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When the Democratic Labor Party’s John Madigan won the sixth Victorian Senate seat at the 2010 election, it appeared a tear in the time space continuum had somehow briefly transported politics back to the early 1960s.

But while Madigan’s party may seem a historical throwback, the peculiarly Australian electoral calculus that delivered him into the Senate for six years with just 2.34% of the primary vote is inescapably real. And there’s speculation that this year’s upcoming election (a half-Senate election that Madigan need not contest) will deliver an outcome that sees Madigan holding the balance of power in the upper house.

But those who view the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) as an instinctively conservative “Catholic” party likely to support a putative Abbott Coalition government need to reassess their views. Drastically.

While Madigan, a man of active Catholic faith, holds very strong pro-life views on reproductive matters, his economic views are very much of the “old left” and reminiscent of the Australian Labor Party (an organisation Madigan clearly sees as of a similar political stripe, albeit separate, to his own
party) before Paul Keating economically rationalised it. Anyone surprised to hear this should take another look at the name of Madigan’s party. The clue is in the second word.

The DLP’s historic role in Australian politics is storied and it remains difficult to shake the sepia tinge the very name of the party evokes, but as Madigan proves by his very existence in the Senate, it remains a well organised and effective political operation with detailed and sometimes surprising policies.

In this wide ranging interview with Deakin University political historian Geoffrey Robinson, Madigan describes the “surreal” effect of being elected to parliament, provides an illuminating window into the values that drive his political thoughts and speaks candidly about the challenges that holding the balance of power may bring.

Importantly, he describes the DLP’s stand on the issues that will dominate the coming parliament: asylum seekers, economic policy and school funding.

If Madigan does indeed end up holding the balance of power, as this interview shows, Australia will have a unique and pleasingly unpredictable yet impeccably sincere politician occupying a position of great importance.

Click here for a full transcript.

**Geoffrey Robinson:** Some people would say that you were elected on a very small share of the vote and would perhaps question you having a significant role in politics, in terms of the balance of power. How would you respond to that?

**John Madigan:** I didn’t make the rules, the DLP didn’t make the rules. We didn’t cheat anybody. The cost of our campaign for my election in 2010 was only A$20,000. If you have a look at some of the new minor players, they are spending an incredibly larger proportion of money than that. Our campaign was conducted on just grassroots and our 2.33-2.34% of the vote was a 130% increase on the previous election.

The children, the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren are returning to the DLP. You’d also be surprised by the people who have come to the DLP that traditionally would not have.

But holding the balance of power is not a right, it’s a privilege. With that privilege comes enormous responsibilities. History does repeat itself, and those who don’t know that are doomed to repeat it. The bottom line is the government is made up in the House of Representatives. The last two weeks of parliament, for me, were just a travesty. Bob Brown used to speak about guillotining legislation and how much of a travesty that was. I can remember him giving a speech about that back when John Howard had the balance of power in the Senate.

It’s a responsibility, it’s not a license to bludgeon. I don’t believe in bludgeoning people. Our members don’t believe that you win hearts and minds by having the whip handle and beat people to death. It doesn’t change anything. One extreme breeds another extreme. If people care to look at history, that’s
what happens. If you're going to ask if I'm going to raise issues yes I am because I'm not going to mislead people. But I'm not going to bludgeon people. I'm going to put up the arguments; I'm going to talk to people. But I don't believe in shutting people down, even if I vehemently disagree with them.

**Geoffrey Robinson:** One option for minor parties is to wheel, deal and bargain. Is that the way you would see your role or would you rather see your role as advocating for DLP principles across the board?

**John Madigan:** My role is to advocate principles and raise issues for people. There are a lot of disengaged people in the community and my attitude is to judge parties on their policies. Horse-trading does not make for good legislation. As I said, the government is made up in the House of Representatives and the Senate must return to being a house of review and scrutiny.

**Geoffrey Robinson:** Do you think the Senate has functioned as a house of scrutiny while you’ve been in the Senate?

**John Madigan:** In the last few weeks, some days we only had 20 minutes, other days 12 minutes, to talk about a bill. By the time the Coalition got up and said, “there will be no carbon tax under a government I lead”, that very finite amount of time was gone. You couldn’t get up anything if you wanted to. You couldn’t discuss anything. The Coalition was complicit in the whole thing of it all. I’m sick to death of hearing about the carbon tax – it’s gone through. Whether I like it or not, that went through.

Once we make up our minds, we listen to the argument and we’re happy to listen to a reasoned presentation laid out for people so they can make an informed decision. But you don’t get that. It annoys me immensely when people go out to people and they turn out to a hall or a public gathering and they just tell people what they want to hear. They then do a bit of a burble in parliament, but in the end the machine takes precedence over people’s concerns.

What do these people believe in? I don’t know where some of these people go but when I drive around, I see so many problems, not to be negative, but to be a realist. These people just mislead people. If I tell people I’ll do something I’ll do it. We are in a position of privilege. My mother reminds me all the time: “you are one of 76 people. With that position comes the responsibility for people.”

**Geoffrey Robinson:** You’ve sometimes referred to the statement by Frank McManus: “the best thing for Australia is a good Labor government, and the worst thing for Australia is a bad Labor government”. Has there been anything good that the ALP has imparted over the last six years - and from the Hawke/Keating government before that - that has been compatible with your view of traditional Labor values?

**John Madigan:** Every government does good things. Additionally, a good opposition makes for a good government. We’ve had neither. The current state of the ALP upsets me because I don’t want to see the ALP decimated and I lament the fact that the Greens sit there all pious, when they are the
architects for a lot of the stuff the ALP has been caned for. They don’t have the guts to stand up to the plate and take the flack – and that’s cowardly.

The other thing is we hear these vitriolic attacks on Windsor, Wilkie, Oakeshott - I've had a tiny bit to do with Wilkie, there's plenty of things we wouldn't agree on. But at the end of the day, in a democracy, everybody is entitled to his or her point of view. I passionately believe in the right of people to hold an opinion and I will go to the wire to protect that right. If somebody has the guts to say what they think, I can cope with that. I can’t cope with people who lack a backbone, manipulating people from the shadows.

On the Greens, if you have a look at DLP policy documents we were on about the environment before anybody else. There are things I voted with them on. But I don’t know that they are always driven by the same motivations as me. I worry about people that use an issue: when people use people or their concerns. I don’t look at where the votes are, I look to whether it’s right or it’s wrong.

**Geoffrey Robinson:** You are very concerned about increasing levels of foreign ownership in Australia. If there is an issue where Australia needs funds for investment, and they are coming from overseas at the moment, what are your views about alternative forms of investment in terms of building up the country?

**John Madigan:** Foreign investment has been a part of the Australian way of life since the First Fleet arrived, so it’s nothing new. What I question is whether people play by the rules. If we say we have a Foreign Investment Board, they have to weigh things up in the national interest. I don’t believe in short-term pain for long-term gain. Sometimes I think the argument becomes a bit simplistic, there are a lot of things to weigh up.

But what concerns me greatly is when it’s just an open slather approach. I believe we need to have a public interest test. We need to have a mature discussion as to what do we want for Australia and Australians. I want them to have a home; I want us to find the best and smartest ways to do things. But I don’t want to see our creeks, our waterways, our beaches destroyed. There has to be a balance and we’ve got to weigh things up and say: “what is the cost to our nation and its people?” In terms of our identity, what do we want, what do we value most as Australians?

**Geoffrey Robinson:** And how do you see foreign investment undermining that?

**John Madigan:** When you have people that control big swathes of infrastructure and property, there comes responsibility. The names may change, the characters may change but human nature does not change. As a historical example, the SEC [State Electricity Commission]. I was staunchly opposed to the privatisation of power, gas, public transport.