Robinson, Geoff 2013, Labor has a big task to become competitive again, *On line opinion: Australia's e-journal of social and political debate*, pp. 1-1.

Published online at: http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=15778

**This is the published version.**

©2013, Geoff Robinson

Reproduced by Deakin University under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No-Derivatives Licence

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30077053
Recently I attended a workshop on the 2013 federal election. Descriptors for the election as whole were tossed around: the angry electorate, the politics of disillusion etc., but then one participant reminded us that this disillusion was largely restricted to one side of politics. The Coalition had won a convincing victory with a primary vote two percentage points higher than what Labor had received in 2007. Who now remembers those confident declarations from some on the political left in 2007 that John Howard’s defeat demonstrated that the Coalition was ‘unelectable’? There is evidence of a broad unhappiness with the Australian political order, but it would be short sighted for the political left to believe that this disaffection must now be turned towards the Coalition. Labor and its Green rivals face an unfavourable political environment due largely to the salience of immigration as apolitical issues and the slow pace of economic growth.

It is true that some of the hyperbole and gloating by conservatives about Labor’s plight is overstated. Labor’s primary vote was historically low but a significant portion of the left of centre vote in Australia is now held by the Greens. Even if this is taken into account the left’s performance was disappointing: only in Victoria did the total of the Labor and Greens vote exceed 45%. In four out of six states the Labor and Greens vote combined was less than Labor’s primary vote in 1975. Before the elections conservatives had already written their post-election analyses that centred on conflict between the real Australians of the suburbs, in particular ‘western Sydney’ and regions and the rootless cosmopolitan elites of the ‘inner city’. After the election Labor’s reasonable performance in western Sydney had to be explained away.

For Labor to take solace from the retention of electorates such as Greenway and Parramatta is to confuse debate ‘victories’ with real political successes. Disillusionment with Labor was general. Labor cannot just focus on the project of the recovery of ‘traditional’ supporters as it did with some success during John Howard’s first term. The party has to appeal to voters across the spectrum. There is an important point here often neglected, elections are about individuals. Much discussion of politics in recent years has evoked groups: ‘western Sydney’, ‘doctors wives’ ‘battlers’ etc., but these don’t cast votes. Voters generally want government to provide the same thing, fluff about ‘aspirationals’ notwithstanding nearly all electors want improved living standards. Voters disagree on the emphasis they place on particular public goods, such as economic growth or ‘border security’ and in their evaluation of the competence of different parties to provide them but there are not fundamental divergences of values in the electorate. Australian society is remarkably unified, revolutionary Marxists and conservative culture warriors are wrong. Nor is there a division between voters in ‘marginal electorates’ and the rest of the nation. It is arithmetically possible for a party to win or hold government by an appeal tailored to voters in individual electorates, but it is very unlikely. Labor’s task has to be to appeal to all voters just as it alienated all voters.

What are the aspects Labor needs to correct? Governance is part of the story, voters want governments to get on with governing and leave them alone. Politics is not a matter of overwhelming concern for most Australians. Labor made politics front-page news. Some of this did reflect media ignorance; it was obvious from early after the 2010 election that the crossbenchers were first and foremost opponents of Tony Abbot and that Julia Gillard’s main threat came from within her party. Despite this Labor did its best to make the survival of the government a topic of media fascination through its recruitment of Peter Slipper as Speaker. The accurate image of party disunity and the inaccurate image of parliamentary chaos will work against Labor for some time but eventually the issues will lose its salience.

The major public policy issue that works against Labor in opposition is immigration. In some aspects the Australian political landscape has shifted well to the left in the last decade. Who now members the post-2004 election mass of commentary that argued that Australian politics would be shaped by a wave of self-employed aspirational Pentecostal suburban Christians committed to the cause of border protection and traditional marriage? Immigration however remains a major issue that favours the Coalition. ‘Border protection’ enables anti-immigration sentiment to be mobilised without a policy that immigration actually be reduced. The issue unites conservative elites and populists whereas it divided them during the days of Pauline Hanson.
Labor’s best proposes might lie in campaigning its traditional strengths of health and education. The problem it faces here is that public opinion has shifted to the right on economic policy. The major reason for this is economic uncertainty. Labor attracts support from voters as the party of public services rather than lower taxes. Voters worried about their economic future are likely to prefer lower taxes. If we are entering an era in which economic growth will be slower for reasons inherent to the current phase of capitalist development the political right will flourish, as they did in Australia between the two world wars. A related problem is that of Labor’s ability to deliver on improved public services. Hostile media overstated the administrative missteps of the Rudd and Gillard governments, but there were real problems. Some missteps reflected the diminution of public sector capacities by decades of ‘reform’, and some did reflect the competence of Labor ministers. There may be a more general problem voters expect the public sector to be different, they hold it to higher standards than private corporations. Labor was accused of overpromising and under delivering, perhaps this is a perception that social democratic parties cannot escape. Ambitious pledges such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the Gonski education funding reforms require a major financial commitment but voters baulk at the provision to governments of the revenues required for these initiatives.

The current political landscape favours the Coalition. This has little to do with social change undercutting Labor’s base. Indeed the decline of the traditional unionised working class has largely benefitted Labor because it has allowed the party to move to the centre. Labor’s long-term woes are due to the rise of immigration as a political issues and impact of slower economic growth on voters’ support for public services over taxation reductions. Labor won elections in the 1980s when public opinion was conservative on economic issues but it benefitted by conservative incompetence and its ability to deliver industrial harmony. This is no longer the case.

Geoff Robinson teaches at Deakin University, Warrnambool and blogs on Australian and international politics and policy from a historical perspective at geoffrobinson.info. His book on former NSW Labor premier Jack Lang will be published later this year.

© The National Forum and contributors 1999-2016. All rights reserved.