

12/1/76

I have been more critical of Liberal Party backsliding than most, but I do not agree with Kathrine West that a new radical conservative political party based on farmers and small businessmen and an end to the two party system would do anything to overcome the nation's problems.

Such a party would be an effective vehicle for self serving interests. It offers more of the politics which got us into the mess she describes. Political splinter groups always have been, and I presume always will be, populist; their policies ignore even such obvious constraints as budget arithmetic. However high minded their intentions, small sectional parties end up selling snake oil - as the Democrats do. The new party, goaded by the frustration of its supporters, might not be in the least high minded but concentrate on witch-hunts and hand-outs.

The proposal is very different from the Progress Party which never won a seat but seeded ideas which are now changing politics. The Progress Party concentrated on ideas rather than interests.

Political forces regrouped in 1917 to form the Nationalist Party and again in 1931 to form the United Australia Party (UAP). Between 1944 and 1949 the modern Liberal Party was built from the tattered remnants of the UAP and others. People, dissatisfied with the performance of the Liberal and/or National Parties, now talk of another regrouping, but the circumstances are different.

The Nationalists and UAP were coalitions of politicians without much organisation and easily split and reassembled. The modern Liberal Party is a grass roots party with internal democracy, a large membership, reasonably reliable sources of finance and voters who have never voted for another party. While all of these positive attributes have been diminished by time or misuse the Liberal Party remains a solid entity not easily divided and too deeply rooted in voterland to be easily displaced.

The Nationals have long harboured ambitions of capturing the more conservative and collectivist Liberals but they have not been successful.

In almost any conceivable circumstance a new party would start very small and have a long job building itself to a position where it might govern in coalition.

Small businessmen and others who feel that the Liberals failed free enterprise, the family and other values they hold dear, might not see Liberal Party reform as much of an option, but the reform that is happening is more likely than a new party to serve their ends.

The Liberal Party failed in office not, as is often said, because it fell into the hands of socialists but because it fell to the forces of Mush. Believing in nothing it governed for nothing out of office. Retreat from privatisation is evidence that Mush still sometimes prevails.

Liberals know they will have to privatise if they are to tackle slow economic growth. Labor is quietly privatising now; for instance by selling the Belconnen Mall and letting treatment of the tailings at West Australian State Batteries to private contractors.

Without regrouping the Libs are reforming in the direction of what Katherine West calls 'radical conservatism'. Howard, Greiner, Olson, Hassell and Kennet have all tried to steer their respective parliamentary parties toward the market, free enterprise and personal responsibility. Howard, in particular, has shown a tenacious adherence to his line in the face of adversity.

Australia is reaping the whirlwind of fifteen years of, by Australian standards, particularly irresponsible government, but it is not just politicians who failed us. To take the example of foreign debt: the public demanded from, I admit, weak politicians, things which made the acquisition of debt inevitable. Where were the responsible opinion leaders outside parliament?

Good political leadership is not often the practice of defying public opinion, but the art of changing it. Pied Piper leadership is easy while the taxes last. The leadership which requires talent, effort, persistence, knowledge and judgement is the blood, sweat and tears variety, but it is seldom the 'Wellington at Waterloo' variety. Charisma may help but it is not necessary. Neither is it necessary to be a politician or form a political party to change opinions.

What is more, charismatic leaders have a mixed record. Too often they not only spellbind their constituents with hyperbole but fall under its spell themselves. It is perhaps just as well that few politicians have the talent for it and governments, by close attention to opinion polls, tend to follow their public.

Public opinion has already been led away from the permissive hedonism of the seventies. The two major parties will to follow the trend. In acceptance of the harder facts of economic life the Fraser Government was more responsible than the Whitlam Government and the Hawke Government is better than the Fraser Government. I have little doubt that a Howard Government would be a further improvement. They are all creatures of their times, some providing more leadership than others but none far ahead of public opinion. The big question is will public opinion stay ahead of the whirlwind?

A new party would be justified only if the Liberal Party proved impossible to reform at its grass roots. The Liberal Party's lay organisations must command the respect necessary to raise adequate funds and attract adequate candidates. Further the party, by endorsements, determines tomorrow's political leadership.

In W.A., if Hassell does not do well he will be blamed, even though his campaign has the handicap of a lay organisation which has gained a reputation for Tammany Hall power play; it is there that the fault and the possible remedy lies.