

Chapter Four

Dealing with Hung Parliaments

The Honourable Michael Field

My credentials to speak on this topic are that I was a member of the Tasmanian House of Assembly for more than twenty years, from 1976 until 1997, at various times serving as a minister, Leader of the Opposition and Premier of Tasmania. Especially relevant is that I was the Premier from 1989 to 1992 during the years of the “Labor Green Accord”.

In 1989, in a 35-member House of Assembly, Labor won 13 seats, the Greens five seats and the Liberal Party 17 seats. Nearly three years later, under the threat of a No Confidence motion, the House of Assembly was dissolved and, in the subsequent election, Labor received just 28.9 per cent of the vote, the lowest vote Labor had received in Tasmania since 1910. Despite this thrashing, the remaining members of the Parliamentary Labor Party asked me to stay on as Leader of the Opposition. I saw my task as rebuilding our stocks, aiming to put us in a position to win majority government. In 1996, there was, indeed, a massive swing. Labor received more than 40 per cent of the vote. The Liberals continued to govern in a minority. This government was short-lived. In 1998, Labor won a majority under Jim Bacon’s leadership. I retired from the House of Assembly the following year.

To put the context in which politics is conducted, I wish to describe some of the increasing pressures facing modern government. The biggest of these is coping with the speed of change. When electricity came on the market in 1873 it took 46 years to reach 25 per cent of the Australian population; the mobile phone took 13 years to achieve the same percentage; the internet only took 10 years to reach the same proportion.

Moore’s Law has been in operation for most of the latter part of the twentieth century and in the first decade of the twenty-first. This law maintains that the amount of computing power doubles every two years. My mobile phone now has about a 1000 times the capacity as the computer I purchased in 1990. Amazon.com is the biggest bookseller in the world; in 2011 books purchased and downloaded onto people’s Amazon Kindle or other tablets outsold the number of books sold in hard copy. There are now 750 million users of Facebook, the social network site.

My wake up call was during the 1990 federal election, when I was traveling with Paul Keating. The national employment figures had just been released. Keating was asked for his response; within a few minutes, Bob Hawke, in another location, was being asked his. The ability to do this was facilitated by the use of mobile phones. A journalist stepped away from the media scrum and received information that enabled him to hone his question to Paul Keating. A small difference in response could have affected the result of the election. Little wonder politicians stick to their lines and stay on message.

The 24-hour news cycle means that there is an unquenchable thirst for stories and a story can be transmitted around the world in seconds. Stories can spin out of control in hours. Video phones and the social media mean that anyone can file a story. Anyone can submit pictures. Personal space is almost non-existent.

Running parallel to these changes are the changes in political identification.

Since the late 1960s, what is called “the quality of life voter” has emerged. Until this time, voter identification was predominantly on socio-economic lines. Simplified, the traditional Labor voter

was concerned about equity issues – participation in the work force and an equitable return on his or her labour. Establishing a safety net was also a core concern with unemployment benefits, pensions, health cover and legal aid under this banner. The right-of-centre voter was more focused on reward for effort, individual freedom and the importance of personal responsibility.

From the late 1960s, the so-called “post-materialist voter” emerged. One step removed from the means of production, and often tertiary educated, this voter took material well-being for granted and identified with quality of life issues. The most significant of these have been centred around the environment.

In Tasmania, the division was particularly marked because there had been a long history of exploitation of natural resources from settlement by Europeans – forestry, then mining, and later hydro-industrialisation. Tasmania arguably had a unique environment. It is not an accident that the first environmental party in the world emerged in Tasmania (The United Tasmania Group). It was formed in order to try to prevent the flooding of Lake Pedder.

Eventually, the “Save the Franklin” campaign was successful in 1983, after the intervention of the recently-elected federal Labor Government. From this campaign, the Greens as a political party emerged.

Parties now have to keep a keen eye on post-materialist voters as they increase as a percentage of the population. It has been argued that the Franklin issue played an important role in the election of the Hawke Labor Government in 1983. Malcolm Fraser tried to neutralize the issue by offering a huge amount for the Gray Liberal Government to stop the damming of the Gordon River, below the Franklin River.

In Tasmania, the 1980s left the Labor Party lacking self-definition. Fairness (or equity) voters left Labor because it did not seem sufficiently concerned about creating jobs. Quality of life voters left Labor because it did not seem sufficiently committed to the environment. Nationally, Labor did not hold any seats in Tasmania from 1975 until the late 1980s and so, having a conflict with the Tasmanian government over dams or forests did the Federal Government no harm in the inner city seats of Sydney and Melbourne. It was at the “GST election” of 1993 (a perceived equity issue) that led to Labor winning all five federal seats in Tasmania.

A quality of life party will now be a permanent feature of Australian politics, with the Australian Greens taking over this electoral territory from the Australian Democrats. Depending on the underlying socio-economic and political environment, the level of their support varied. Highs were experienced in Tasmania at a State level of 17.8 per cent in 1989 and 21.61 per cent in 2010. The Greens received only 10.18 per cent in 1998.

So the face of politics has changed. With fewer and fewer “rusted on” Labor or Liberal voters, there is a high probability that an election held under a proportional representation voting system will not result in any one party holding a majority.

The Labor Party is more threatened by the Greens than the Liberal Party. The Greens and Labor are competing for the same electoral territory. The Greens cannot have the Labor Party appear to be performing too well without risk to their voter base. On quality of life issues, generally the Greens will have a position one or more steps further than Labor’s. Because they do not have to worry about the materialist voter, they can be more radical than the Labor Party on matters such the environment, sexuality and general law reform.

In Tasmania, after 1992, it was time for a serious assessment of where progressive politics was going.

There were two views. One was to conclude that a return to majority government was impossible, that the Greens were to be a permanent feature of the Tasmanian political landscape, and that there was only one way to ensure a left-of-centre government, and this was to find accommodation with the Greens in some kind of alliance.

The other was that Labor’s way back was to shake off the minority image and stake out the ground as the progressive political question and to govern only in majority.

The latter position was adopted. The fundamental question that the Labor Party had to confront was whether a fragmented progressive movement could provide more than short-term unstable government in Tasmania. Was it possible with such configurations to have any more than short periods of government followed by long periods of conservative government? The view was taken that any relationship between the Greens and Labor would be inherently unstable.

The Greens are anathema to many traditional Labor voters. These voters are very sensitive to a change of political focus away from their core concerns.

For Labor to say that it would govern in minority would cause a drop in Labor's vote in its traditional areas. In addition it would be letting the potential Green voter off the hook because they then would not have to make the choice between a Labor or Liberal government.

The Labor Party believed that the only way to long-term sustainable government was to stay out of power if it was unable to gain a majority in the election following its defeat in 1992. Labor declined to go into an arrangement with the Greens in 1996, re-establishing Labor's legitimacy and setting the scene for Labor winning in 1998. Labor governed in majority from 1998 until 2010. At the 2010 House of Assembly election, a hung parliament emerged: Labor 10; Liberal 10; and Greens five.

The situation was such that another election was unlikely to resolve the matter and so workable government had to be formed one way or another. What are the arrangements most likely to provide a stable and effective government in these circumstances?

The greater volatility of the parliament means that cabinet has to be stronger, not weaker. The biggest concern surrounding government in recent years has been the weakening of the authority of cabinet, with an increased centralisation of power in the prime minister's and premier's offices. The processes leading to cabinet meetings – a minister presenting a submission, concerned departments having written contributions presented, a 10-day rule that ensures some reflection by the bureaucracy and ministers on the merits of policy initiatives – increase the chances that good policy will emerge. Cabinet not being involved at all in major decisions, or often simply rubber-stamping deals that have already been made, undermines good decision-making.

Confidentiality of discussions is paramount. Reactive decision-making is much more likely in the midst of a media frenzy prompted by leaks. This presumes a high level of trust and an assumption of a commitment to the government overriding personal or sectional interests – a big call at any time, more so if there is a hung parliament!

There also needs to be a high level of strategic thinking – also a big call with any government given the increased reactive pressures on them. This is more difficult when there are competing interests in the parliament that can threaten the future of the government at any time. Mechanisms to maximize the chances of strategic thinking should be put in place. The Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC), that meets in full session twice a year to discuss major national issues in science, engineering and technology and their contribution to the economic and social development of Australia, is a model that comes to mind.

So assuming a government is to be formed, what are the prerequisites that can increase the chances of success? First of all, there should be guarantees on money bills to avoid the insecurity at least twice a year associated with Supply.

Secondly, there should be an undertaking by all parties involved in any agreement, that a no-confidence motion not be moved, except in circumstances of proven corruption or gross public maladministration. A body external to the parties should evaluate what constitutes corruption or gross public maladministration, with its report tabled in the parliament prior to any debate of confidence.

While this would not stop no-confidence motions being moved, it would act as a brake on those that are moved, but on the basis of political expediency only. It would increase the perceived stability of the parliament and rule out frivolous threats that publicity-seeking members can use that guarantee a headline.

There should be no blackmailing of the future of the government in order to pursue a particular policy issue. The floor of the parliament is where decisions should be determined. The government being held to ransom on a policy issue undermines the credibility of the government and the legitimacy of the institution of parliament itself.

Finally, there should be an adherence to cabinet solidarity. If any member cannot adhere to cabinet solidarity, then they should not be in cabinet. Cabinet members must be able to discuss submissions openly and then come to a corporate decision. If a member cannot adhere to a decision made, then that freedom could only be exercised after a resignation from the cabinet.

Unless these conditions are met, then a minority government is unlikely to go full term and then is likely to spend a substantial time in opposition.