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The Liberals Face 2023 Lost In Electoral No-man's Land

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Labor is basking in an aura of competence. The Liberals do not even know what their product is any more. Could that change this year?

If Anthony Albanese could call an election for the weekend after Australia Day he would. Now into its eighth month his political honeymoon shows no sign of ending any time soon. Honeymoons can, of course, conclude abruptly. Kevin Rudd's lasted almost his whole first term in government until to his surprise (and the surprise of much of the Australian public) it was ended by Julia Gillard.

Labor's policy program that in many regards is quite radical has so far been successfully smothered with an air of professional competence. After everything the country's been through, the desire of the public for some calm and quiet shouldn't be underestimated. The administration that preceded Albanese (and indeed that in the United States preceded Joe Biden) was anything but calm.

One of the reasons why the [Indigenous Voice to parliament](#) referendum might fail is that a proposal with as far-reaching and significant consequences as it has sits outside the prevailing popular mood. That there is a universal desire in the community to improve the life opportunities of Indigenous Australians is undeniable. Whether the creation of a separate system of legal and political rights is the way to achieve that outcome is controversial.

When just after Christmas the prime minister said of the referendum "How about we give this a crack?" he did so with a sense of resigned hope rather than unbridled optimism. "Let's give it a go" is the sort of enthusiasm that could be applied to many walks of life, but perhaps not to permanently changing the constitution.

For Peter Dutton and the Liberals, the immediate future is less rosy. The party has its lowest share of seats in the Commonwealth parliament in 75 years.

[The Liberals' election review released last month](#) is a perceptive assessment of the party's failed campaign, its creaky infrastructure, and the lack of enthusiasm of its membership. The only thing positive about the campaign the review identified is that at one stage the Liberals were facing an even worse result than they achieved.

Political analyst and former Labor senator John Black was right when he [wrote in *The Australian Financial Review* last week](#) that the Coalition should not assume the voters who deserted them in



May last year will come flocking back as interest rates rise and economic conditions turn. “The advice I’d normally give a prime minister in these circumstances is to keep blaming Morrison. The bloke is hanging around parliament like the ghost of leaders past, and he was loathed by better paid voters who put Labor into office.”

The gloss of his May victory has stayed with Anthony Albanese.

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The gloss of his May victory has stayed with Anthony Albanese. **Alex Ellinghausen**

The Victorian state election result supports Black’s thesis. Electors’ concerns about cost of living pressures don’t automatically translate into votes for the Coalition. Maybe they once did, but they don’t any more. The New South Wales election in March will very likely demonstrate that again.

Know your product

Liberal MPs have praised themselves for the unity they’ve displayed since their election defeat – but “unity” isn’t an end in itself. At the moment, that “unity” looks more like an excuse to avoid asking hard questions about what they’re there for. If the Liberals had a unity of purpose, unity would be a good thing to have – but for now, they’re not quite sure what their purpose is. That the Liberals don’t yet have an official position on the Indigenous Voice to parliament referendum, and may not have one, speaks to a bigger problem.

The Liberals’ review says so politely, but there’s no escaping one of its key conclusions. “Put simply, by the time of the election the Coalition has lost control of its brand, with the parties and their leaders defined in the public’s mind by our opponents.”

The Australian public no longer knows what the Liberal Party stands for. The Liberals are losing votes to the left (to the Teals), to the right (right-of-centre parties and candidates received over 10 per cent of the vote in 71 seats and over 15 per cent in 26 seats), and as the “centre” moves left the Liberals risk being stranded in a sort of electoral no-man’s land.

What former Intel boss Andy Grove said about companies applies to political parties too. “Businesses fail either because they leave their customers or because their customers leave them.”

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