REVIEW


The price of democracy in Australia is the democratic election. Our fragmented political society cannot gather itself together to make a deliberate decision. It has to be forced by the party system to reduce its several demands to simple choices. So, despite the extravagant claims to the contrary, a majority vote obtained by a party candidate does not reflect a single-minded party vote. The ballot-box, which is stuffed with folded and crumpled paper bearing numerals and sometimes cryptic messages, becomes the effective disguise for countless interests and principles and the symbol of democracy's failure to devise a system in which a vote can be clearly understood as well as recorded. But the price is not the party system or the ballot box. It is the inability of the electorate to divide into precisely defined parties.

This is inevitable and it does not follow that Australian democracy, having been cheated at the start, is itself a failure. But one effect is that while (or because?) an election appears dull and insignificant the great difficulty is to make sense of it. Some commentators, of course, have few reservations about their perspicacity. When the writing was on the wall by midnight of 22nd November, 1958, the political Daniels were eagerly producing their devastating interpretations of the Menzies Government's record majority. For the psephologist, however, the difficulty presents a problem rather than a challenge. Assuming that the most important question to ask is: 'Why did the electors vote the way they did?' (an assumption which may not have the authority given to it so easily by some), the initial excitement of discovering complexity might give way to exasperation. Perhaps because his analysis of the voting in 1958 is selective, and even then speculative rather than explanatory, Dr. Rawson is enthusiastic when he can find more questions than answers. He has written a useful record of the 1958 federal election ranging from a few pages on the preceding Parliament to the parties, from the policies, campaign and results to the role of the clergy, the press and television. Clearly, Rawson and his associates consider the problem of motives in voting to be an important field for investigation, but their analysis is too thin to do more than show how complicated the problem really is. Nevertheless, the illuminating paragraphs on the Country Vote are sufficient to bear out one of the significant points about voting in 1958; the electorate aligned itself to party candidates with motives differing in kind as well as degree.

Australian historians have much to learn from this conclusion. First, while an election may have a profound effect on subsequent political history, that is not because the Sovereign People, sensing their destiny, unite to make a deliberate decision. The point is obvious enough, but the refusal to take notice of it is in part responsible for the fiction that Labor won 'a decisive victory' in 1910, a judgment which no doubt will be made of Non-Labor's success in 1958. In a sense the judgment would be true if the historian considers the election within political history and does not look beyond the seats won to the voting figures. Decisions by the federal electorate—Rawson's work suggests that 'electorates' might be a better word—are, at the most, made in effect and not with common
intention. The few are left to interpret the will of the many who care too little to be disturbed or too much to regard the vote as their only political outlet.

The second lesson is more important. The electorate does not divide sharply into defined parties and the political organizations reflect this fluidity. Historians of Australian politics will be the last of the academics to acknowledge the fact. Scornful of Burke in most things, they have assumed that his idea of party is present in the political alignments of the Commonwealth and have demonstrated their own conservatism by clinging obstinately to the substance of the thesis elaborated by W. K. Hancock in the early 1930's. Hancock believed that the Australian party system was class based and that Labor, representing the Haves, was the party of initiative resisted by several groups of Have-nots. The reaction to this view has been dominated by the Mayer School of Sydney University. Very broadly, Henry Mayer has sought the key to an understanding of Australian politics in the operation of pressure or interest groups organized at federal, state or local levels and working both inside and outside the party structure. So far the Mayer School has not justified its claims beyond endless repetition of them in a few isolated studies. But it is notable that the School is working from a new starting-point and with an entirely different set of presuppositions. The singular interest of Rawson's work is that, having accepted the Hancock thesis as appropriate for the early federal decades, Rawson discusses the various modifying factors. In 1958 the class system was under attack from two sides: slowly, by Non-Labor seeking the permanent allegiance of a majority of voters which the A.L.P. could only detach by abandoning its traditional character and, dramatically, by the D.L.P. which was nevertheless proving itself to be more Catholic than Centre. Still thinking of party as something more than a framework Rawson has shown that it is impossible to attach simple meanings to the parties in 1958.

The time has surely come for a thorough analysis of parties in Australian politics. The approach must be historical and must recognize that the common bond of groupings may be secondary or, at least, offset by contrary or diverse tendencies within them. Only in this way will it be possible to assess the role of the party in the election and of the election in democracy. And one further point: Rawson is aware that the L.C.P. exists. Hitherto most writers have been bedevilled by an infatuation for the left so that although the Non-Labor parties have supplied a majority of Federal and State Governments they generally have been passed off as 'organized Babbity' while Mr. Barry Humphries remains as the authority on their followers. This habit of thinking and writing must be abandoned before a thorough analysis of the party system can be attempted.

Dr. Rawson is both the psephologist and the historian; together, he is better than one. Contemporary electoral research is in its infancy in Australia and no one is sure of its aims and procedures. It is better therefore to admire Rawson's ambitious sweep than to question the science of his method. Anyway, just as the vote is not an isolated political act, so an election is not an isolated political event, an end and a beginning. An election study which, like Dr. Rawson's, accepts this assumption is on the way towards making a worthwhile contribution. A study which is merely a tribute to the muse of psephology could easily restrict the adoration to the few.

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