

HENRY PARKES ORATION 2005

APATHY AND ANGER: OUR MODERN AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY.

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In Australia today there is a dangerous indifference to politics accompanied by a simmering resentment of politicians. Citizens who haven't enough interest in the democratic process to stay even vaguely informed of the issues of the day have only one profound political conviction: that politicians can't be trusted. Politicians show reciprocal cynicism in an electoral climate where a lie about mortgage rates has more impact than the truth about lies.

Our democracy is drowning in distrust. And at a time when our Australian democracy most needs an honest appraisal, we are instead being told to do nothing. On the one hand, a Prime Minister who invented the “non-core” election promise is using tax-payer’s money to fund advertisements telling us things are good and getting better. On the other, former Labor leader Mark Latham giving us "10 reasons why the idealistic should forget about organised politics" and telling us things are bad beyond repair.

We need better leadership than John Howard’s self-serving soft-focus reassurance. And we need more thoughtful answers than the glib solution proposed by Mark in his recent lecture. He advised his listeners to turn their backs on organised politics because "Social problems require social solutions."¹

No wonder he found the political landscape a bleak and barren one.

Politics is one of the ways our large and diverse nation works out solutions to our problems – including our social problems. Politics without a social purpose is the empty pursuit of power, brutal and meaningless.

¹ Ten Reasons Why Young Idealistic People Should Forget About Organised Politics
Public Lecture by Mark Latham at the University of Melbourne,
27 September 2005

Not because politics prompts particular viciousness. Mark Latham's suggestion that we turn to "local charities, sporting and community organisations" to escape the unpleasantness of factions and power struggles could only be made by someone who has never been to a meeting of the P&C, local progress association or cricket club!

Politics is as it is, not because of the nature of politics, but because of the nature of people.

To expect the practice of politics to be somehow nobler than your own workplace or community organisation, to expect politicians to be better and more virtuous than you yourself are, is to guarantee disappointment. If these are your criteria for a healthy democracy, you will inevitably conclude that the system is mortally sick. How else to react, but with anger, or with apathy?

Too many in our community and our media have precisely these unrealistic standards, combined with the weary cynicism of having seen so many fall short.

Australians go to the ballot box with hopes too high, and fears too great.

By all means, let us be idealistic in what we hope to achieve. But let us be realistic in what we will be satisfied to get done. Let us be realistic in our expectations of our colleagues and our opponents. Let us be realistic about the distribution of altruism and selfishness in our fellow citizens.

Politics has never been easy. Reform is always slow. Compromise is always necessary. Bismarck famously said that politics is the art of the possible. It is popular in our anti-political culture to sneer at those who agree. They are that most despicable of creatures, a pragmatist. Well, politics requires pragmatism.

Politics also requires commitment and patience, and a sense of proportion. If you don't have those things, then yes, it will be a terrible job. And if you are unable to compromise with those who disagree with you, and unable to persist in your goals over a long period of time, then you may well find party politics, community politics, any politics, your own personal hell – a personal hell very much of your own making.

Unless we have mature and realistic expectations of the possibilities of politics and the capacity of politicians, we cannot as a society understand or resolve the real problems within the political system. If our analysis is as shallow as Mark Latham's complaints that people were mean to him, our solutions will be as self-defeating as his decision to take his bat and ball and go home.

And I believe that there are real problems with our modern Australian democracy and an urgent need for us all to address them.

Henry Parkes stood here in 1889 and called for the Australian colonies to work towards Federation. Twelve years later, Australia became a nation.

I find it hard to imagine Australians today having enough faith in our political classes to bring the Commonwealth Government into existence.

But then, Henry Parkes was not asking his contemporaries for that much faith. His appeal was for a government of limited powers compared to our government today, and by insisting on a directly democratic model, Parkes's model of federalism extended the power of the Australian people rather than the power of Australian politicians.

That was the genius of Parkes and our other democratic pioneers: they were designing institutions – federal democracy, universal suffrage, free state schooling – to operate in a climate that they hoped would be created by the institutions themselves.

But in the rapidly-changing twentieth century, our nineteenth century democracy developed in unexpected ways.

Our parliament was first imagined when modern political parties were only beginning to emerge, by men who assumed that the interests of a local community would be the most important factor in voting decisions. Universal voting, public education and an Australian government accelerated the development of an Australian identity. Voters went to the polls thinking of the nation as a whole. Importantly for the development of the political system we see today, Australian workers took their sense of class solidarity to the ballot box. For survival, non-Labor politicians banded together. The two-Party system was born and from then on candidates' Party allegiance, not their personal view or individual abilities, were the most important factor in their election.

Nineteenth century democrats saw the vote as a right to be fought for and prized. They did not anticipate voter turnout declining to less than 60%, prompting the introduction of compulsory voting in 1924 to guarantee that all Australians would participate in our democracy.

Nor could they possibly have imagined the technological changes the twentieth century brought, or the social transformations that resulted.

From telegraph to email, from horse and carriage to jet plane, from newspaper to television, technology has shrunk and accelerated our world. Today's media is far more immediate than ever before. Events are reported on-line moments after they happen. Rapid turnover leads to the constant search for the latest scoop – however flimsy the connection to the public interest. News now comes packaged, enhanced with manipulative sound and image. Stories that don't suit simplistic illustrations are dropped. Stories about scandals boost circulation, and take priority over complex discussions on policy. As British journalist and commentator Malcolm Muggeridge once said: "Who sleeps with whom is intrinsically more interesting than who votes for whom."

One wonders how Henry Parkes would have fared, forced to resign from public life for bankruptcy not once but twice – once with debts so huge he narrowly escaped fraud charges.

The short attention spans of today's media "consumers" are trained by infotainment that seeks to reduce our political process to a more boring version of 'Survivor'. There is little incentive for our citizens to dig

deeper with increased demands on our time in the modern world. Work and family commitments grow ever greater as more families have two wage-earners, but the greatest increased demand on our time is from multiplying kinds of leisure, most prominently television.

Opinion pollsters report a lack of interest or understanding from the very same people racking up massive mobile bills trying to save or evict a Big Brother housemate or Australian Idol contestant. This disinterest breeds a vicious cycle, for those who don't speak up will find nothing so certain as that they won't be heard.

Our material prosperity has markedly improved since the nineteenth century. Although there are still many Australians living in real poverty and hardship, *most* of us are not: and the most direct interaction many people have with their government is in times of need.

Around the world political parties and community organisations of all kinds are suffering declining and ageing membership. As volunteer associations and community organisations fade, our society suffers. As mass political parties wither, our democracy suffers. My own Party, the Labor Party, feels this most keenly. We are the oldest Australian political party and the only one in existence today that was founded in Henry Parkes's life-time.

Like Henry Parkes' democracy, the Australian Labor Party was conceived in the 19th century and endured throughout the 20th. As the only Australian political party to see the whole of that 20th century, Labor

has a great tradition of support and respect for the institutions and conventions that underpin our democracy.

Now at the beginning of the 21st century, Labor is not the only party facing new challenges and new struggles but as Australia's best example of a mass democratic party, the decline in political activity among Australians affects not only Labor's strategies but also Labor's soul. The last decades of the twentieth century saw the introduction of public funding for election campaigns, an effort by the ALP to combat massive corporate donations to the non-Labor parties. It didn't work. Campaigns have merely become more expensive, and parties have spent even more time chasing corporate donations to pay for them. Shrinking membership means a greater need for big donors, but the pursuit of big donors alienates the remaining members. Instead of a broad political movement, Labor has become a party of parliamentarians with a machine element dedicated to funding campaigns and influencing the composition and often behaviour of the parliamentarians elected. Grass-roots members are an afterthought and for many in the machine, an inconvenience. They shouldn't worry. If things keep going as they are, they won't have to worry about Party members at all.

Another substantial change since the time of Henry Parkes is the decline of the power of the nation-state in the face of multinational corporations and international organisations. In the past, economic policy has been the main ground of debate between politicians. Australia's first political parties were called "Protectionist", "Free Trader" and "Labor". Now there is a general agreement between political parties and public

commentators that there is only one real way to run the economy: by "free market" precepts. National sovereignty is diminished as global markets, multinational corporations and international institutions play a major role in shaping Australia's economy.

For most people, the strength and the structure of the economy is the single greatest contribution the government can make to their well-being. It is little wonder that Australians lose interest in politics when the economy so often seems beyond the reach of their democratic power.

Our society, our technology and the institutions that govern our lives have changed radically since Henry Parkes stood here and called for a federal and a democratic government of the Commonwealth of Australia. The environment we do politics *in* has changed dramatically, but the way we do politics has hardly changed at all.

All these are convincing reasons for the indifference of many Australians to our political processes.

But partly, politicians must take responsibility for the pervasive sense of political impotence. Low-content, high-colour campaigning, slogans as vague as they are reassuring and the deliberate downplaying of ideals, vision and hopes for the country leave Australians with the impression that there's little politicians can do, and less they'd try. Australian politicians sometimes seem to believe that Australian voters have all taken to heart Bernard Baruch's advice to "Vote for the man who promises least; he'll be the least disappointing."

Baruch's cynical joke is popular among political aficionados who compete to seem the most jaded and disillusioned. Few know or care that Baruch left a more lasting legacy as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's economic advisor. **He** voted – and worked – for the man who promised the most – and delivered.

In the modern climate of ever-lowering expectations, apathy and disengagement are self-protective reactions to an equally powerful and dangerous current: anger. You never hear someone say as they refuse a how-to-vote on the way into a polling booth: "It doesn't matter who I vote for, someone *good* will get in."

Politics is a valuable activity, a way to bring about real change for the better, and a means of managing substantial disagreements within a society or a community. Cynicism about politicians and our motives corrodes faith in that process. And if the pervasive belief is that politicians have nothing but self-interest at heart, then their allowances, their pay, their very existence is the subject of resentment.

From time to time, simmering resentment flashes over into populist campaigns with hostility to politics and politicians as a defining feature. The brief success of One Nation and Pauline Hanson is perhaps the best example: Hanson was wildly popular because of, not despite, her economic ignorance, political naiveté and nervous, unprepared media persona. The Democrats were never so popular as when promising to "Keep the Bastards Honest". The Greens have expanded their base from

environmentalists to protest votes, campaigning as the 'anti-political' political party.

Such posturing makes for fleeting popularity as voters seek an outlet for their frustration, but does nothing to address the causes of that frustration.

We need more than a press-release and a campaign commercial to cure the powerful, potent, destructive mix of apathy and anger in our community.

And we need more than facile appeals for idealism and civility.

If Australians are to once again see their government as the instrument of the nation's collective will, and their national parliament as the place consensus is forged, then we have to learn again from Henry Parkes the importance of direct democracy. As Parkes said in here in 1889, it is through democracy that governments gain legitimacy. As our nineteenth century political institutions creak and groan with the effort to keep up with changing times, we are experiencing an increasing deficit of democracy.

The apathy and anger that marks our modern Australian democracy is a sign that the deficit of democracy is becoming a lack of legitimacy.

Today I would like to recommend three main areas of reform.

The first is in Australia's political parties. In our two-Party system, with state and federal governments changing back and forth, the selection of

candidates and the setting of policies *within* the political parties has as great an influence on Australia's governance as general elections. It is therefore essential that Australia's political parties are open, transparent and democratic – no code-words, no cabals, no secret handshakes.

This applies most acutely to the Australian Labor Party – not because we are the Party most in need of change or least democratic as things stand, but because as Australia's progressive political party dedicated to principles of inclusiveness, democracy, and merit, we have to practice what we preach.

A hundred years ago, the difficulty of travel and communication around our huge continent made party members' direct participation in the ALP's organisation impractical. The solution was for local members to delegate their democratic rights. Today, the problem and the solution are out-of-date. A hundred years ago, the ALP's structures provided for the greatest possible participatory democracy under the circumstances. Today, the abuse of those structures too often smothers Party democracy. Today, we can do better.

Undemocratic practices are often blamed on factions and factionalism. There is nothing inherently wrong or undemocratic about like-minded people voting together to maximise their chances of success. It is, after all, the principle of Party politics. When such groupings are based not on shared beliefs but on shared venality, factionalism goes bad. When factional interests are put ahead of the Party's interests, the Party rots.

As Party membership declines, the influence of factional warriors increases. They maximise their influence by excluding those who disagree, not through leadership and persuasion. Those who defer to the powerbrokers are rewarded with positions in the Party and with employment.

This is not factionalism. It is feudalism, and it is killing the ALP.

Mark Latham, having benefited from this system throughout his career, ultimately turned on it. His conclusion was that since he could see no way to reform the ALP, it was unreformable. I have a higher opinion of Labor's capacity for renewal.

Democracy and transparency must be the watchwords of our reform. Under Simon Crean's leadership, some reforms were made, and they have been moderately successful. Our national Party President is directly elected by the membership. And delegates representing unions at conference have to actually be members of the union they represent – a long overdue change.

The sky did not fall, as was prophesied when Simon introduced these reforms. I think it's time we went further.

If our national president can be popularly elected, then why not our state presidents? I believe it is time for the state and territory branches to follow the lead of the national ALP and introduce direct democracy in electing their branch presidents. Indeed, I believe as many as possible

Party officials, executives, committees and for that matter Senators, ought to be directly elected or preselected by the Party membership.

Those are some reforms that would enable Labor's supporters to have confidence in the Party's commitment to democracy.

The next area of reform I think is important is media reform. Our ideas of press freedoms and rights are based very much in the nineteenth century. When Henry Parkes ran *The Empire* newspaper, the 'professional' model of peer regulation seemed adequate protection for the public interest, particularly given the narrow influence of the nineteenth century newspaper and the diverse range of newspapers published.

Today, we deal with massive media corporations that pursue their business interests on a multinational scale. In many of Australia's media markets, one single company dominates. Accurate reporting and the public interest struggle to compete with the imperative for advertising sales and pursuing the corporate agenda. Media proprietors use the best marketing techniques to shape public opinion in the guise of news.

For thirty years, no government of any political persuasion has done enough to ensure diversity, although media diversity is the greatest protection of the media's vital role in scrutinising and informing our democracy. Neither the Press Council in its present form nor industry watchdogs like the ABC's MediaWatch can force our media outlets to be honest and accurate, and neither provide remedies strong enough to

discourage huge corporations from putting their own interests ahead of the public interest.

The media's freedom to publish was once a safeguard for our democracy. Today, as trash tabloids and opinion-for-hire commentators destroy any semblance of a debate of ideas, the principle of informed decision-making at the heart of the ideal of democracy drowns beneath racy headlines and print-now, retract-later coverage. Radio shock-jocks and shallow television infotainment do the same.

If our Australian democracy is to recover its health, one essential step is for standards of accuracy and responsibility to be set for all media outlets – print, radio and television – and enforced with meaningful remedies. For one thing, retractions ought to receive the same coverage and the same emphasis as the original incorrect reporting. Putting the lie on page one and burying the retraction inside makes a mockery of press responsibility.

Extending the role of the Press Council to cover all forms of media and ensuring it has adequate staff and resources would be steps in the right direction. We **are** entitled to insist that the media's self-regulation mechanisms are strong and effective, and that any self-regulatory body is vigorous and independent.

The third area of reform I would like to deal with is perhaps the closest to Henry Parkes's original purpose here at Tenterfield in 1889. The reason we remember the speech Parkes made here is that he set out the argument

for the nation of Australia, and in advocating a Constitutional Convention he recommended the machinery to establish that nation.

In the nineteenth century colonial environment, the main preoccupation for our pioneer national democrats was to preserve the rights of the residents of the colonies while creating a new democratic institution. To do so, they adopted the model of a federal parliament, not a national one. Our Senate, and our mechanisms for constitutional reform, are designed to protect the rights of the states against the power of the Commonwealth.

Australia has been a nation for more than a hundred years, I believe it is time our machinery of government recognised that fact. We are all first and foremost Australian citizens.

But part of the difficulty in changing our constitution has been the federalist requirement for a referendum to be passed in a majority of states, as well as receive a majority of votes nationally.

There **are** many important constitutional reforms that would vastly improve our national democracy. Fixed simultaneous four year terms for both houses and the removal of the Senate's power to block supply are two overdue Parliamentary reforms. An Australian Republic is a more substantial constitutional change, but one I strongly support.

Existing federalist requirements for constitutional reform, for state as well as national majorities, remain a roadblock.

In Henry Parkes's time, the federal system protected democratic rights. Today, I'm sure we can do better. We need our constitution and our mechanisms of constitutional change to reflect the reality that Australia is today "a nation for a continent".

I believe we need, as a starting point, a commission into constitutional reform. Its task should be to explore the best ways to maximise democratic participation in the constitutional reform process. This is of course only a beginning: as our nation continually grows, so the suitability of our constitution ought to be under constant review.

Ladies and gentlemen, I began today talking about the apathy and anger that characterise modern Australian democracy. I believe both are symptoms of the widening gap between the Australian people and the Australian polity. Without both an understanding of the practicalities of political change, and the confidence that the citizen can shape the state, Australians will drift further and further into disengagement and resentment. It is a dangerous moment for our democracy.

I hope it will be the impetus for renewal.