

# Voting for the leader is next step for Liberal reform

Christopher Pyne



In 2007, the Australian Labor Party successfully created a narrative that the Howard government had lost touch with working Australians. Issues such as climate change and industrial relations reinforced this narrative. During the campaign, this perception was one of the most difficult to overcome around the country.

Regaining the connection with the community will take more than just aesthetic changes to the Liberal Party message—it will require a major change to how the party engages its membership. The Liberal Party needs to embrace participatory democracy.

A political party that is perceived to have lost touch will always be punished at the polls. Every politician will claim to have their ear to the ground—to being in touch with his or her local constituency. Continuing success within the context of a representative democracy depends on demonstrating that the local representative is aware of, and acts upon community issues and concerns. Many politicians rely on constituents or community groups making the first contact to become aware of issues.

But it will be vital to the Liberal Party's future success that it proactively engages with the community—at a local level as well as a national level. A responsive MP is better than an apathetic one, but a higher standard that must be applied is for MPs to be *proactive*. Local representatives need to be actively engaged with their community. The opposition leader, Brendan Nelson, is engaged in a 'listening tour' of the country.

The new century has given us better tools with which to engage our communities—overseas there are many examples of parties that have more effectively utilised these tools than we have yet seen in Australia. Being in opposition gives the Liberal Party an opportunity to embrace internal change. Taking a look at the examples of overseas experience is part of this.

But we must first be frank about the dire situation in which the party finds itself.

Despite holding federal government for eleven years, Liberal Party membership has declined around the country to unprecedented lows. State branches struggle to retain existing members, let alone recruit and sign up new ones. Many of the continuing members are frail and aged. They simply cannot provide the sort of support the party needs into perpetuity.

Low membership levels mean that the party

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has a diminished ability to raise the funds to fight election campaigns, as well as less support on the ground at the local level. And a small and narrow membership also reduces the scope for members of parliament to be kept in touch with local community concerns by their local party membership. Low membership means the Liberal Party's policies being more influenced by fewer people rather than bringing the light of many voices to drown out the darkness of ignorance. The Liberal Party's first priority must be to reverse the evaporation of its membership base. It needs to introduce innovative new ways to embrace our membership and the wider community, and involve people in the democratic process more generally.

To re-engage the membership, all Liberal Party members should be given the opportunity to vote for the party leader. The parliamentary party would select two candidates who would then go to a nationwide ballot. Rather than tailoring their message to the personal preferences of their parliamentary colleagues, candidates would need to travel the country, meeting members, involving themselves in all sorts of issues, and broadening their appeal to a much larger constituency.

Candidates would have to prove their mettle in the glare of national media and they would have to show their energy and capacity to handle a national campaign. The mere activity of running for party leader would ensure that the person elected would be engaged in a way neither major political party has demanded so far. International experience shows that such campaigns also give candidates a handy profile boost as well.

The other important facet of this reform is that it would give the broad community a real incentive to join a political party for the first time. Our elections are increasingly disparaged as 'presidential'—the vast majority of the electorate votes for their preferred party

leader rather than their local representative. Recognising this fact gives us an opportunity to engage them by letting them have a say in who leads the party.

Participatory democracy is the next frontier in the evolution of the political party. The term has been used to describe a number of ways to improve the political process, but in whatever form one is talking about, the fundamental idea is to give more people more opportunity to make meaningful contributions to politics.

In Queensland, South Australia and the ACT, the Liberal Party already gives every member a vote in the selection of candidates for parliament. There is strong support to extend this across the entire Liberal Party.

Giving people a vote for the party leader is one process that makes democracy more participatory in its nature.

The on-going presidential primary process in the United States has encouraged record participation in the party and electoral system. This extraordinary turnout is in part being driven by the intense media and voter interest in the diverse field of candidates competing for nomination. We have also seen an enormous level of engagement through new media, in ways that have only just begun to evolve in Australia. The internet is an amazing political tool that is providing opportunities to network and personally participate in the political process.

Studies are now showing for the first time that weekly internet use has surpassed television viewing. Research released by Nielsen Online earlier this year shows that in 2007, Australians spent 13.7 hours a week online compared with 13.3 hours watching television. In 2006, 12.5 hours a week were spent online and 13.8 hours watching TV in 2006. For the first time more Australians are using the internet as their primary source of news and entertainment. Its interactive nature means

that in order to appeal to people using the internet, different strategies are required than those demanded by the passive medium of television.

Political parties cannot ignore these changes in media consumption, and must adapt to allow increased participation in the process. An internet strategy must become as central a part of an overall communications strategy as television and radio coverage, if not more so.

So long as the Liberal Party is aware of this trend, it can harness new media to its advantage. The internet will allow the average punter to easily become involved in the political process. Parties that engage their membership and have their opinions heard through direct participation will be electorally rewarded. When political involvement is more than a burdensome chore, but something that becomes personally worthwhile, party membership will increase.

In many countries virtual town hall meetings are being held bringing together hundreds and thousands of people online who can then directly communicate with a party leader, minister or MP and have their say.

The left wing lobby group GetUp have demonstrated in a limited way that participatory democracy is something that Australians are willing to embrace. Their claims of 250,000 members would suggest that Australians online are willing to engage in the political process, provided there is a perceived value in doing so.

By embracing participatory democracy the Liberal Party will change itself from the bottom up. It could attract more members, younger members and more engaged members. Such a change would change how policy is developed and communicated. It would bring the Liberal Party more closely in touch with the community. This year is the time to make these changes.

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**What next?**