

Get
1991.Small Parties in Australian Politics
From 1950 to 1990

BY RUTH CROW

For about one hundred years Australian politics has been dominated by a "two party system" but there are signs that this may change in the future. It is therefore useful to look at the role of the smaller parties over the past four decades. This essay is confined to a study of State politics in Victoria, but similar situations exist in other States and in the Federal sphere.

The Two Main Parties

The conservative party, which is regarded as representing the wealthy people, is currently called the Liberal Party although in earlier years it has been called the Nationalist Party (until the early 1930s) and the United Australia Party (during the 1930s and 40s). The alternative party has always been called the Australian Labour Party. It was founded by the union movement in 1891 and has been regarded as representing the working class ever since, although, in recent years its base in the union movement seems to be losing its strength.

Three Main Small Parties and Victorian Politics

Over the past forty years three main small parties have had some political significance. These are the Democratic Labour Party (DLP), the Nationalist Party (NP) and the Australian Democrats (AD).

These three parties came into existence as splinters from the two main parties. The Nationalist Party and the Australian Democrats are the result of splits in the main conservative party, and the Democratic Labour Party was a split in the labour ranks.

The Democratic Labour Party was formed when the Australian Labour Party expelled the anti-communist industrial groups in the mid 1950s. The DLP have not had many representative in parliament but they have wielded quite significant power through being the force which kept the Liberals in office in Victoria in the 50s, and 60s and have on occasions held the balance of power in Federal parliament.

The "hidden" relationship between the Democratic Labour Party and the Victorian Liberal Party in the 1960s was recently described by Henry Bolte a former Liberal Part Premier. (see exhibit 1).

The Liberal Governments in the 1970s (Hamer and Thompson) did not have the same relationship with the DLP as did the Bolte Government. In any case the popular base of the DLP in the Roman Catholic Church was eroded by the changes in Catholicism through Vatican 2. It took some time for some DLP members to recognise this. (Exhibit 2,)

In the past decade the Democratic Labour Party has not been so prominent in Victoria politics but Robert Santamaria, the main theoretician for the DLP still has a political base in the National Civic Council.

The Nationalist Party (which in the 1930s, 1940s was called the Country Party) is mainly based on representing the interests of primary producers and other people associated with rural interests.

2

There have always been strong links between the Liberals and the Nationalist, with candidates from these parties swapping preferences, or not standing candidates in the same electorate and sometimes a sharing of Government power through forming a Coalition Government. (dates)

The Nationalist Party is, on the whole, more conservative than the Liberal Party (give examples or leave this sentence out)

The Australian Democrats was formed when a senator, Don Chips (check spelling of name), resigned from the Liberal Party because he did not support the Vietnam War. He and his followers also had more progressive ideas on social issue such as abortion and child care. In more recent times the Australian Democrats have campaigned very enthusiastically on environmental issues as well as on peace issue.

The Australian Democrats have not tried to manipulate the political scene through bargaining for support or proposing coalitions. They have earned a reputation for voting on issues rather than being involved in the power game of "swapping votes". This is in contrast to the way the Democratic Labour Party and the Nationalist Party maintain their political positions.

Other small parties which have contested elections in the past forty years.

Probably credit for being the most tenacious small party in the 1950, 1960s and early 70s goes to the Communist Party of Australia which regularly stood candidates who were soundly defeated. Despite these defeats the Communists believed that elections provided important opportunities to popularise its policies. The standing of Communists candidates did ensure that there was some public debate on issues which may not have been raised without such candidates standing. (Exhibit 3)

In the elections since the mid 1970s there has been an increase in the number of independent candidates (not standing as members of any political party but usually with the support of some organisation) standing on particular issues, for example, environmental issues and women's issues and a variety of small radical political groups such as socialists and anarchist. This trend is likely to continue.

New political movements are emerging, such as the Rainbow Alliance, the Green Party and the New Left Party and it is probable that these groupings will support independent candidates rather than have candidates standing on a party platform.

The Future

Two recent elections in other states show that the domination of the two parties may not continue indefinitely.

Firstly the election of "green" members of parliament in Tasmania where they holding the balance of power.

Secondly the 1991 elections to the Brisbane Council (a municipality comparable in size to one of the smaller Australian states) where the Labour Party mayor is supported by some of the the newly emerging small parties such as the Rainbow Alliance and the New Left Party. (Exhibit 4)

Conclusion Although two parties have dominated Victorian parliamentary politics for the past 40 years significant roles have been played by smaller parties. On the one hand the Nationalist and the DLP have helped the conservative forces and on the other hand the Australian Democrats plus a number of smaller parties (which have never won parliamentary power) have ensured that minority issues are kept in the parliamentary political arena.

.....

Exhibit 1. A recent cutting from the Age about Bolte and the DLP when he was Liberal Premier of Victoria which illustrates how the Liberal Premier ensured support from DLP by personally ensuring donations to the DLP.

Exhibit 2. Part of an article from Ecoso Newsletter, September 1991 and cutting with a statement by Dr Max Charlesworth which illustrates how the DLP was "blinded" by its anti-communism and its preoccupation with power so that its members were unable to recognise issues on their own merits.

Exhibit 3. Leaflet about the Crow Collection at the Victoria University of Technology which has a number of Communist Party documents. Unfortunately, on the day of my visit, these were unavailable as they were being catalogued. Thus my information about the Communist Party election experiences was from an interview with Ruth Crow, the donor of the documents who was a member of the Communist Party of Australia.

Exhibit 4. A page from the Rainbow Alliance Newsletter, June 1991 which outlines the current policy of this "small party" on standing election candidates.