



CHRISTIAN KERR

Budget holidays matter, of course.

Canberra local politics barely registers outside the ACT, but Liberals around the country may be taught some rude realpolitik by a group of local party dissidents.

While Western Australia could go to the polls from late June, the next scheduled election is in the ACT, on October 18. It should be livened up by a sudden schism that appeared in the Territory Liberals late in February.

The party governed the ACT between 1995 and 2001. They had the political smarts to hang onto office at a time when their federal colleagues shed 7,000 public sector positions. Their policy settings weren't bad, either. They presided over the creation of nearly 13,000 jobs and gave a significant boost to Canberra's private sector employment.

Opposition, though, has been hard. Like their counterparts elsewhere, the ACT Liberals have been characterised by infighting and mediocrity. Like their counterparts elsewhere they have been churning through the leaders. They are on their third in two years—and no one can pronounce the name of the current bloke, Zed Seselja.

Earlier this year a group of party powerbrokers declared that they had had enough. The Liberal fundraising group, the 250 Club, relaunched itself as the Canberra Business Club and announced it would bankroll independent candidates in this year's election.

There are some subtexts here. Little parties have big feuds. Off the record, some CBC heavies admit that they are hoping to take advantage of the Territory's multi-member electorates to get their people up and guarantee a business-friendly government.

But there are also some ominous signs for the Liberal Party, in the ACT and elsewhere.

'The Liberals can't rely on business support,' one CBC board member told me. 'People give money to the party they think will win.'

In other words, ACT business people believe the Liberal brand is weak—and tainted. The same is probably true in all the states. The federal party's brand has taken a walloping, too.



Robert Menzies' great success involved bringing a disparate group of parties together and melding them into one. The myriad of organisations that attended the Canberra and Albury conferences became the Liberal Party. And the Liberal Party became Australia's most successful political brand.

Menzies' Liberal Party, and the groups it bought together, had two defining characteristics. They were opposed to socialism and opposed to centralism.

In contrast, the Howard government became characterised by big, bossy government that constantly accrued more power in Canberra.

At the election last year, the Liberals were snookered. They could not rely on their traditional pitch. They could not claim Labor technocrats threatened the liberties of ordinary Australians.

The Liberal brand has lost its strengths. Now, it faces dilution, with the demands from Queensland Nationals leader Lawrence Springborg for a new state party.

It's no surprise that his proposal is being resisted. It represents a return to pre-Menzies days and disparate groups of anti-Labor parties scattered around the nation.

Federal Liberal leader Brendan Nelson seemed to stake his leadership on a merger, only to rapidly back away.

As well he might, after winning his position by just 45 votes to 42.

With his leadership balanced on a knife-edge like that, can Nelson restore the Liberal brand?

He set out on a 'listening tour' at the end March, but his very first post in an online tour blog read more like Adrian Mole's secret diary than Menzies's essays. It made him look entirely confused:

One of the other things I've learned is this country makes a caravan every nine minutes. But also the caravan parks around our coastline and throughout Australia are disappearing and I think there's a real need for governments to make sure that there's always going to be a place where you can take your family for a budget holiday. And caravan parks need I think to be protected and we've got to stop developers and people moving in and turning them into money-making machines for apartments and dwellings for people that have got a bit of money. I mean development is good, but I think we've got to protect the things that are really important to us.

Budget holidays matter, of course. If Dr Nelson wants to provide space for caravan parks, I suspect it would be relatively easy. I also suspect it would involve an almighty fight with well organised and well resourced environmentalists and the national parks lobby.

The Liberal brand simply isn't strong enough to wear the fight.

The party mustn't be surprised if people look for an alternative.

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