

Spare us from by-elections

*John Hyde*

Among politicians there is a cynical saying: "Heaven spare the public from elections". The point is that during elections politicians make promises they know to be irresponsible. The saying applies with particular force to by-elections which rarely change the government but often cut off sound policies.

A Liberal Party document I read recently said: "The goal is government". It did not say "good government". On this account, politics is about getting and holding office---not about using it to overcome admitted serious economic and other difficulties.

Perhaps I should be delighted with the Adelaide by-election result. After all I sat on the Liberal benches for nine years. Howard, who was cheated of an almost certain win when Hawke grasped the Joh factor, has proved he can win. This will confirm his leadership and I remain of the opinion that he is the best likely candidate for Prime Minister. But the way the Liberals used the Telecom-charges issue raises doubts about their fitness to govern. In search of popularity they threw rational economics to the winds. Their attitude smacks of the bad old days.

I am not interested in their fine print. Of course Telecom is disgracefully inefficient and should be broken up, de-monopolised and privatised, but that is not the point. Telecom and the government were proposing to reduce the cross-subsidies which are at the root of the inefficiency and they should have been supported.

Mr Hawke now blames the Telecom charges issue for his defeat. Of course: the alternative is to admit that he is on the run. As I think he is---at least a little. If Mr Hawke's interpretation of the events enters folklore the way tariff cuts did after the Bass by-election and pension means-testing did after the Lowe by-election, then yet another nail has been driven into the Australian coffin.

If the Adelaide win means that the wets and uglies in the Liberal Party get the bit between their teeth as they did after the Bass by-election in 1975, February 6 will have been a bad day for Australia. Rational economic policies, which alone can turn the Australian economy around, will not be promoted by political leaders who believe they will be caned for them by their own parties, by their opponents, and by the

electorate. The Labor Government won't introduce dry policies if it believes the Opposition will discredit the policies and injure the government politically. A Liberal Government won't introduce dry policies either, because by the time it gets elected it will have promised a tropical downpour and will in turn be hostage to a vengeful Labor Opposition.

If elections can only be won by populist scare campaigns, then of course democracy is unworkable. However, much of the time, it works tolerably well because disinformation (it usually falls short of literal lies) is not inevitable. Politicians can afford to be more frank with their electorates than many of them believe. I remind John Howard that, as deputy leader, while Malcolm Fraser was in hospital, he won the Flinders by-election without resort to disinformation.

Politicians would be far more likely to believe in plain speaking if they were not so close to public relations experts whose job it is to put a favourable gloss on anything. The argument that Labor is "professional" because it is in perfect harmony with Mr Rod Cameron and his Swinging Pollsters leaves me cold. The proper role of politics is leadership---and that goes for the Opposition too. Labor does not always follow pollsters' advice but, to the extent that it does, it is professional only in the sense that a prostitute is professional.

The statesman's job is to articulate good policies. When someone does it well the public follows him. When it is not done well, demagogues fill the vacuum and then anything might happen.

9% is a big swing even by by-election standards. 5% or 6% is the normal by-election anti-government vote: that leaves 3% or 4% to explain. 3% or 4% would have been enough to have given Howard a majority at a general election. It is not all attributable to the Telecom issue.

The Mick Young affair or, if it is named for its likely electoral impact, the "Environmentalists Affair" would have accounted for some of the swing. Mr Young and Mr Loosley undoubtedly cost Labor some environmentalist support. Moreover, the issue was not just that Labor took money from a wood-chipping company but that it did so in a clandestine way and that Labor is seen as altogether too matey with big money. If my recollections of John Voter's attitudes are still relevant, he would have been more worried about the subterfuge than about the wood chips.

We should also remember that the swing is being measured from a general election which was affected by the Joh factor that that has now gone away. Had there been no Joh factor the swing would have been less.

The support the Liberals had in the 1975 general election was fair indication that their support in Bass a few months before had been based on more than the 25% tariff cut. Similarly, I believe Liberal support now will prove to be much more enduring than the Telecom issue, which is, as Mr Hawke has said, "dead". But the habit of cheap opportunism, for which Australia is paying dearly, was established in Bass.

I am not saying that the Liberals are without their problems: far from it. By embracing wetness in Adelaide, Mr Howard cost himself the respect of people who, though they found him pretty boring, respected him for his guts and honesty.

If the Liberals abandon economic rationalism, what have they to offer? What is their special claim to government? How can they possibly live on the wet side of Labor? Did they not learn from past failures?

Time charging is not in itself a big issue, but weakness breeds further weakness, and the problems we face are too serious to be left in the hands of cheap populists in either party. My disappointment is the more intense because I thought the Liberals had at last seen the distinction between "government" and "good government" and found the guts to act upon it.

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