

Ted Mack's launch speech given at the launch of *Against the Machines*

2006

I came to politics some thirty-odd years ago having had no previous connections with any political organisation.

Since then I have had the unique experience of having an independent, inside look at all three levels of government. That experience has convinced me that our current system of government and political parties in their current form have no long-term future.

Rodney Smith is certainly to be congratulated for leading this original research on the history of minor parties and independents. His book *Against the Machines* comes at a time when the political duopoly that has controlled New South Wales for most of the last century has reached new depths in terms of public satisfaction.

Not in living memory has there been a government that so deserved to be thrown from office and an opposition that so little deserves to be elected. There is little doubt people are increasingly looking at alternatives to the major political parties. The development of democracy is essentially about decentralisation of power and at every stage the existing holders of power have fought savagely against it and devised methods of subverting the will of the people.

The altruistic search for democratic systems and ideals reached a high point around the end of the 19th century when the major political parties were in their infancy. It's been mostly downhill since then with the major parties centralising power within themselves and taking a stranglehold on the political system. They must therefore take full responsibility for today's situation. They have, like all institutions, tended to become self-serving. The brutal fact is that the adversarial "winner take all" political system more often than not brings out the worst in people.

It results in the "them and us" "good and evil" mindset to most issues and prevents rational debate. It encourages the development of careerism, cronyism and nepotism.

Negative advertising becomes the norm.

In both the adversarial political and legal systems winning is everything and truth is at best secondary. This is now a serious impediment to civilised society and better alternatives need to be explored. Today the Australian political system hardly qualifies as a democracy. It fails the fundamental tests of democracy in that it almost always never produces majority government and we have an electoral system at Federal level and in most States that does not reflect the will of the people.

Most governments in Australia achieve a majority of seats with a minority of votes. Responsible government is a joke. Executive governments dominate parliaments and accountability is negligible unless independents hold the balance of power as occurred in New South Wales in 1991-95.

For example the current New South Wales government obtained almost 60 per cent of the seats with a little over 40 per cent of the vote. It is therefore no surprise that most governments are generally disliked. Typically 55-60 per cent of people have voted against them.

Many recent major government decisions consequently did not have majority support, eg the sale of the Commonwealth Bank and Telstra, the GST, the war in Iraq, the conversion of a reasonably equal opportunity based education system into one where the quality of education and opportunity now mostly depends on the wealth of parents.

The editorials of our newspaper duopoly constantly propagandised for these and similar minority views, by relentlessly pushing the profoundly elitist idea that what the majority want will almost always be wrong and that governments must take the hard and necessary but unpopular decisions shortly after being elected to office.

I notice that John Howard has recently taken to this defence in the face of falling support at the polls – "I know this is not popular but I believe it to be right" he intones.

This of course is the view of representative government in single-member electorates first propounded by Edmund Burke in 1774.

That "your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion". What the supporters of this view never say is that Burke did not make known this view before his election and that he was later forced by a barrage of criticism to resign his seat.

Burke's view cuts right across the fundamental principle on which democracy is based, ie a decision taken by the people as a whole will be right more often than a decision taken by an elite group no matter how wise.

Of course a representative should not slavishly follow the popular view, particularly in the face of a great deal of distortion by the pundits of the media and thousands of "hired guns" of the public relation industry.

However, if a representative disagrees with the majority view of their electorate it is up to them to put their arguments and change the majority view if possible. However, in the end they should not use their delegated authority to oppose the majority view unless they have been clearly elected on that basis.

Most independents would take this view of representation. It is why they claim that major party representatives cannot represent the electorate or even their own views but must follow the party line. For at least the past 20 years both major parties have constantly extolled the virtues of a free market and globalisation.

They harangue the community that we need to restructure, embrace competition and deregulation. Yet they carefully exclude themselves from these ideas. When competition comes to them they scream, like all oligarchies, that independents are a waste of time.

Over the past 25 years the major parties have increasingly funded themselves from the public purse and, in spite of statements to the contrary, dramatically expanded private contributions and largely hidden the identity of contributors.

I well remember Neville Wran in 1981 introducing the first bill for public funding of political parties in any Australian parliament.

In introducing the bill Mr Wran said the bill would, and I quote, "remove the risk of parties selling political favours and declares to the world that the great political parties of New South Wales are not up for sale. It is a measure for a better democracy, a clean democracy."

Well here we are a quarter of a century later, the second best pseudo democracy money can buy.

We have cabinet ministers selling access to themselves at breakfasts, lunches and dinners. Incumbents encourage financial contributions from developers, clubs, hotels, mining companies and many other well-known supporters of democracy and port elections by entrenching incumbents with vast quantities of public and private monies. They do not need supporters to distribute pamphlets or to meet voters, they can simply take newspaper and television ads, use direct mail and rely on multi-million dollar party television campaigns. This is the major reason why it has become so difficult to remove incumbents in recent years.

Unless there is a massive public mood for change elections have in effect been neutered. Over the same period the public services of Australia have been stacked with political appointments. Political lobbyists, consultants, and public relations people have multiplied exponentially. All largely dedicated to distorting public decision-making in favour of themselves and their clients.

Make no mistake there are thousands of Brian Burkes out there.

Party bureaucracies have expanded with the ever-increasing flow of money all dedicated to gaining or retaining power – whatever it takes, is the rule, as a one-time party secretary once famously said.

Again over that same period freedom from information and privacy legislation has restricted and distorted the flow of public information as has media concentration.

Open tendering is a thing of the past and "commercial-in-confidence" facilitates corruption at all levels of government. Governments now openly buy votes by giving away billions of dollars of public money in discretionary grants.

It is no wonder in one sense that over this same 25 years the independents and minor parties' share of the votes has increased in New South Wales and other States from