

IS THE PARTY OVER?

Peter Andren at a Forum at Old Parliament House, 2 June 2004.

Mr Chair, My Parliamentary colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

I am very pleased to address this question, crucial to the future of Australian politics: *Is the Party Over?*

When The Seekers recorded their hit song *The Carnival is Over* in late 1965 the membership of the Liberal Party was about to peak at 127,000, so for the Libs the party was well and truly in full swing.

On the other hand the Carnival was definitely over for the Labor Party in the wake of the great split of the 1950s. The Labor Party's membership had peaked at 350,000 on the eve of world war two, and by 1965 was on a downward spiral to a published trough of 43,000 in 1967, but according to three separate newspaper reports late last year the figure may now well be close to 30,000.

For both major parties the party has turned somewhat sour and in my humble estimation the carnival is definitely over. The Liberal Party's membership currently stands at around 64-thousand.

The Country Party/National Party membership has remained fairly buoyant up until 1997 at around 100,000, but with the arrival of more and more independent regional representatives since 1996 at both a state and national level, this figure would be expected to have fallen away ... but surprise, surprise not even our forensic parliamentary researchers can ferret out the current membership numbers.

I suspect in my electorate alone membership could well have fallen by half since the late 1990s.

On the other hand, as voters seek alternative to major parties the Greens membership has increased from 1400 in 1999 to 7500 currently according to parliamentary research. Senator Bartlett will no doubt detail his party's membership which the parliamentary library puts at 6000.

There is no doubt the membership of the major parties has suffered a serious decline in the past twenty five years, and particularly over the past 10 years. I say serious with tongue in cheek, for I believe it represents a healthy move by the electorate towards a far more representative parliament despite the absence of highly desirable proportional representation in our house of representatives.

The Prime Minister, in opening the restored party rooms in this place last November admitted the base of political party membership is narrowing to an alarming degree.

South Australian Liberal Chris Pyne believes political parties have an image problem, that there is a social and professional stigma attached to being involved.

One wonders whether the continuing crises ... from the travel rorts affair of 1997 to the travel controversies of 2004 might have anything to do with that.

In his Sydney Papers article of 2002 entitled 'Why people aren't coming to the party' Pyne reckons more and more young people are finding their political interests are outside the ambit of major political parties, which he says concentrate on 'the important big ticket items such as balanced budgets, privatisation, deregulation, low interest rates and competition policy'.

Wait a minute ... privatisation, deregulation, competition policy ... it seems to me these are major reasons why farmers, small business operators and ordinary folk in my electorate of all ages are totally turned off by the major parties. Bill Clinton may have said 'it's the economy stupid', but more and more people are saying 'it should be society stupid', and believe the social dividend has been sacrificed for the dollar.

Recent polls showing widespread support for less tax cuts and more government investment in social infrastructure have been studiously ignored by Coalition and Labor parties in a mad rush to deliver the biggest tax reductions.

Pyne reckons our work has intruded into our lives to such a degree people don't have space for politics. He says quote: 'office drinks, work related conferences, industry dinners, professional development courses and part-time tertiary study have become a part of our after-hours culture'.

Is this the Liberals' 'Middle Australia'? It might be in the trendier parts of Adelaide. In my electorate farmers are feeding the pigs seven days a week bewildered as to why their former Country Party has rolled over on subsidised pork imports, or apple growers battling supermarkets for a fair price as subsidised or fire blight threatening imports are about to arrive in the name of free trade and competition. An electorate where many mums and dads shop with the credit card after work ... no time for office drinks.

Why are party numbers falling? Look no further than the growing disconnect between the agendas (and perhaps the after-hours habits) of the major parties and the needs of the electorate. No doubt we'll hear later a lot about good economic management and jobs for all ... well hey ... let's also ask where careers have gone and why both major parties accept that one hour of work a week is regarded as being employed.

The falling membership in major political parties is not of course confined to Australia.

One definite party member Michael Kroger in an article for Options in April this year entitled "The Decline of Party Membership", quotes a Guardian newspaper report detailing how, since 1980 party membership has dropped by 50% in the UK since 1980, 50% in Italy and nearly two thirds in France.

Is it any coincidence this decline in western political parties has coincided with the advent of economic rationalist policies that place the individual ahead of society ... that places the economic dividend ahead of the social dividend ... that condemns the big hand of government rather than recognising people expect the benign hand of government to play a significant role in their lives?

Is it any coincidence that the internet and activism is having more influence in challenging the excesses of globalisation and the widening social and economic disparities than any party-room or parliamentary debate?

Is it any coincidence the total non-major party vote for independents and minor parties in most parliaments around Australia is now anywhere between 20 and 30 percent, virtually forcing a de facto proportional representation system onto lower houses despite the desperate attempts of major parties to amend electoral laws (and even parliamentary numbers as in Tasmania) to shore up eroding support.

I can hear the Seekers ... still singing ... it's 2024. The last Liberal and Labor member leaves the house on the hill ... arm in arm they're singing: 'Though the carnival is over, I will love you till I die'.

Ladies and gentlemen, The Party's definitely over.