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Conclusion: The Implications of the 2016 Federal Election

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In the year that the pollsters were stumped by unanticipated outcomes in both the Brexit vote and the United States (US) presidential election, the Australian polls got it close to right. Although Malcolm Turnbull had not campaigned particularly well and the party's relentless mantras of 'jobs and growth' and 'innovation' were perceived as out of touch with the concerns of everyday Australians, the poll trends almost consistently put the Coalition one to two percentage points ahead of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). They predicted a close result in terms of the vote, which, in 2016, also translated into a close result in the number of seats won.¹

With the parties within a few percentage points of one another, and the Liberal–National Coalition suffering a period of leadership and policy turmoil prior to the 2016 federal election, the circumstances going into the campaign did not present a reassuring scenario for stability. Would the federal election follow the 2014 Victorian and the 2015 Queensland State elections where questions of leadership (transition and style) were seen as definitive in the electoral losses for the incumbent Coalition governments? Or was the 2015 New South Wales (NSW) contest—where a new, young leader who consolidated the Coalition's hold on government with an

1 This is not always the case. In 1998, the Coalition won 49 per cent of the vote and 80 seats out of 148.

agenda for major infrastructure expenditure leveraged against economic rationalisation (asset sales, administrative reform)—a better indicator of what might occur? In other words, would the elevation of Turnbull, with his contrasting style and policy standpoints compared to Tony Abbott, result in an agenda for change and increased support within the electorate?

In the end, neither scenario was borne out. While the 2016 election clearly produced a ‘new’ government (albeit one with a narrow margin for error in the lower house), we could not describe the outcome as a political victory given the government’s deliberate choice in bringing on an early election over policy issues with comparatively low public salience (Essential Media Communications 2016). Many of the chapters in this book questioned the government’s motivation and wisdom in seeking an early, double-dissolution election, and now one year on, issues of stability and a lack of resonance with the electorate continue to plague the government. By the end of 2016, Turnbull’s popularity rating as preferred prime minister had fallen to its lowest level since he took the leadership from Abbott, dropping 18 points during 2016 to 41 per cent. On top of this, confidence in Turnbull as the leader best placed to manage the economy had dropped below 50 per cent for the first time since he became prime minister (*Australian* 2016). Since September 2016, the ALP has consistently maintained a two-party preferred lead over the Coalition (*Australian* 2018). With little to suggest that Turnbull’s popularity will rise significantly, the implications of the decision to go to the polls early and via a double dissolution may yet prove fatal.

‘Double disillusion’: Some key themes from the volume

As editors, we called the 2016 federal election volume ‘Double Dissolution’ to highlight the lacklustre nature of the campaign, the failure of the election to produce a decisive result despite both houses of parliament being dissolved, as well as disaffection with the major parties and their limited capacity to pursue the policy challenges facing contemporary Australian society. These sentiments are poignantly captured in findings from the 2016 Australian Election Study (see Bean, Chapter 10), which show that, in contrast to the previous four elections, fewer people cared about which party won the election and those paying close attention to the campaign through traditional media sources continued to decline. In

this section of the chapter, we return to some of these themes and, in the section that follows, reflect on the implications of the 2016 federal election for the 43rd Parliament.

A failure to reset: Leadership and policy capacity

The timing and circumstances of the elevation of Turnbull to the prime ministership were less than optimal. Beyond the party's internal machinations, this was true of the longer-term position of Australia in its economic cycle, the medium-term memory of Australians to the leadership uncertainty of the Rudd–Gillard administration and the compressing effects of the short, three-year election cycle at the federal level in Australia.

While politics have become increasingly personalised in the figure of the leader in Australia (Bennister 2012: 161–73; see also Strangio and Walter, Chapter 4), the presidentialisation thesis remains contestable. Turnbull inherited real constraints in taking office. The policy legacy of his predecessor, and the internal political and ideological divides in the Liberal Party that supported Abbott's ascendancy, constrained Turnbull's freedom of action immediately upon his taking the leadership and this continued right up to the 2016 election. Polling indicates that this transition period, perceived as indecisiveness, did his reputation considerable harm (Jackman and Mansillo, Chapter 6), demonstrating that the choices a leader makes immediately upon assuming office can be critical. To some extent, this view of Turnbull as a 'fizza'² reflects a paradox of Australian political leadership: the hesitancy of his first months in office was deemed to be at odds with the aggressiveness with which challengers are required to pursue leadership (as discussed in Strangio and Walter, Chapter 4). What is less visible was the new prime minister's emphasis on Cabinet processes and executive decision-making. While this was the foundation laid for his incoming government, it provided little in the way of visible 'wins' in 2015–16.

2 Coined by the former Prime Minister Paul Keating, but popularised by the Sydney artist Michael Agzarian.

Having failed to use his ‘honeymoon period’ as the new prime minister to announce a significantly new policy agenda, it appears that Turnbull also missed the opportunity afforded by a long election campaign to put a new stamp on his incoming government. Research suggests that the longer the campaign period, the more likely voters will be exposed to a wide range of campaign messages from which they can accurately estimate the true positions of candidates on important issues and the true state of the economy (Stevenson and Vavreck 2000). However, in the Australian case, the 56-day campaign was not employed as a space for a period of significant agenda-building that would serve as the foundation for a new Turnbull era (see Taflaga and Wanna, Chapter 2). Rather, the abnormal election period proved too short to facilitate informed policy discussion and too long to sustain a simplistic economic mantra that was, in effect, largely a rebranding of the core neoliberal orientation of the traditional dry elements of the party (see Cahill and Ryan, Chapter 22).

The 2016 federal election therefore did little to increase the policy capacity of the major actors involved in the Australian political contest. The campaign was also notable for a lack of policy discussion and deliberation in key areas, such as social policy. As Amanda Elliot and Rob Manwaring argue in Chapter 24 of this volume, despite the predominance of ‘Mediscare’, education, housing, health and unemployment were areas in which both major parties struggled to mount cohesive narratives and policy plans. Difficult and divisive policy areas, such as the environment and energy transition, were also avoided during the campaign (Pearse, Chapter 25), in addition to contentious issues, such as refugee policy, which otherwise attracted bipartisan support (Dehm and Walden, Chapter 26). Attention to multicultural affairs and the concerns of migrant communities was similarly muted (Jupp and Pietsch, Chapter 29). Indigenous policy debates, though characteristically low profile, saw an ideological and practical divergence between the two major parties not seen since the 2007 Northern Territory (NT) intervention (Perche, Chapter 27). Due to the salience of the marriage equality debate during the previous parliamentary term and the Coalition’s commitment to holding a plebiscite on the issue, LGBTBI policy received greater attention during the campaign. The ALP held a women’s policy launch, though media coverage was lacklustre (Williams and Sawer, Chapter 28).

Following the ascendancy of Donald Trump in the US presidential election campaign, the prime minister has since seized on concerns about the social impacts of deindustrialisation as a vindication of his emphasis

on employment and economic growth during the campaign (Chan 2016). However, this misremembers his emphasis on *laissez-faire* economics that focused on free markets, labour flexibility (Turnbull 2015) and an embrace of ‘agility’ that others see as the ‘uberfication’ of once-stable employment. As both the right and left of politics are increasingly developing and popularising renewed critiques of neoliberalism, the Prime Minister, once seen as a herald of new ideas in politics (Hopewell 2013), is increasingly looking like an adherent to a dated economic orthodoxy.

Similarly, the ambiguous outcome of the election campaign has also not resolved debate about the wisdom of the strategic conduct of the Coalition in opposition and under Abbott’s administration (Kenny 2016). Thus, in the policy and strategic dimensions of leadership, the election failed to provide a clear direction for an administration entering its third session of parliament. With the departure of high-profile senator Cory Bernardi to form his own party, the Australian Conservatives, as well as Abbott’s continued critique of Turnbull’s policy stances on issues such as gun control, the innovation agenda and the environment, the disillusionment of the electorate appears to have been mirrored in the party room. Moreover, the near election loss has not resulted (within the government at least) in a renewed recognition of the need for caucus unity and party discipline, a necessary requirement if the Coalition is to convince the public that stable government—one of its key electoral slogans—is desirable and deliverable.

Beyond the major parties

As several of the chapters in the volume have shown, the 2016 federal election was also notable in highlighting the increasing importance of minor parties and Independents in Australian politics (Curtin, Chapter 16; Green, Chapter 8; Kefford, Chapter 15; Curtin, Chapter 16). Results revealed the highest level of primary minor party support in both the Senate and House of Representatives since 1949, demonstrating—in part—the effects of major party disaffection and the fragmentation of the electorate. This is further evidenced by declining rates of partisanship amongst Australian electors; though as Clive Bean notes in Chapter 10 of this volume, partisan attachment is still the greatest influence on voting choice in Australian elections.

Outside of the electoral arena, the 2016 federal election campaign saw the prominent participation of a wide array of interest groups (Halpin and Fraussen, Chapter 17) and most notably the online advocacy group, GetUp!, which was able to achieve a level of engagement and influence that surpassed the more traditional interest organisations. As Ariadne Vromen notes in Chapter 18, GetUp!'s success was underpinned by the group's strategic flexibility in combining both digital campaigning with 'hyper-local' initiatives that targeted sitting conservative Coalition parliaments to indirectly achieve policy change by seeking to oust particular individuals from the parliament.

The broader shift to online participation was also highlighted in the Australian Election Study (AES) results, which suggested that an increasing number of voters followed the campaign via the Internet (Bean, Chapter 10), as well as in the chapters by Peter Chen and Scott Wright, Verity Trott and William Lukamto. Though traditional media was still the primary and most trusted source for election news in the 2016 campaign (Carson and McNair, Chapter 19), Chen's chapter pointed to increasing levels of diversity (both in terms of providers and the audiences targeted) within the non-traditional media landscape and online news reporting. Wright, Trott and Lukamto showed the ability of online forums to act as spaces for deliberation and everyday political talk.

We suggest that the 2016 election highlighted Australian electoral democracy in a period of transition. Traditional actors (such as the major political parties, interest groups and traditional media, for example) continue to dominate electoral politics, yet we also have evidence that the range of actors who participate in election campaigns and debate is becoming more diverse, as are the spaces in which politics and policy are debated. Although 2016 was an election characterised by disillusionment, this may well be symptomatic of a transition to a more complex and fluid electoral landscape.

Looking forward

While considerable attention has been paid to the choice of the double dissolution and its implications for the Senate crossbench, the ambiguous election outcome has produced a range of constraints and dependencies on the new government.

The first is negotiation within the Senate. The objectives of the 2016 Senate reform package are likely to be more fully realised only at the next election (2018 or 2019), though the consolidation of minor parties once only used for preference harvesting has been seen in the 2016 contest. For minor parties and half-term Senators, there is a strong incentive to increase their profile before facing the full electoral quota of a normal Senate election. Thus, while Abbott's prime ministership was criticised for his inability to manage the complex Senate (Bourke 2015), Turnbull faces a more difficult and complex set of negotiations, only partly due to the number needed to form minimum winning coalitions for each piece of controversial legislation.

Here, the role of the Nick Xenophon Team (NXT) and Pauline Hanson's One Nation (PHON) will be important, but each has very different political logics (Kefford, Chapter 15). A legislative stalemate cannot serve the interests of NXT, who need to stake out a position in the 'sensible centre' of politics through effective negotiation with government. PHON appeals to those disenchanted with the major parties for not addressing their concerns about immigration, national identity and globalisation.

While the problem of negotiating legislative support in the current context could be seen as a creation of the cartel-like approach to electoral law reform, the established party cartel may serve as the best way the new government has in passing legislation; maintaining the tendency for non-controversial legislation to pass through with the support of both Labor and the Coalition. The ALP has taken its own oppositional mandate out of the election, and is likely to be very selective in what aspects of the government's legislative agenda it will support.

The second complex set of dependencies lies within the Liberal Party and across the Coalition. The Liberal Party of Australia comes out of the 2016 federal election showing its factional make-up more clearly than ever before. John Howard's 'broad church' party (Hollander 2008: 86) continues to diversify, with some of the loudest voices of dissent coming from its reactionary and strongly conservative right. In light of Bernardi's departure from the Liberal Party, and the continued threat of a split from members of its conservative right wing, the government's policy agenda will continue to be constrained in order to satisfy the largely cultural concerns of this mixed group and avoid further splintering (O'Malley 2017). The Nationals, having performed well, have been encouraged to

maintain more autonomy from their Coalition partner. Barnaby Joyce appears more willing to embrace the party's own brand of agrarian populism than was his predecessor, Warren Truss.

The public nature of these ongoing intraparty negotiations is likely to be a theme of the new administration, but disunity may be overstated. Executive political management provides insight into the way the government is likely to focus its attention. Unlike Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, Turnbull has appeared to use cabinet conventions effectively to produce a disciplined executive, both during his first term³ and into his second. But a viable alternative leadership candidate has failed to emerge. Julie Bishop is the only minister to have a 50 per cent poll rating, but she is not sufficiently conservative for many in caucus, and the Abbott loyalists have long memories (Hartcher 2015). Thus, where the above barriers cannot be resolved through negotiation, the government is likely to focus on administration over legislation. Whether this is sufficiently inspiring to convince voters this is a government worthy of re-election remains to be seen.

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3 In return, Turnbull's post-election Cabinet was largely unchanged in its core composition (Anderson 2016), signalling his recognition of the importance of this level of unity to his administration.

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