

WEE ON THE DRY SIDE 378A-U

That Dreadful Campaign

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The poll has come and gone and we still don't know which party will govern. Mr Peacock's opinion, at about midnight on Saturday, to the contrary, notwithstanding, the fact that we don't know is not important: the great decisions of government will wait a week. It is serious, however, that we voted without knowing what he and Mr Hawke thought about the most important issue, the economy. Throughout the campaign both leaders avoided credible discussion of it. Such has been the nature of the campaign and the outcome of the poll, that neither Labor nor the Coalition has established a mandate to take the economy in hand.

It is ironic that, at a time when many Communist nations are enthusiastically embracing democracy, we are making a mess of it. Our problem is the opinion poll. It has encouraged the fantasy that democratic leaders can be absolved from the responsibilities of leading. I cannot imagine a Walesa, Havel or Landsbergis failing to lead public opinion, but our so-called 'leaders' have abandoned their responsibilities to explain, encourage and cajole, in order to become slavish followers of qualitative opinion polls.

During our election campaign, employees of Mr Garry Morgan and Mr Rod Cameron sought out typical swinging voters. That is, they consulted people who had not made up their minds and may, for want of interest or knowledge, never reach a firm opinion about any of the great affairs of state. Then, they and a dozen or more minders and image makers fashioned the plastic Mr Peacock and the equally plastic Mr Hawke into 'leaders' who would appeal to the uninformed and the disinterested. And we called that process democracy!

The party leaders---who were in truth followers---were advised not to say anything controversial: not to offend any appreciable interest group. Far from trying to win support for realistic programs to deal with the unpalatable facts of life, such as foreign debt, the campaigns pandered to the least informed public opinions.

Because both campaigns followed rather than led opinion,

the party leaders' contribution to public understanding was

little more than a promise that everything will be just fine, but only under us. The tactic did not work even in terms of votes. Voters knew that the economy was in difficulty and they waited in frustration for either Hawke or Peacock to make believable statements about solutions for the economic problems. To give it substance, the Government had its record; but it was a record which, in any ordinary circumstances, would have seen it defeated. Because of poor leadership, the Coalitions' mostly sensible policies, on which it had done so much work, did not come across. It gained ground only because of disenchantment with State Governments.

The public also became fed up with media which were obsessed with leadership style to the exclusion of issues, and which entered the campaign as participants. Mr Paul Lynham of the ABC's 7.30 Report provided an example of particularly bad media failure when he made no attempt to follow up when first Peacock and then Hawke fudged answers to his economic questions. Did Lynham really think that economic policy was less important than, say, demonstrating that Mr Peacock did not know the current level of GDP? Alternatively, was Lynham too ignorant, that is, too ill-briefed, to frame a follow-up question without the help of his minders? There is a strong feeling in Voter Land that blame for the dreadful campaign does not rest with politicians alone.

The lieutenants, particularly Dr Hewson and Mr Keating, were less anodyne and more truthful than their leaders, but the campaigns were built around Hawke and Peacock. Any retreat from waffle and exaggerated claims for the coming Nirvana irritated those who were running the campaigns. Some in the Liberal camp are annoyed with Howard for being truthful about likely trends in interest rates, and some in the Labor camp are furious with Graham Campbell for being truthful about the Green vote. (Mr Campbell's remark to the effect that Senator Richardson would start World War III, if he thought there was vote in it, provided one of the few memorable incidents of the campaign.) Instead, of discussing the accuracy or inaccuracy of the Howard and Campbell statements, the media proclaimed that the respective parties were 'split'. So what! Political

parties are always split---many ways and over many issues.

It does not surprise me, therefore, that the public deserted the two major parties in droves. This, however, has a further unfortunate consequence.

Both parties, by failing to campaign for a 'mandate' to undertake necessary action, failed to establish one, and that is not the limit of the problem. Whichever party proves the ultimate winner, it will have won with only about 40% of the primary vote. It enters the parliament with a psychological disadvantage. Yet it must get legislation through a Senate that will be dominated by bruised losers and Democrats and Greens, who will be high on their own importance. What is more, the consequences of having no clear mandate will be no less serious in the cabinet and in the party room or caucus as the case may be.

We could be in for a period of aimless government. The real leaders in the parliament might be frustrated because they are not seen to possess a mandate for action. They might be unable to impose their wills upon people who, finding the relevant facts of economics unpleasant, resort to wishful thinking.

If only opinion pollsters could ask people what they would think, if they had been properly led---that is had had unpleasant facts as well as pleasant ones explained to them. If only our party leaders were leaders in the mould of Curtin or Menzies. If only the lieutenants had been the leaders. If only the tooth fairy would leave me five cents.

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