

The 2010 Australian Federal Election: A Historian's Perspective

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The word 'historic' is often misused in Australian political discussions and debates but is highly appropriate in describing the 2010 federal election. As the first poll in 70 years to produce a hung House of Representatives, it has already been the subject of extensive analysis and debate, much of which is highly critical of the main parties and players. *The Economist* magazine, in a comment typical of many, described it as exciting but masking 'a desperately impoverished politics'. I partly agree with that view but in the limited time at my disposal today, I want to take a rather different approach that reflects my longstanding interest in Australian political history. I will very selectively consider some particular aspects of the election that I

find intriguing and that can be best understood in a wider historical context.

The first and most obvious of these is the final result. While Australia has had a good deal of experience with hung parliaments, examples of which since the early 1990s include all the states and the two mainland territories, if we regard the Liberal-National/Country coalition as representing a de facto party, it is a much rarer situation in the House of Representatives. The last such occasion was between 1940 and 1943 when two Victorian independents held the balance of power, which they used to first to support a non-Labor government and after 1941 a Labor one.

Rather than just judging the 2010 result as an aberration, though, it is better understood as the culmination of trends that emerged almost a decade ago when the 2001 federal poll saw three independents elected, the largest number to succeed at a single federal contest for many years. Of the three, one, Peter

Andren, died in 2007 but the other two were the current parliamentarians Bob Katter and Tony Windsor. Rob Oakeshott joined them at a by-election in 2008 and Andrew Wilkie did so last month. All but Wilkie represented rural and regional electorates. There are now proportionately more non-party independent parliamentarians in the House of Representatives than in the lower house of any other comparable western country of which I am aware.

Following House of Representatives elections in which Labor or the coalition won a clear majority, the independents had little influence. Even before the last election, experienced senior politicians like the Liberals' Nick Minchin and Labor's Wayne Swan argued that a hung parliament was most unlikely. The closeness of the major parties in the opinion polls combined with the almost certain re-election of the three sitting independents meant that it should have been seen as a distinct possibility.

A significant factor here is that over the past couple of decades the Labor, Liberal and National parties have pursued economic reforms that may have had strong national support but were sometimes portrayed, most vociferously by Bob Katter, as denying the full benefits of an otherwise sound economy to parts of rural and regional Australia. Large numbers of people living in those areas had already expressed their dissatisfaction in the 1990s by supporting Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party.

Because the Liberal and National parties held more rural and regional electorates than the Labor Party, the independents Andren, Katter, Windsor and Oakeshott won seats that would probably otherwise have been Liberal or National. Once elected, they usually increased their support. Windsor, for example, won a primary vote of 45% in 2001 and 62% last month.

Such successes reflected a view in parts of rural and regional Australia that the major parties were, as the political scientists Brian Costar and Jennifer Curtin recently wrote, 'struggling to

reconcile local representation with the brutalities of machine politics'. Even in urban Australia, there was increasing dissatisfaction that was reflected in the support for the Greens that I discuss shortly. While at the 1987 federal election the Labor and Coalition parties accounted for 92% of the vote, last month the figure was about 81%. One needs to go back to the 1943 federal election, which witnessed a temporary disintegration of the non-Labor parties, to see a similar figure of 83%.

The Greens benefited the most in 2010 from the decline in major party support. The provisional results gave them for the first time a Senate seat in every state, which brings their Senate total to nine and provides them the balance of power in the upper house from the middle of next year. They also won their first House of Representatives seat in a general election, a feat that the Australian Democrats, who like the Greens did well in Senate elections, were never able to achieve. Their House of Representative vote rose 3.8% from its 2007 level to reach

11.6%. Much of that new support was from former Labor voters in inner city areas and young adults who were voting for the first time but they also did quite well in safe Liberal electorates such as Bradfield in Sydney and Kooyong in Melbourne. Both major parties underestimated the extent to which climate change was a big issue for many voters. Although the Greens' success was widely expected, it was another sign of the growing disenchantment with the major parties.

It would be rash to say whether the state of affairs I have outlined will continue. A similar widespread scepticism about the major parties existed in the early 1930s but proved relatively short-lived. The Democratic Labor Party and the Australian Democrats were significant third forces in Australian national politics after the mid 1950s before both quite quickly disintegrated. If the Liberals decide to change their preferences policy, the Greens may suffer a similar fate. There is a long history of independents in federal politics and not all have enjoyed continuing electoral success. Even so, unlike every

other very close federal election since the Second World War, in 2010 neither Labor nor the Liberal-National coalition was able to secure a House of Representatives majority in its own right. The closest previous poll was in 1961 when the Menzies government held a majority of one in a House of Representatives in which there were no independents. For the first time in 70 years, in 2010 a Commonwealth government lost its lower house majority and only eventually retained office because three independents allowed it to do so. In comparison with 1940, in 2010 there was a total of four rather than just two independents and the government lacked a Senate majority. The 2010 result is unique in these vital respects.

A second feature of the poll that I want to consider is that it was the first federal one in which a woman led one of the major parties. Until quite recently women were less successful in achieving high office in the federal sphere than they were in the states. The first woman was elected to a state parliament in 1921 yet there were no women in the federal parliament until 1943.

The first woman state Premier was appointed in 1990. While the proportion of women serving in federal ministries has increased over the last twenty years, it is still considerably less than in some other western democracies. Julia Gillard was the first female leader of a major party in the Commonwealth parliament and won that position and the prime ministership in unusual and largely unexpected circumstances. Although long seen as ambitious and capable, the expectation when she was elected Deputy Leader of the federal parliamentary Labor Party in 2006 was that should the new leader, Kevin Rudd, become Prime Minister she was destined to be deputy for a long period.

Australian electors have not in most cases treated women party leaders well. Only one of the four female state Premiers, Anna Bligh in Queensland, has won an election. Joan Kirner in Victoria and Carmen Lawrence in Western Australia both lost the only elections they contested as Premiers and a similar fate is likely for Kristina Keneally in New South Wales. Women state Liberal leaders such as Kerry Chikarovski in New South

Wales and Isobel Redmond in South Australia were unable to take their parties out of opposition. Under Julia Gillard's leadership, the federal Labor Party only just hung on to office and lost a large number of seats.

I can only speculate as to the reasons here. In all the cases mentioned the women faced an unenviable task as they only came to leadership after their parties' support had deteriorated with men in charge. That was undoubtedly the situation regarding Labor and Kevin Rudd, with many of his previous supporters believing that the party was destined for electoral oblivion unless he was removed. Another possibility is that there remains among many Australians a regrettable suspicion of women in key roles. The proportion of women who run large companies, government agencies and universities is also quite low. A further explanation sometimes advanced is that most women sensibly stay away from high political office due to the adversarial and unpleasant environment in which party leaders often need to operate.

The third historical aspect of the election that I shall discuss is that it starkly highlights important long-term changes concerning the role of religion in Australian politics. Between the serious Labor splits of 1916 and 1954, most Australian Catholics supported the Labor Party and many of its state and federal leaders were Catholics. There were always some Catholics involved in the non-Labor parties but they were few by comparison and there was often hostility to them in those parties. Joseph Lyons, the non-Labor Prime Minister between 1932 and 1939, was a devout Catholic but his situation was unusual as he had previously been a Labor state Premier and federal minister who changed sides in 1931 during unprecedented economic, political and social turmoil.

After 1954, many Catholics moved from the Labor Party to the Democratic Labor Party. Protestants, though, remained ascendant in the non-Labor parties. Sir John Cramer, for example, recalled in his autobiography the suspicion he

encountered as a Catholic parliamentarian and minister in coalition governments during the 1950s and 1960s.

With the decline of the Democratic Labor Party and of sectarianism in Australian society, great changes occurred from the early 1970s onwards. Many former Democratic Labor voters transferred their allegiance to the Liberals and Catholics became increasingly prominent on the non-Labor side. Tony Abbott's rise to the leadership vividly illuminates what was happening. A former seminarian, he remained a devout Catholic yet that proved no barrier to his political advancement. His predecessor, Malcolm Turnbull, is a Catholic convert. Other prominent Catholics in the Liberal Party include the shadow treasurer Joe Hockey and the New South Wales leader Barry O'Farrell. Tim Fischer, a former Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Nationals, is another staunch Catholic. With the exception of Joseph Lyons's rather special case, the 2010 election was the first since federation in which the main federal non-Labor Party had a Catholic leader.

Key sections of the Labor Party, on the other hand, appeared to be moving away from organised religion. Although Rudd is a devout Christian who regularly worships in Anglican churches and writes about his beliefs, some other Labor leaders had much less faith. Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke made no secret of their agnosticism. Julia Gillard went one step further in admitting that she was an atheist. In doing so, she joined a growing minority of other Australians but there is anecdotal evidence that her honesty cost Labor votes. Although the old sectarianism may have largely disappeared in Australia, at least some electors may still be uneasy about a Prime Minister who openly rejects any form of religious affiliation.

Finally, there is much comment about Kevin Rudd being deposed as a first term Prime Minister shortly before an election. It was yet another unique event. There were instances during the Commonwealth's early history of Prime Ministers such as Alfred Deakin and George Reid losing office between

elections but that did not happen because their own parties deposed them.

Although Rudd's problems were largely of his own making, the unprecedented brutality and timing of his execution distinguish it from the ways in which other Australian Prime Ministers have involuntarily relinquished their positions. The fall came after he abandoned his emissions trading scheme. Ironically, those who strongly advised him make that decision, including Gillard, Swan and the New South Wales Labor Right, were, as the former Labor minister Neal Blewett recently put it, 'the very instruments of his downfall'. There is a clear distinction between the removal of a Prime Minister and that of a party leader who is not Prime Minister, such as Malcolm Turnbull's involuntary departure from the Liberal leadership.

While Labor may well have been headed for defeat with Rudd, the circumstances of his going at least partly counteracted the benefits of Gillard's greater political skills and different style.

Believing that she would have the honeymoon with voters that many new Prime Ministers enjoy, she quickly and perhaps misguidedly went to the polls. As *The Economist* commented, ‘Voters don’t much like assassins...Presiding over a party at war with itself, she would struggle to assert power as prime minister’. The election was a very nearly a disaster for her. Had she lost office, it would have been the first time since the Depression federal election of 1931 that Australians have rejected a first term federal government. Her future as Prime Minister is now in the hands of a disparate group of fickle parliamentarians who do not belong to her own party.

There are many features of the election, perhaps most notably the debate between the parties over economic and social policies and the contrasting personalities of Abbott and Gillard, which I have hardly touched on this afternoon. I hope, however, that I have said enough to indicate why I believe that the recent federal election warrants being described as historic. With the benefit of hindsight, historians in the future may view it very

differently to the ways in which I have today but I will be most surprised if they ascribe any less importance to it.