and doing things, this or that institution. Our educational, media, legal and political institutions in particular are in need of thorough scrutiny. Political parties – even of the more progressive variety – precisely because they are forever attuned to the imperatives of media-packaged electioneering, seem ill-equipped for the task. What is in question is the party system itself. This is perhaps the most important lesson of the 2004 Federal election – a lesson which, we may be pleasantly surprised to find, many intuitively understand, even when they cannot articulate it or are at first psychologically discomfited by it.

Joseph Camilleri

17 October 2004