Four points on federalism

Why ‘passing the buck’ could make good public policy and good political strategy

Richard Allsop

1) National security and the economy are traditional areas of Commonwealth responsibility. The provision of services such as health, education, transport and infrastructure are traditional State responsibilities.

2) Over the course of a decade, the Commonwealth intervened more and more in areas of State responsibility, largely on the basis of its claims that the States and Territories were failing in these areas.

3) All published opinion polls indicated that, until the end, the Howard government continued to enjoy positive opinion poll ratings on national security and the economy, while it was well behind Labor on issues such as health and education.

4) The current eight Labor State and Territory governments were all easily re-elected at their most recent electoral contests. The Coalition federal government lost the Federal election.

In recent years, traditional concepts of federalism have come under attack at both a micro and a macro level.

There once was a time when a key item for the receptionist in a political office was a list that divided every area of government activity into one of three categories—for example, army (Federal), police (State), and dog catcher (local).

If a constituent rang about a matter which was the responsibility of a different tier of government, MPs had no hesitation in referring the matter to the appropriate destination. In the process, constituents hopefully became a little wiser about what they should, and should not, be expecting from the three levels of government.

At some point in its tenure, the federal Coalition government decided that this traditional approach needed to be changed. Suddenly, federal MPs were being told never to ‘pass the buck’ on any issue and to use State, and even local, matters to demonstrate their own credentials as a grassroots member.

Not content to deal with problems raised by constituents, MPs would endeavour to create them. They would visit local schools and identify leaking roofs, or stand at railway stations handing out questionnaires asking people about perceptions of crime on public transport. The fact that schools, public transport and policing were not a federal responsibility in some ways added to the perceived attraction, as it meant that federal MPs could hardly be criticised for the problem having appeared, but could nevertheless claim credit for any attempts to ‘fix’ it.

Huge increases in MPs’ printing and postage budgets exacerbated the tendency, as MPs were naturally on the lookout for local issues to provide content for their brochures and newsletters. These publications tend to be full of pictures of MPs presenting grants to local sporting clubs and environmental groups, or announcing federal funds for a black spot on a local road. Campaigning strategists quickly realised that specific local material was more likely to be read than general policy information.

Most of these projects were small enough to gain only local attention, but sometimes there were big enough sums of money involved, or radical enough policy implications, to attract national attention. A classic example was when the federal government offered $40 million and a takeover plan for the Mersey Hospital in Devonport. While the people of Devonport were understandably upset by the loss of services at the local hospital, it certainly appears that the Tasmanian government’s decision to rationalise services in north-western Tasmania was a logical one, given the availability of medical professionals and funds.

Unlike the Mersey Hospital case, in many situations the Howard government was right in its diagnosis of a problem. Most people

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Whether computers are a priority in schools should be a matter for those charged with running schools—not the federal government.

An agenda which removed areas of duplication, and a federal leader brave enough to say that something is not an area for Commonwealth involvement, might not only lead to more efficient service delivery, it could reduce the scope for pork barrelling and may actually be politically appealing as well.

By its piecemeal involvement in a variety of State issues, the Howard government achieved the counterproductive outcome of making people feel that the Commonwealth was equally culpable for the failings of the State governments in areas such as hospitals. Pointing out failures in hospitals should have been left to state Oppositions and, if the public agreed with their arguments, then maybe we would now have some State Liberal governments.

Unlike the Fraser government, the Howard government has left the nation’s economy in excellent shape. Yet, in many ways, the Howard government’s treatment of the federation is the equivalent of the Fraser government’s failure to deregulate the economy. However, just as in March 1983, when few would have expected the Hawke government to go down the path of economic deregulation, maybe the Rudd government will make useful reforms to the federation. Let’s also hope that, just as the Liberal Party supported the majority of the key economic reforms in the 1980s, the new Opposition takes a similar attitude when the Rudd government surprises us by proposing measures which genuinely improve the federation.

In the week after the election there was much discussion about the Liberal Party acknowledging that it got issues such as WorkChoices and global warming wrong. It would also do well to recognise that its ad hoc assaults on the federation were not only bad policy, but ended up being bad politics as well.

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