

From the Kitchen

24 November 2010



With elections in Victoria this coming Saturday to elect a new (or old) State government, I am puzzling again on the question of what issues we put our minds to in order to choose who will govern us for the next three years. Of course, in Australia, there are two other layers of government, at the municipal level and federally. They all have elections at staggered times.

I have three basic choices: the incumbent, slightly left-of-centre Labor Party; the right-of-centre, conservative Liberal Party; or the Greens, who cannot form government themselves as they won't be able to win enough seats but who can and do have a growing influence on policy at both Federal and State levels. With our quaint preferential voting system, I could vote for the local Greens candidate and give my second preference to the Labor Party candidate, which is akin to voting for Labor and ensuring that my support is noted for what the Greens are aiming to achieve. Or I could give my first preference to an independent candidate or to the Sex Party.

Whomever I vote for, it will be one of the two major parties that will form government and both are adept at lying and manipulating and both are too close to large industry interests and too easily influenced by industry lobbyists. Both major parties will try to whip up support from voters through empty promises and fear. One such empty promise is the building of a new, major rail link but, when examined closely, it is a promise merely to investigate the feasibility of such a project and to seek Federal funding if it is to go ahead and maybe it will be built in ten to fifteen years. An example of fear mongering is the image both parties are painting of an increasing crime rate and an increasingly dangerous city (where over 70% of Victorians live). Despite the fact that official figures indicate a 30% drop in overall crime in the last ten years, both major parties are promising to be tougher on crime, with more police officers, higher penalties, mandatory gaol terms and new anti-crime laws. The media seem to be slaving as they report these unnecessary promises to make us all safer. Many criminologists and ex-judges have argued and continue to argue that increasing penalties does little to reduce the rate of offences and that mandatory gaol terms lead to injustice and a dehumanising of the court system.¹

It seems that our governments are concerned more and more with what other people think than with developing (preferably long-term) policies that are aimed at really improving our lives and ensuring that we do not make our planet uninhabitable. The sad aspect of this is the people whose opinions seem to be most important to the politicians and the party hacks: 'swinging' or uncommitted people, people who are least engaged in the political process and perhaps least interested in the issues that are important to have clear policies on.² We are fortunate in Australia that we have such a wealth of intellect in academics, commentators, thinkers and writers. What these people have to offer in ideas should inform much of the political debate but, regrettably, it is largely ignored or, even more regrettably, ridiculed by politicians and sometimes by the media.

All this comes together to create an impoverished space in which to bring forth and test ideas to inform government policy. We end up with governments that lurch almost blindly

from election to election, each time asking the most disinterested members of the populace what they (the government) should do next.

I am sure that many people go into politics because they believe they can contribute to our society in a meaningful way, even to change the direction in which we are heading. It must be demoralising for many of them to find that their enthusiasm and visions must be put aside for the pragmatism of staying in parliament and, hopefully, in power.

It brings me, as a citizen and voter, to question what influence I can have on the direction of affairs in this country, beyond my occasional vote. I can and do write to politicians to voice my concerns but I doubt that much happens with my earnest suggestions and pleas beyond the growth of the information about me that is kept on the secret databases of political parties.³ I could become disillusioned and decide that I can make no difference beyond those affairs I know I have some influence over. But I keep working at the politicians, imploring them to take notice of more than that relatively small number of people who don't care.

1. See for instance [The Quest for Justice by Ken Crispin](#)
2. See for instance [‘The Hollowmen’ by Mark Aarons in The Monthly, August 2010](#)
3. [The Age, 23/11/10, “Revealed: How the ALP keeps secret files on voters”](#)