

2010 Annual Hawke Lecture

Re-thinking Australian Politics: engaging the disenchanted



Delivered by Professor Geoff Gallop AC

Director, Graduate School of Government, The University of Sydney
and Former WA Premier

Wednesday 13 October 2010

Adelaide Town Hall

About the Hawke Centre

Website: www.hawkecentre.unisa.edu.au

The **Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre** is a dynamic University of South Australia initiative to establish an internationally recognised public learning/visitor and research facility serving local and global audiences.

Named after Bob Hawke, a third generation South Australian, one of the 20th century's most notable Prime Ministers (1983-1991) and a great conciliator nationally and abroad, the Hawke Centre was established by Memorandum of Understanding in 1997. UniSA has developed the Centre believing that Bob Hawke's contribution should be properly recognised through a national facility, not as a memorial, but in a way that helps new generations and furthers his legacy of valuing a cohesive, sustainable and fair Australia.

Broadly, the Hawke Centre aims to challenge Australians to consider ideas and develop solutions for Australia and the world, leading towards more sustainable societies, within a democratic framework. It is supported by a fine group of national patrons, and especially, international patron Nelson Mandela.

The **Annual Hawke Lecture** is the premier national event on the public calendar of the University of South Australia, delivered under the auspices of the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre. There are relatively few moments when we have the time to consider the larger issues of life, including the future of our nation and our world and how we can shape it. The University of South Australia offers the Annual Hawke Lecture in this spirit, as an opportunity to listen to the views of someone whose experience of human affairs is notable, and whose concerns are truly worthy of consideration. The lecture is recorded for the Hawke Centre website. It is broadcast by Radio Adelaide and ABC Radio National at a later date. In 2010 it will be featured by the ABC Big Ideas website.

*While the views presented by speakers within the Hawke Centre public program are their own and are not necessarily those of either the University of South Australia or The Hawke Centre, they are presented in the interest of open debate and discussion in the community and reflect our themes of: **strengthening our democracy – valuing our cultural diversity – and building our future.***

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I feel very honoured to be able to deliver the Annual Hawke Lecture and to follow such a distinguished list of lecturers. Bob Hawke acted as an inspiration to many Australians of my generation. I remember writing a lengthy essay on resale price maintenance whilst studying economics at the University of Western Australia. This had followed Bob's campaigning on the issue as ACTU Advocate and President. I was particularly interested in his view that trade unions ought to expand their horizons to take on issues like the collusive practices of big business and their impact on Australian consumers. Already we can see developing here what was to become the Labor case for a more competitive and therefore more productive Australia. In fact by engaging and involving the trade union movement in economic reform Bob Hawke restored Labor's status as an international leader in social democratic thinking and practice, a position it had held – along with New Zealand – in the early years of the twentieth century.

Speaking tonight also allows me to remind us all of the energy and commitment that were displayed during the years of the Hawke Government. Serious economic and tax reform, wide-ranging social reform and some major decisions to protect the environment, most notably stopping the construction of the Franklin Dam, were the order of the day. Hawke and his Ministers managed government well and had an eye to politics but weren't afraid to take risks in the interests of a better and more compassionate Australia. When it was necessary they took a lead and fought for their proposed reforms. Indeed it is to these themes of leadership, engagement and reform that I intend to return later in this lecture.

Politics, the political system and political reform

My focus tonight is on politics and the political system. I don't hold the view that Australian political debate should just be about economics. The economic debate is crucially important and I strongly support a continuing program of micro and macroeconomic reform to ensure our economy is internationally competitive and efficient. We can ill afford to be complacent about productivity and the legal, human and physical infrastructure needed to support its improvement.

The truth is, of course, that there are a range of issues that need to be addressed if we are to secure the future – the economics of productivity being one. Others include our foreign and trade policies, our approach to education, health and welfare, our policies for climate change and environmental renewal, and our agenda for population, immigration and religious and cultural diversity. Some are pressing issues and some are evolutionary by their nature, needing long-term and persistent attention.

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What, then, of the way we are governed and the challenge of political reform? Some say we should leave such questions to one side while we get on with the “real” issues mentioned above. To argue that our nation is incapable of debating and acting on political reform at the same time as it moves forward with economic and other reforms is to underestimate the capacities and misrepresent the interests of the electorate. What happens in politics is understood to be important and seen to be in need of repair. Politics is not an issue which can or should be avoided.

Political reform can mean many things ranging from changes to the Constitution, to changes in parliamentary practice and behaviour, to changes in the electoral system. We may seek changes to the formal arrangements under which we are governed or changes to the culture under which we are governed. Whatever the proposals for change they will need to be assessed not just for their guarantees of extra responsiveness and accountability but also for their capacity to promote good and effective government.

The attitude that electors take to the system and the politicians that run it is important. They may be disillusioned and apathetic. They may be supportive and energetic in their citizenship. If they feel confident about and trust the system making important and necessary changes is going to be easier, even if still difficult. What is needed is an atmosphere of trust that makes it possible for governments to tackle issues that they may otherwise seek to avoid.

Thus the title of my lecture tonight: “Re-thinking Australian politics: engaging the disenchanted”.

The questions I seek to answer are as follows. What do we mean by disenchantment with Australian politics? How extensive is the phenomenon? Who are the disenchanted? What form is their disenchantment taking and is it the same thing as disengagement? Do disenchantment and/or disengagement matter and, if yes, what solutions have been proposed? Will these solutions address the issue as intended or are they based on a merely impressionistic and largely faulty view of what is really happening? And finally, given my answers to these questions, what is the way forward for Australian politics?

To assist me in this endeavour I commissioned Ipsos Marketing to engage in some research. They used a sample demographic profile to ask 1,040 electors the following questions: How important is it to you personally which party is in government? What do you think is the best thing about Australian politics? What do you think is the worst thing about Australian politics? If you had a magic wand what one thing would you change about Australian politics? Thinking about politics over the last decade, which federal politician do you most admire? I have attached the overall findings as an appendix to my lecture.

The survey found that 73 per cent of respondents still thought that it was very or somewhat important to them which party was in government. However, the younger the respondent the less likely they were to report that the party in government was ‘very important’. Whilst 27 per cent said there was nothing good about Australian politics only 4.2 per cent reported that everything was bad! As Ipsos reported to me; “cynicism has not yet triumphed! “ However there is disenchantment with the parties, the politicians and the culture they support, particularly in terms of in house fighting, negativity, honesty and accountability. The theme of freedom featured prominently as a positive – freedom of choice, freedom of speech and the freedom to vote. This being said more reported compulsory voting to be the best thing about Australian politics (3.9 per cent) than reported it the worst thing (2.9 per cent). Of politicians most admired John Howard and Kevin Rudd scored the best with 31.4 per cent and 24.3 per cent respectively. Most desired by

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way of change was more honesty and integrity in politics. Electors do like their politicians to stand up for what they believe in even if they disagree.

I include this research not to indicate that my argument is based upon it but just as background to the discussion of disenchantment and disengagement. Such findings don't tell us everything, still require interpretation and as you will see in my lecture I believe the key issue to be the way political leaders frame the debate that follows from digesting such findings.

The 2010 election

It has been a remarkable year for Australian politics – A Prime Minister deposed by his own party and an election that produced a hung parliament and a minority government. For the first time the Greens have captured a seat in a General Election for the House of Representatives and there are now four Independents in that chamber as well. The resurgent Nationals in Western Australia gained a seat at the expense of the Liberals, proving once again the power of the City versus Country narrative in Australian politics.

The changed circumstances have seen renewed debate about the role of Parliament, the place of the Speaker and the conduct of politics generally. Indeed the concept of a “paradigm shift” has re-emerged in our political vocabulary. The new paradigm, so the argument goes, involves a spirit of compromise across boundaries rather than claims of a mandate to rule. Strength in politics is being defined less in terms of the will to power and more in terms of the capacity to listen, negotiate and influence.

That this would be the result of the election comes as no surprise. Never before have we seen an election that was as much about itself as it was about the issues facing the nation. The commentary was highly critical of both the major parties and their attempt at risk-free campaigning. Ideas were out and images were in. It seemed everyone was dissatisfied – the true believers on both sides as well as the media and the electorate. This was manna from heaven for the Greens and the Independents and they were only too happy to occupy the territory left uncontested by the big boys.

Add to this the intervention by Mark Latham and his case for an informal vote. This was consistent with the view he had been putting that we ought to drop out of mainstream politics and focus on building social capital in the community. It would appear that his cynicism was shared by many others and the trend to an increase in the informal vote continued. In some Labor seats, it actually exceeded 10 percent.

Conservative and radical interpretations

What, then, do we make of this new situation? There is both a conservative and a radical way to interpret these events.

A conservative interpretation would go as follows. Australia is a well governed country with a sound Constitution and political institutions that have stood the test of time. Outcomes from this system have been good even though there are new challenges such as climate change and older challenges such as indigenous disadvantage requiring more attention.

More importantly it is a system that allows for change, but change of an evolutionary nature initiated by voters dissatisfied with the two major parties. We can see these evolutionary changes happening today in

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relation to both process (parliamentary and political finance reform) and outcomes (climate change and the city/country divide). Adjustments are being made to reflect the new reality – more resources for regional Australia and a new attempt at pricing carbon.

According to this view, politics will change, but only at the margins where the Greens and the Independents are chipping away at the centrist consensus. Strategic and political power will still lie with the major parties and they can be expected to return to their dominant positions once the new policy equilibrium is established.

Behind such thinking is the assumption that political restlessness within the electorate doesn't equate with radical fervour. Indeed the so-called "hollow men" of party politics are confident that what they face is a management problem rather than a political and cultural challenge.

This takes me to the alternative, radical interpretation of current politics. Here it is held that there are indeed deeper forces at work. They point to the decline in the status and influence of the ordinary members of the major parties. Party conferences are stage-managed affairs and party organisations simply exist to fight elections rather than develop policy for the future. The once powerful forces of class, party and ideology still exist but no longer drive the system as they once did. Politics has become a science, the science of political management where public opinion and public policy interact.

No matter how hard the major parties try, radicals believe such organisations are incapable of regaining their strangle-hold on the nation's imagination. Their mission has been played out, they are hollow and exhausted and they are incapable of meeting the challenges of the times. They know no world other than focus groups, political slogans and political marketing. They find cause in a limited range of policies and plenty of empty and often contrived adversarialism played out in Question Time and through the media.

Although the radicals see the major parties as the problem rather than the solution, some continue to work within for change on issues like party democracy, party finance and policy development. For example there has been talk of establishing the American system of Primaries to broaden the basis for pre-selection. It is quite remarkable, however, that there are so few party activists pursuing a reform agenda within the major parties. In and of itself this tells us something about change in our political culture.

For an increasing number today new forms of political participation and/or allegiance are seen to be necessary if change is to be achieved. Their slogan is vote Green or Independent to bring new voices into the Parliament. Back this up with support for GetUp or Australian Conservation Foundation-style campaigns around individual issues like climate change and mental health reform and a whole new dynamic is created in the political system. In relation to this one can only say that it has already proved to be feasible and effective. Not only does it perform the crucial role of mobilising and energising electors – something the major parties have downplayed at great expense to their support base – but it has notched up enough wins to encourage those for whom outcomes are as or more important than processes.

Disenchantment and disengagement

Re-adjustment or reform? What is the answer? In order to tackle this question properly we need to analyse the phenomenon of political disillusionment and distinguish it from disengagement. We need also to recognise that politics ought not to be about just responding to change, it should also seek to shape the world in which we live. This takes us to the question of leadership and one of the ironies of modern politics.

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At the very point at which our major political leaders have emerged with more status and influence than the parties that have created them, they have narrowed their vision to the science of political management. This is a story to which I will return later.

What, then, is political disenchantment? Digging beneath the surface of this phenomenon reveals two sets of attitudes, one about politicians and the other about the system. What we see is declining trust in politicians, cynicism about their motives, concern about their behaviour, and/or disillusionment about the capacity of the system to deliver good results. However, none of this necessarily means disengagement from the political process by opting out, not voting or voting informal. Cynicism and disenchantment don't automatically link with apathy or despair. Indeed it may be linked to greater and different levels of activity in the interests of change.

But back to disengagement. It is the opposite of what we might call active citizenship. It may be that electors drop out of involvement with a party, take little interest in what is happening in politics and stop voting or vote informal.

I include voting informal but acknowledge that for some it may be a form of political protest to shame the political class into action. What it does mean, however, is a diminution in the representational value of our political system and a weakening of the all-important link between civil society and government, so strongly supported by our institution of compulsory voting.

Such political alienation is a cause for concern that warrants attention even if one is not inclined to agree with those who say our very democracy is on a course of self-destruction. I, for one, don't believe we are on the edge of the precipice. I do recognise the problems but can see a way forward. Part of the reason for my confidence in the future is that a good deal of the disenchantment we have seen has not yet translated into disengagement. For all its weaknesses, Australian democracy is robust with those seeking change full of energy and action. Such pressure from without should force a rethink of Australian politics.

My confidence, however, is qualified. What we need to analyse is what is being proposed by way of change, and whether or not it will achieve what is being sought. So too do we need to ask: Even if the proposed reforms could achieve their intentions are there other negative consequences that should be part of the calculations?. In other words, we need not just to analyse the viability but also the desirability of the proposed changes. In saying this I reveal my own bias in support of the major parties. This should come as no surprise. After all I did work as a Labor parliamentarian for twenty years, a local councillor for three and a party activist for a decade prior to that, including a brief stint as a Union Organiser for the Miscellaneous Workers Union. I do have loyalties and I do have an ongoing belief that the Labor versus Liberal division does have meaning and is still important in giving context to our day-to-day arguments about policy directions for the future.

What we need to understand is that the mixture of disenchanted and/or disengaged is not consistent or uniform. There is, in fact, a fundamental divide here which is as important as the divide between the conservatives and the radicals. Disenchantment has its own divisions and internal tensions. There is what I would call a "left-green" as opposed to a "right-populist" disenchantment.

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Left-green and right-populist

The left-green movement seeks fundamental change in the political system including proportional representation for the House of Representatives. They are republicans and supporters of human rights legislation and a re-prioritised public policy agenda that replaces economic rationalism with the principles and practices of sustainability. The unfettered capitalism associated with globalisation is the target of much of their campaigning.

Globalisation is also a target for the right-populists. They are less a political movement these days, particularly since the collapse of One Nation, but more a political tendency active in civil society and in the world of politics. They want strong government based on the will of the majority in areas like law and order, immigration and economic development. For such electors, the Republic and human rights legislation are the province of the chattering classes. They see government as having been captured by middle-class liberals at the expense of working people like themselves, particularly those who live and work outside the major cities.

Some within the right populist tendency are engaged in the Australian version of the culture wars. For them politics is about values independent of the consequences of applying them – a Judeo-Christian Australia, the right to life, the sanctity of the family, and a drug free community. We have seen faith-based politicians elected to parliament and strong campaigning around issues like abortion, stem cell research, euthanasia and same sex-marriage. They wish to turn the tide of late twentieth-century left liberalism.

Inasmuch as we can see a political reform program associated with right populism its focus is majority rule and accountability. They want the silent majority to be given a voice and have on occasion flirted with the Swiss model of direct democracy and its institutions of citizen initiated referenda and a popular veto power. A less sophisticated but equally powerful version of direct democracy is government by opinion poll! Different method but same result – rule by majority opinion at any point in time.

Right-populists may be disenchanted with the political culture and system but they are certainly not disengaged. We see their influence in both the major parties, even if more obviously within the Liberals since the ascendancy of John Howard. What they have challenged is the bipartisan agenda of progressive social reform associated with Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke.

These two forces – left-green and right-populist – have energy and commitment and are growing in self-confidence and power. They have been outflanking the mainstream political parties and squeezing their support. Politics in Australia is changing. The only question left is how far will the process take us? More important is the question – how far should the process take us?

This takes me back to the conservative versus radical interpretation of the current situation. What the evidence tells us is that there is certainly a growing level of disenchantment which is associated with a degree of disengagement. However, it is my view that we need to penetrate deeper beneath the surface if we are to fully understand this disenchantment. It is a complex process with a range of cross-cutting elements. Already I have mentioned the left-green and right-populist forms of disenchantment. Inasmuch as there is a program of political reform associated with these tendencies it is not necessarily the same as what is in the minds of those voting for them. There are protest voters as well as conviction voters and, as we noted, some choose to vote informal or opt out altogether.

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Leadership -shaping and responding

This leads me to a fundamental point I wish to make - politics needs to be about leadership as well as responsiveness. Electors want their leaders to stand for something and to craft a narrative and policy agenda for the future. Part of the disenchantment we see relates to a belief that the political class has been too short-term and risk-averse in its thinking and practice. Even the language of politics is seen to have become too managerial and insufficiently ideological. We should consider such criticisms when designing a political reform program. Take direct democracy for example. It would certainly give power to the people. It would mean majority rule but at what price? To go beyond the valid requirement that our Constitution only be changed with the support of a majority of electors overall and a majority of States and incorporate a popular veto for all matters would make legislative change difficult if not impossible. One of the good things about our current system is that it does provide room for change that may be disapproved of today but accepted tomorrow. This is how a good deal of economic and social reform has been achieved in the past. Such a leadership function can be best exercised in a representative rather than a direct democracy.

What of the left-green agenda or proportional representation? This has been the system in Tasmania since 1909 and has become accepted throughout Europe. After the intense debate about the unfairness of New Zealand's first-past-the-post system, they too changed to proportional representation.

There are, of course, many different versions of proportional representation and it is not my concern tonight to analyse them. Rather, I would like to address the logic of proportional representation and how it relates to the theme of disenchantment.

Proportional representation will certainly give the minor parties a greater say and will guarantee that there is a balance in the relationship between votes and seats. Coalition government (or minority government) will become the order of the day. Politics will be more complex and outcomes less predictable.

In relation to this let me say a number of things.

Firstly, I note that we already have proportional representation for our Senate. Smaller parties and Independents have won seats there and come to play a not insignificant role in legislation and public policy. Proportional representation is well entrenched and well understood in the electorate. This is reflected in different voting patterns for the two Houses of Parliament.

Secondly, it would mean that the capacity for a party to form government in its own right would in all probability be lost to the system. It is true that the major parties are under pressure and have been found wanting but do we want a system that would forever prevent them from achieving a majority presence in the House of Representatives? Systematic change is already difficult to achieve in Australia today, why would we want to make it even harder?

Those who advocate change will need a carefully crafted agenda that is relevant, feasible and acceptable. It needs to take into account the views of the disenchanted on the way things are done and what is prioritised. Such views cannot be swept under the carpet and ignored. Sitting still and waiting for the world to return to where it once was is not an option. However, it will need to transcend the political reform politics associated with the left-green movement and the right-populist tendency. It needs to lead and that means engaging with electors and mobilising support for change. To be engaged, electors will need to hear a message they can understand and support and which is based on conviction as much as it is based on

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attitudes within the electorate. Necessarily it will challenge as much as it responds. Indeed there can be no such thing as a genuine re-engagement that is free of risk or devoid of conflict.

How then can we create such interest and harness such energy? Our political class needs to send out a message that they wish to engage the electorate around sound principles of democratic reform. Our citizens need a light on the hill as well as an extra penny in their pocket. Given the right-populist tendency to seek rule by the majority and the left-green tendency to seek rule by the percentages this is not going to be easy. Both have helped create the necessary pressure for change but defend or promote political institutions that fall short of what the nation needs.

A new radical centre

When it comes to political reform we need a new radical centre built around the consolidation of parliamentary reform in the short-term, a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities beyond that, and a meaningful Republic in the longer-term. This needs to be linked to a new concept of political leadership that seeks to better engage the public on a range of issues including political reform. Indeed, a move to a republic will need to involve the public every step of the way if it is to be successful.

In recent decades, both here and abroad, we have seen very successful exercises in political engagement that have taken us beyond the politics of public opinion and parliamentary power. Parliament can – and should – play a more active role in the development of national policy. Hopefully, the Climate Change Committee created by Prime Minister Gillard will prove to be a good example of what can be achieved through focussed and non-adversarial consideration. However, it should not be seen as in competition with alternative mechanisms of deliberation such as my own government’s Dialogue with the City which developed planning policy for metropolitan Perth.

One third of the participants in the Dialogue were randomly selected from across the city to join representatives from government, business, academia, interest groups and community associations. The Government made it clear that it would follow up on the recommendations made and we did with “Network City: Community Planning Strategy”. So too did we involve representatives from the Dialogue in the Implementation Team set up within government. For such initiatives to be add real value to our representative system they need not only to guarantee influence for the participants but they also need to be genuinely representative of the population and facilitated to ensure there is open and informed deliberation.

The Commonwealth Government’s ill-fated Peoples’ Assembly proposed during the election campaign would have been a good idea for the 1990s when it became obvious that climate change was real and threatening. Imagine too if it had used some form of deliberative process to assist in the matter of tax reform, particularly for the resources sector.

There are many issues for which such processes would not be appropriate, most notably areas of strong political commitment and mandate. However it should not be ruled out as an option on the grounds that Parliament is the font of all wisdom. Just as citizens are now involving themselves in politics in a range of different ways and not just through party membership, so too should government develop policy in a range of ways that are more participative and deliberative.

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Power is a wonderful thing but if not shared it may become a liability. What we need is power with authority. So too does power need to be regulated, particularly executive power. We need a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities as recommended by the Brennan Committee and as instituted in the A.C.T. and Victoria to place individual rights and liberties at the forefront of our decision-making and public administration. Such proposals have well understood that rights have to be defined and their boundaries marked out. What are the limits of free speech? How do we best institutionalise the right to vote? So too has it been recognised that rights may come into conflict with each other or with wider public interest considerations such as national security.

The aim of a Charter is to open up a proper dialogue between the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. It does this without undermining the pre-eminence of the Parliament and with full recognition of the need to balance rights against each other and against competing public interests. By requiring the Parliament to carefully consider the rights implications of its work and the public sector to act in ways that are compatible with human rights would add a new dynamic to our political processes. It sends a powerful message to our legislators and to our administrators about the accountability of government to the people. Indeed the British experience with such a system tells us that public authorities have been encouraged to search for solutions to situations that had previously been viewed as unavoidable and unalterable. In other words it helps avoid that tunnel vision that all too often operates within executive government.

Finally there is the question of the Republic. It is unfinished business in Australian politics and debate about it necessarily takes us to debate about our Constitution and political system. We need to take the opportunity it provides to take a serious look at our Constitution. A popular vote on the question of the Republic would sensibly come first. Should it be a popular vote in favour of a move to a Republic we would then do well to refer the matter to a properly constituted Constitutional Convention. Such a convention could examine what type of Constitution we wish to have and what the powers and responsibilities of a President would be.

Attempt to cut off debate beyond a politician-dominated minimalist model would almost certainly fan the flames of disenchantment and populism. This time around more detailed consideration could be given to models of direct election and presidential power. Indeed a strong case can be made that a move in the direction of an Executive Presidency separate from the Legislature would be good for Australian politics. Not only does it accord with the evolution of our system in the direction of presidential politics but it creates the possibility for Cabinet Ministers to be selected from outside Parliament. Many Australians who would exercise ministerial office with distinction and effectiveness are simply not willing to stand for Parliament. In the case of some of the smaller States and Territories the pool of talent from which to select is limited. Indeed an American-style system of government would work well for the States and Territories given the service delivery functions they perform. Having Ministers less trapped by the imperatives of electoral and parliamentary politics should allow for better management and more innovation.

Due to our Westminster inheritance all our Ministers are Members of Parliament. Some rise to the occasion, others don't as the pressures of maintaining a political base in the Parliament and within the Electorate overwhelm their best intentions. We know that the way we govern can be improved but seem addicted to the view that Westminster is the only way. This reflects itself not just in the composition of our Cabinets, but also in our reliance on conventions to run the system. At a minimum level we ought to be clarifying and properly codifying the powers of the Head-of-State, the role of the two Houses of Parliament and the relationship between the Executive and the Legislature so that the conflict and uncertainty that surrounded the crisis of 1975 is not repeated.

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In other words the Republic debate allows us to put on the agenda new ways of thinking, not just about government but also about the functioning of Parliament. By separating the Government from the Parliament voters could be given a wider range of choices. Who do I want to be President or Governor? Who do I want to be my Member of Parliament? Already electors have shown that such questions are relevant to them by their different voting patterns for the Senate and the House of Representatives.

A vision for the future and a strategy for achieving it

It is important, however, that I put these proposals into a political context. I'm not arguing that the Australian Government drop everything else it is doing and make political reform the sole focus for its legislative and policy development. Politics should be just as much about vision as it is about the nightly news. What we need is a serious strategy for political reform that distinguishes between short, medium and longer-term initiatives.

In the short-term it is important that the current case for a more constructive and policy-making Parliament be consolidated with real support and commitment. Couple this with the utilisation of new forms of public engagement where it is appropriate and a strong message is sent to the community about support for change. It will signal a turning of the tide.

The current government has thus far rejected the full program of human rights reform recommended by the Brennan Committee. This indicates the role right populist thinking plays within the ALP either as a phenomenon to be feared or as an approach to politics that should be endorsed. However, like the Republic it won't go away as an issue. Resistance of its embrace on the grounds of popular opinion and the greater importance of the needs of executive government diminishes us as a political community. However, it is an issue that requires more advocacy and campaigning around the role such a Charter can play, particularly in respect of services provided by public bodies. As the British Institute of Human Rights put it when reviewing the day-to-day functioning of the UK's Human Rights Act:

Too often the Human Rights Act is associated with technical legal arguments or perceived to be limited to high profile – sometimes spurious – claims by celebrities and criminals. These case studies reveal a very different picture. They show how groups and people themselves are using not only human rights law, but also the language and ideas of human rights to challenge poor treatment and negotiate improvements to services provided by public bodies.

Even though I can imagine the difficulties of campaigning on the question of a Charter, I see it as an important political reform because it talks to us as free citizens with wider responsibilities just as the new forms of political engagement do. It institutionalises the values we purport to hold and makes it clear that the exercise of power is a most important business that needs ethics and sensible regulation. By requiring governments and law-makers to think carefully about what they are doing it has the potential to create greater confidence in the quality of the outcomes. Once again we have entered that territory we call "trust in government".

The move to the Republic should involve a longer process of consideration. Firstly, we need a vote on whether to cut the ties with the English Monarch and secondly, the creation of a Constitutional Convention to consider the future government of the nation. Properly engaging the people on the question is not only

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good in itself but also increases the chances for a consensus to emerge on the twin questions of democratic accountability and effective government.

Re-engagement through leadership

By way of conclusion let me return to where I started.

There is a level of disenchantment about, and a degree of disengagement from Australian politics. It is neither uniform in its expression nor internally consistent in its arguments. There are overlapping currents and a range of complaints about the way our political class is discharging its responsibilities – the rigidity of their adversarialism, the narrowness of their agendas, their defensiveness when it comes to community engagement and their attraction to the “quick fix”. However proportional representation or populism doesn’t represent a solution. The disenchanted don’t just want a better Parliament, they also want better and more principled government. This is why I believe a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities is necessary alongside new and innovative forms of public engagement. I have sought to find that political reform formula that achieves the right mix between principle (rights and responsibilities) and responsiveness (public engagement).

So too do I think it is the case that our current method for producing Cabinets is putting too great an emphasis on politics and not enough on creative administration. Good government built upon long term strategic planning and administration has become a necessity if we are to secure our future. That’s why the move to consider a Republic should open up the debate to wider considerations than those we have inherited from Westminster. Indeed it is worth noting that two of the better reforms in Great Britain in recent years – the Human Rights Act and Devolution – challenged traditional Westminster thinking rather than endorsed it!

Re-engagement shouldn’t just be about giving electors what they want as indicated by opinion polls. It requires leadership around the very principles under which we say we are governed – human rights and democratic accountability. Putting them together in a way that produces good and effective government requires a commitment to reform and a commonsense attitude to what is required from our political system. Yes the numbers matter as to the proportions but politics ought to be about more – our long-term productivity and environmental sustainability, the rights of the minorities and the marginalised and the public interest generally. However, should the major parties not take up the challenge of political engagement and involve the population in a deliberative dialogue about these issues there is the risk that we drift into a system that makes change too difficult and which may even take us back to a more insular, defensive and protectionist Australia. Re-engagement is not just about re-adjustment, it must also be about leadership and reform. On this conclusion it will either stand or fall!