



The Great Divide Driving Voter Disgust

Publish Date:

October 2018

Australians are frustrated, disengaged and pessimistic. There is widespread and growing dislike of politicians, the political process and lacklustre policy outcomes. Australians think that the system is being stacked against them, their communities, families and potential for human flourishing.

[“Public satisfaction with our democratic processes and public trust in the politicians we elect are at some of the lowest levels ever recorded,” Professor Ian McAllister of the Australian National University surmised after the 2016 election.](#) Just a third of Australians are satisfied with the way that democracy is working. Three-quarters think that “our government does not prioritise the concerns of people like me” – among the highest in the developed world.

Australia’s shambolic political predicament is caused by a new divide driven by different identities, lifestyles and cultures.

Inners base their identity on educational and professional achievements. They have degrees and live in the inner-city with professional jobs. They value change, autonomy and diversity. Their



politics is cosmopolitan liberal. Inners are a minority but dominate the upper echelons of Australian society – from politics and the bureaucracy to the media, civil society, universities and corporates.

Outers base their identity on family, community and nation. They value stability, safety, and unity. They live in the suburbs, have low to middle incomes and less education. Outers are under relentless pressure in our ever-changing world. They are marginalised, politically, culturally and economically in today's graduate-dominated knowledge economy era.

In the past self-identifying working class Australians voted overwhelmingly for Labor, and middle class Australians mostly choose the Liberal Party. In 1970, political scientist Robert R. Alford wrote that "Australia's politics have been dominated by class cleavages before and since its foundation as a nation in 1901".

This is no longer the case. A self-identifying working class voter is now more likely to vote for the Coalition than Labor, according to data from the [Australian Election Study](#); many middle class voters now opt for Labor and the Greens. The Inners-Outers divide overlaps and often overrides the traditional left-right class distinctions of yesteryear. Working class Outers who feel disillusioned by Labor's strong Inners focus are increasingly voting for the Liberals; meanwhile, middle class Inners who are disappointed by the conservative political right are opting for Labor and the Greens.

The major parties cannot be all things to all people. The Liberal Party struggles to simultaneously speak to the voters of Wentworth and western Sydney. The Labor Party struggles to speak to inner-city Melbourne at the same time as North Queensland. The outcome is insincerity and opportunism, which drives further frustrations, instability and fracturing across the political spectrum – including voting for the Inner parties, such as the Greens, and Outer parties, such as One Nation.

We should welcome the influence of Inners in many fields. Inners-led campaigns on issues ranging from racial equality and women's liberation to gay rights have made Australia a more tolerant, interesting and forward looking society. Nevertheless, Australian politics is too Inners centric.

Inners have come to dominate Australia's political, economic and cultural institutions. Inners lead, staff and influence both major parties. Since the "consensus" driven reform era of the 1980s, policymaking has become an iceberg. On the surface, politicians, bureaucrats, corporate leadership, trade unionists, journalists and academics – who went to similar universities, live in near identical suburbs and have comparable values – argue about a narrow set of policy options.

Australia is not alone in these trends. The "Inners" and "Outers" are inspired by British author David Goodhart's *The Road to Somewhere*. Goodhart argues Britain is split into two tribes: the Anywheres, the educated, mobile middle class, which values autonomy, openness and fluidity; and the Somewheres, the less educated, more rooted, working class which values security and group identity. Charles Murray's *Coming Apart* identified how America's educated elite are living

geographically, politically and socially separate lives to those who have less education.

British magazine *The Economist* celebrated its 175th anniversary last month by declaring that the liberal creed is on the defensive. From Donald Trump to Brexit, movements are defining themselves in opposition to a “liberal elite”. The association between liberalism and elitism is undermining core premise of liberalism, that all individuals are morally equal.

Inners pursue technocratic and paternalistic governance by the supposedly best and brightest, that is, decision making by themselves. Process is often lacklustre. Yesterday the Institute of Public Affairs and Per Capita released separate reports in conjunction with the newDemocracy Foundation’s [Evidence Based Policy Research Project](#) which found that Australian state and federal governments are failing to follow best practice policymaking – they are making policy on the run without full analysis and consultation.

Meanwhile, the growth and complexity of the regulatory state empowers Inners to make policy in their interests, often excluding Outer voices. Managerialism may have mostly been a technical success – it has been 25 years since a recession – but it has not stopped many feeling helpless, disengaged and governed over. Outers are frustrated and losing faith in a political system dominated by people unlike themselves.

Australia should respond to these challenges in a pluralist manner. Both Inners and Outers are legitimate voices and should be allowed to contribute to the national debate. The century long centralisation of power in Canberra must come to an end. It is time for a localism agenda to empower local communities towards for inclusive decision making at the state, city and local level.

The challenge in the years ahead will be to find and strengthen what unites us. We will be stronger if a divided Australia can learn to live together.

This article is based on Matthew Lesh’s new book, [Democracy in a Divided Australia](#). Take the Inners-Outers quiz at australiadivided.com.

Original Link:

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-great-divide-driving-voter-disgust-20181005-p507xw.html>

Originally published in:

Sydney Morning Herald