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‘Double Disillusion’: Analysing the 2016 Australian Federal Election

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After six weeks of a faux campaign followed by eight weeks of official and vigorous campaigning, the night of Saturday 2 July 2016 proved an anticlimax for election observers, particularly those expecting a clear result. Australia’s seventh double-dissolution election did not deliver the political ‘cut-through’ intended by the Constitutional framers—inspiring the title of this volume: *Double Disillusion*.

Making his election-night speech to the party faithful assembled at the Wentworth Hotel in Sydney, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull did not declare victory. Rather, he cautiously relayed the news that:

based on the advice I have from the party officials, we can have every confidence that we will form a Coalition majority government in the next parliament. It is a very, very close count ... so we will have to wait a few days (*Herald Sun* 2016).

Although more upbeat in his election night speech to Labor Party supporters at the Moonee Valley Racecourse in Melbourne, Opposition Leader Bill Shorten began in a similar tone:

Friends ... We will not know the outcome of this election tonight. Indeed, we may not know it for some days to come. But there is one thing for sure—the Labor Party is back (*Herald Sun* 2016).

In what was reminiscent of the 2010 Australian federal election count, which produced a hung parliament and a minority Labor government (see Simms and Wanna 2012), the result of the 2016 contest took several days to finalise. With counting still to be officially completed, Bill Shorten conceded defeat a week later on 10 July 2016, and Malcolm Turnbull claimed victory with what would turn out to be the slimmest of majorities in the lower house: winning 76 seats for the Liberal–National Coalition in the 150-seat House of Representatives.

Similarly, the outcome in the Senate did not provide additional certainty for the government: 20 crossbench Senators were elected in the highest primary vote for minor parties since the postwar consolidation of the Australian party system (see Glenn Kefford, Chapter 15). In some ways, this representative outcome was not surprising given the low quota of a double-dissolution election, but it also typified the type of result predicted by the ongoing trend towards minor-party voting in the upper house over the past half century. While this result will begin to be reversed at the next half-Senate election as the new Senate voting system starts to deliver its intended effect (see Antony Green, Chapter 8), the representative balance created by the 2016 federal election has once again brought to the fore the necessities of Senate negotiation—a process that plagued the Abbott administration, albeit recreated this time with different political actors.

The title *Double Disillusion* also reflects the fact that, for many political commentators, the uncertainty of election night and Turnbull's lacklustre and somewhat sullen speech compounded what was regarded as a 'surprisingly formulaic' (Kenny 2016) and dull campaign—'one defined by extreme boredom and a lack of mistakes' (*Australian* 2016). While the campaign itself did not provide the theatre many had hoped for, it did produce a dramatic result with seemingly little capacity to resolve the political deadlock that had arisen in the previous parliament. Not only had a first-term government lost a net 14 seats and was reduced to a majority of one in the House of Representatives, the strength of the minor party vote in the Senate ensured that seven different parties would be represented on the new crossbench.

As far as elections go, the 2016 result was a 'wake-up call' to the government; however, perhaps more significantly, the election provided important insights into some of the contemporary challenges (both domestic and international) facing Australian society and representative democracy. Globally, 2016 was a year of political upheaval

and enduring uncertainty, manifested by the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom in June, the election of Donald Trump in the United States in November and the increasing prominence of populist politics across Europe and Latin America.

Amidst these political convulsions, the 2016 Australian federal election campaign had seemed isolated and largely immune. For all the political salience of Australia's hard-line border control policy, the country remained unaffected by the record mass displacement of migrants and refugees and the associated resentment of immigration, open borders and globalisation seen in parts of Europe (see James Jupp and Juliet Pietsch, Chapter 29). As with the failure of the global financial crisis to significantly impact on the 2010 federal election (see Simms 2010), Donald Horne's 'lucky country' appeared again insulated from global trends and global problems. References to global affairs were largely subsumed within the call by Turnbull and the Liberals to vote for 'stability' and avoid chaos by re-electing the incumbent government (detailed by Marija Taflaga and John Wanna, Chapter 2), though the specific emphasis of the risk—global uncertainty or Labor's history of internal disunity—remained ambiguous.

As an agenda-setting event signalling future policy and policy contestation, the 2016 election was extremely underwhelming. The array of issues considered in the campaign remained largely constrained to narrow debates about limited economic growth and austerity, with both major parties wedded to extremely conventional economic management theories (Damien Cahill and Matthew Ryan, Chapter 22). Both parties played to their policy strengths: the Coalition emphasised stability and measures for budgetary restraint, which Labor was quick to mirror. Labor focused on the protection of Medicare with its controversial 'Mediscare' strategy (Amanda Elliot and Rob Manwaring, Chapter 24). In many areas, policy domains were reduced to synecdoche issues for wider concerns; for example, threats to the Great Barrier Reef instead of a wider debate about environmental management (Rebecca Pearse, Chapter 25), same-sex marriage over social inclusion (Blair Williams and Marian Sawyer, Chapter 28) and penalty rates over wider industrial relations terrain (David Peetz, Chapter 23).

A politics of disillusionment

A comprehensive chronology and analysis of the main events of the 2016 campaign is provided by Marija Taflaga and John Wanna (Chapter 2); rather than covering this same terrain, our main aim in this introduction is to highlight some of the key themes that unite the diverse chapters in this book. Drawing on the expert opinion of the collective authors of this volume, we contend that the 2016 federal election, often characterised as lacking spark, dynamism and interest from the public (Clive Bean, Chapter 10), can be better viewed as a ‘magnifying event’ reflecting the politics of the nation—a popular disillusionment with Australian political institutions and actors. We suggest that this can be seen in both structural and behavioural terms.

- From a structural perspective, the 2016 election brought into question the capacity of the Australian political system to deliver political and policy outcomes to the electorate. This has a number of sources, including the pluralisation of a society that employs a majoritarian institutional arrangement; as well as the significant challenges to the capacity of political parties and governments in middle powers like Australia to respond to the policy problems facing a diverse and global society.
- From a behavioural perspective, within a general scepticism about institutions (Edelman 2016), there is a popular sense that established parties are too focused on strategy, too factionalised, and lacking in capacity, to address the complex policy issues of the day. There is increasingly a disconnect between the ‘promise’ of elections as a mechanism of democratic accountability and the ‘reality’ of their use as a tool of political strategy.

Taken together, these themes further illustrate why this book is titled *Double Disillusion*, a play on the descriptor ‘double dissolution’. First and foremost, the 2016 federal election highlighted the fact that although elections formally function as the opportunity to provide a ‘voice’ to the people to hold politicians to account, several aspects of the electoral process can be managed by political parties as a tactical mechanism to prolong periods in government and achieve their legislative programs. Operating with a three-year window that has some flexibility, federal governments will routinely time the announcement of an election in line with their calculations of electoral success, even if, as in the case of 2016,

these calculations may not bear out. Although useful from the federal government's perspective, voters do not always view early elections in a positive light. The manipulation of electoral timing can be perceived as a self-serving strategy.¹

In 2016, the issue of strategy was heightened by the government's decision to invoke provisions in the Australian Constitution to dissolve both Houses of Parliament, and thereby achieve an early election not only for the House of Representatives, but the full Senate.² As Antony Green discusses in Chapter 8 of this volume, as a measure to break political deadlock, section 57 of the Constitution provides that if both Houses of Parliament fail to agree on the passage of a bill, in certain circumstances the Governor-General may dissolve both Houses of Parliament simultaneously—what is commonly referred to as a 'double-dissolution election'.

The 'trigger' for this mechanism in 2016 was the Senate's inability to pass bills on union governance and the re-establishment of the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC). However, as Taflaga and Wanna argue in Chapter 2, the alternative strategic motivation behind the double-dissolution election was to 'clear out' the Senate crossbenchers, who had provided a source of frustration for the government in attempting to legislate its policy program in the previous parliament. This misfit between public interest in trigger bills (Irving 2015: 40) and the underlying strategic import of the prime minister's actions serves to further underline a disconnection between popular concerns and political practice.

The timing of the 2016 election and the use of the double-dissolution trigger also needs to be understood in the context of reforms to the Senate voting system, which were passed by the parliament in March 2016. Designed to address the growing electoral importance of 'micro-

1 Given this scepticism, it could be argued that moving to fixed-term elections may be one way to reduce disillusionment and to 'modernise' the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy, following in the footsteps of the United Kingdom (2011) and Canada (2007). The majority of Australian States and Territories also follow this model: New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australian, and the Northern and Australian Capital Territories.

2 On 21 March 2016, Malcolm Turnbull formally requested the Governor-General to prorogue parliament with effect from 15 April as per section 5 of the Constitution, thereby allowing for a reintroduction of the trigger bills and the Budget to be read before the cut-off date of 5 May. A double dissolution cannot occur within six months of the end of a three-year term of the House of Representatives, so the PM's initial request essentially set the election date for 2 July.

parties' and preference-harvesting arrangements leading to democratically questionable outcomes, the changes instituted a system of optional preferential voting and removed 'group-voting' tickets.

The voting system reforms were lauded on the grounds that they increased transparency and restored true choice to voters, rather than results being driven by preference deals engineered by parties and so-called 'preference whisperers' (Kelly 2016: 98). By the same token, the reforms were also criticised as creating a significant disadvantage to new entrants, making it more difficult for minor parties to be elected and consolidating the power of the incumbent political parties (Lee 2016).

As several of the chapters in this book suggest, while the government's strategy of clearing out a previously difficult Senate may have backfired, with a plethora of new parties now present, the politics behind the electoral law reforms, the timing of the election and the use of the double-dissolution trigger were clearly in the interests of the established parties of government and, as we argue, contributed to the climate of disillusionment surrounding the 2016 federal campaign.³ This notion of an 'insider class' of self-dealing and privilege was again in the media at the end of 2016—the expenses scandals (Riordan 2017) and political donation debates highlighting the opaque nature of politicians' use of public resources and party financing (Baxendale 2017; see also Gauja and Sawyer 2016).

Second, and a prominent theme in the chapters throughout this volume, is the necessity to understand and engage with the growing complexity of electoral politics in Australia. In particular, attention must be paid to shifting attitudes and forms of engaging with politics, and the constantly evolving landscape of actors involved in election campaigns, as well as the arenas in which political talk occurs. We suggest that the increasing myriad of political actors involved in the electoral process highlights the importance of looking beyond traditional arenas to assess the extent and impact of political debate.

Previous editions of the Australian federal election book have noted the decline of partisan attachments and the increasing professionalisation and personalisation of election campaigns (see, for example, Johnson, Wanna

3 It is worth noting that only half of the new Senate will have six-year terms; the other half will be up for re-election under the full quota in three years. This means it is likely that the number of micro-party representatives will decrease.

and Lee 2015), trends that could be associated with electoral discontent, instability and declining party membership. In this volume, we try to draw attention to the changing nature and heightened complexity of the electoral landscape—in particular, constraints on individual political actors, as well as the blurring of formal and informal arenas of political activity by parties, politicians and citizens.

The contributors to this book emphasise, perhaps in a more optimistic way, that although political parties and their leaders remain central to Australian election campaigns, the universe of participants is far more diverse than this. Contrary to their representation in elite and emerging media (see Andrea Carson and Brian McNair, Chapter 19; Peter Chen, Chapter 20), we argue that elections are not monopolised by leaders, parties and media elites (the ‘whales’ of political journalism). The 2016 contest saw ongoing participation by a wide array of interest groups (see Darren Halpin and Bert Fraussen, Chapter 17), marginalised communities (see Diana Perche, Chapter 27; Williams and Sawyer, Chapter 28), independent candidates (see Jennifer Curtin, Chapter 16) and online campaigning organisations—most notably GetUp!—(see Ariadne Vromen, Chapter 18).

Some of these activities, like the intervention of GetUp! in asylum-seeker policies (constructed by political parties over time to ‘wedge’ political opponents—see Sara Dehm and Max Walden, Chapter 26), demonstrate new modes of participation and illuminate political actors that can be important in shaping campaigns and campaign narratives. Others, like the coalition of individuals and groups who developed and promoted the Redfern Statement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, remain in a state of potentiality. Without these alternative voices, the 2016 election would have been far less dynamic than even its current low reputation attests. Thus, while the discussion of Senate reforms point to a closure of the competitive space of campaigns, the ideational nature of elections may remain even in a political system dominated by parties following the cartel trajectory.

Finally, we suggest that much of the disillusionment with the 2016 Australian federal election is linked to critiques of the major parties’ capacities (particularly that of the government) to deal with the significant policy challenges facing Australian society and to represent the interests of an increasingly diverse community (see Jupp and Pietsch, Chapter 29). Specifically, this volume reveals how these policy areas were approached

and emphasised (or de-emphasised) by the various actors (parties, interest groups, social movement organisations, and others) involved in the campaign and the political strategies involved in the process. As many of the authors contend in this volume, much of the 2016 election was fought over traditional ideological divisions: economic management versus social provision (see Carol Johnson, Chapter 3). In a complex political environment, this demonstrates enduring class divisions and the importance of inequality and material concerns in the lives of everyday Australians. Several chapters in this book are critical of the ability of the political community to generate significantly new policy ideas. In some areas, it appears they are ‘searching’ for new solutions during a period in which conventional policy models in a number of key economic, social and environmental domains appear no longer to have efficacy, while in other areas authors identify agenda closure by parties and other elites.

In providing an expert analysis of the actors, policies and, importantly, the political strategies involved in the campaign, this collection gives readers a much more nuanced understanding of why the 2016 Australian federal election was one that represented a ‘double disillusion’. It is evident that voters were disillusioned, but, looking beyond the negative tone associated with the title, we suggest that many of the characteristics of the 2016 Australian federal election may also represent a longer-term shift in Australian electoral politics. This shift is signified by a period of party and electoral fragmentation leading to a richer universe of political and campaign participants, increased policy complexity in a climate of growing economic uncertainty and inequality, and an ever-present public cynicism with leadership churn and the political manipulation of electoral rules.

Continuing the tradition: The 2016 federal election volume

The post-election analysis of Australian federal campaigns is well established in the discipline of Australian political science. These volumes date back to 1958 (Johnson and Wanna 2015: ix). In this, the 16th edited collection of post-election analyses, a larger editorial team has worked to bring together 41 contributors. This expanded scope, we hope, provides an unprecedented depth of expertise to this key political event by bringing together an interdisciplinary group of established and emerging scholars.

Each of the chapters goes beyond political commentary, being written on the basis of in-depth and original research and analysis providing new and important insights.

The analysis in this volume is divided into four sections.

The first provides the context and outlines key contests in the 2016 Australian federal election. Observing the importance of this volume for the historical record, it begins with a chapter that maps the chronology and provides a detailed overview of the campaign (Taflaga and Wanna, Chapter 2). In this chapter, the authors demonstrate the connection between the disruptive leadership change before the election and the temporal and policy constraints faced by the prime minister in 'setting up' the double-dissolution election. This context is followed by a discussion of the ideological (Johnson, Chapter 3) and leadership contests (Paul Strangio and James Walter, Chapter 4). Both chapters demonstrate a 'narrowing' in Australian political practice: the first highlighting this narrowing at the ideological and ideational level; the second underlining the way political practice has become personalised in the figure of the party leader. With the unpleasant return of the leadership principle and its populist turn in politics at the global level, it is valuable to be able to observe how Australian political leadership is constructed and made manifest today. Finally, in the context of the surprising results in the United Kingdom's 'Brexit' vote and the United States' presidential race, the final chapters in this section examine the impact and accuracy of Australian election polls in detail (Murray Goot, Chapter 5; Simon Jackman and Luke Mansillo, Chapter 6). Given that professional polling is one of the most prominent features of modern political campaigns and the source of considerable 'meta-commentary' on politics by the media, it is important to assess how effective contemporary polling is and look behind the figures to understand how these numbers are constructed.

The second section of the book reports and analyses the results of the election. This takes a number of forms. The first two chapters look at the results in aggregate: first for the House of Representatives (Ben Raue, Chapter 7) and second for the Senate (Green, Chapter 8). Reminding us of the important lesson that there is no 'uniform swing' in Australian elections, these chapters look at those seats that changed hands and those that did not. Given the importance of the Senate in this race and the institutional changes that preceded it, Green's chapter provides

commentary on the outcomes, but also looks in detail at the way elements of the new Senate voting system influenced the result, and how they were also interpreted strategically by the competitors.

Narrowing the focus from these aggregate results, the following chapters in this section provide additional thematic analysis and explanation by examining the way different constituencies were considered (or not) in the campaign, and the impact of different types of electoral grouping on the outcome of the campaign. Two very different chapters examine these topics. The first looks at federalism and regional variations in campaigning and results (Martinez i Coma and Smith, Chapter 9). The second reports on data from the 2016 Australian Election Study (Bean, Chapter 10)—that long-running survey of voter behaviour and opinion that allows both demographic factors and issue salience to be examined in more detail.

The third section of the book explores the campaigns and the impact of a variety of different political actors. Keeping with tradition, we include chapters that focus on each of the main parties: the Australian Labor Party (Rob Manwaring, Chapter 11), the Liberal Party of Australia (Nicholas Barry, Chapter 12), the National Party of Australia (Geoff Cockfield and Jennifer Curtin, Chapter 14) and the Australian Greens (Stewart Jackson, Chapter 13). Recognising their growing role, this volume also includes an in-depth analysis of the key minor parties that were significant in the 2016 election campaign (Kefford, Chapter 15) as well as the independent candidates for office (Curtin, Chapter 16). Breaking with the tradition of previous editions of the post-election book, each of these chapters is written by academic experts rather than party practitioners. Parties' and candidates' campaigning techniques and practices are covered along with the main policy issues they campaigned on, an analysis of their strategies and their respective electoral strengths before and after the election.

Further expanding our appreciation of the electoral arena in Australia and the variety of actors involved, this section also includes chapters on the conduct of interest groups and their motivations for participation in elections (Halpin and Fraussen, Chapter 17), a specific chapter on GetUp! as an electoral actor worthy of analysis on par with many of the parties contesting the election (Vromen, Chapter 18), the established media's coverage of the campaign (Carson and McNair, Chapter 19) and new entrants into the Australian media market (Chen, Chapter 20). Recognising the interactive nature of new media in facilitating and magnifying 'folk'

political speech, this volume includes a chapter that explores the incidence of election 'talk' in everyday online spaces (Scott Wright, Verity Trott and William Lukamto, Chapter 21).

The final section of the book shifts the focus from actors in the campaign to policy issues. Included here are chapters providing analysis from experts in their respective policy fields: the economy (Cahill and Ryan, Chapter 22), industrial relations (Peetz, Chapter 23), social policy (Elliot and Manwaring, Chapter 24), the environment (Pearse, Chapter 25), refugees (Dehm and Walden, Chapter 26), Indigenous policy (Perche, Chapter 27) and gender and sexuality (Williams and Sawyer, Chapter 28). The final chapter in the volume, by James Jupp and Juliet Pietsch (Chapter 29), analyses not only policy issues that surround a multicultural Australia, but also the importance and treatment of ethnic constituencies and issues. Many of these contributors come from fields outside of political science and their contributions cement the richness of the collection with additional expertise and insights.

Overall, this volume provides the 'continuity with change' promised by the prime minister in outlining his intentions upon coming into government in 2015 (Henderson 2016). This has been a deliberate strategy to ensure that this volume provide useful continuity back to its forbears in the late 1950s, while focusing on the phenomena, issues and actors relevant to explaining both the election itself and the political milieu in which it sat.

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