

## The two-party system is dead – Hooray?

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Australian students have been taught at school and at university that the two party system that which operates in Britain – the Westminster model - is the ideal type. The model evolved in Britain from a dualism between country and city, Tory and Liberal, to a dualism associated with social class, Conservative and Labour.

The Brexit referendum is the last nail but the construction of the coffin was already well underway with the emergence of political identities unrelated to the Conservative/Labour model. These drew their strength from regionalism and also because of alienation from a society which had become increasingly mixed in race, religion and culture. Leaders of the two major parties did not understand what was happening because they drew their ideas and their political strength from elites which were insulated from this alienation. Conservatives moved in circles of middle-class affluent self-confidence which took their lead from Etonians; Labour leaders had faith in the trade union ideals of the “brotherhood of man” which deplored issues of nationality, race and religion.

Cameron (and Corbyn) both blundered because they could not detect the groundswell of hostility towards the changes flowing from association with Europe, particularly around the issue of unemployment. Cameron believed that his unexpectedly easy victory in the last general election gave him authority to take on the apparent lunatic fringe emerging inside the Conservative Party and to its right in the UK Independence Party (UKIP). He wanted to call the bluff of those anti-Europeans by showing their activism did not represent the wider community. What surprised everyone was that many in the wider community might be ashamed of their xenophobic view when answering public opinion pollsters but would give vent to their prejudices in the privacy of the ballot box. (There may be a lesson here for assumptions about the projected plebiscite on gay marriage).

The two party system is entrenched in Britain by a whole set of conventions based on a two-party model, not least by the method used for counting votes. If the political world is visualized as a binary choice, then it is appropriate to require voters to decide which side they fall on across that divide. Shades of opinion are then left to be represented within the two major blocs. The system has been fraying at the edges for a long time, particularly the edge across the Irish Sea. Northern Ireland has had a multi-party system for most of its history, with nationality and religion complicating class divisions. Scotland belatedly followed suit in terms of a strongly supported nationalist party of its own.

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Unlike the British, the Australian federal constitution was never intended to establish a rigid two-party system – protection, free trade and the labour movement were already political players but states also wanted safeguards. The choice of election system reflected this. There was explicit rejection of the British “first-past-the post” electoral system because Australian voters were not expected to group neatly into two ideological camps. Preferential voting and proportional representation mechanisms are designed to provide political openings for fractions of opinion.

Throughout Australian history, particularly at state level, there has been an existence of minor parties and independents, and even the ruling “coalition” has not operated as a solid front as currently portrayed. The accession to power of Turnbull was only accomplished by making a series of undertakings to the National Party recanting on his previous positions concerning gay marriage and climate change. In ‘realpolitik’ terms, Turnbull functions as a manager of a collection of supporters with varying degrees of enthusiasm for his leadership. To sustain his position he has made numerous concessions on issues he once regarded as central to his own identity. It is grossly misleading to suggest that this is a rock of stability.

On the other “side” of the two houses of parliament, there is potential for reinforcement of an already-existing multi-party system and additions to the range of independents. The exact balance between Liberal and Labor sympathisers remains unknown – the voting record of surviving independents in the last Senate suggests a trend towards conservatism, especially by Xenophon – but this breadth of opinion ought to be welcomed as “representative democracy in action”, not deplored as the sort of shocking outcome visited on the hapless Britons by Brexit.