

THE AUSTRALIAN

Restoring trust Labor lost is way to sideline Palmer

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN APRIL 14, 2014 12:00AM

THAT affluence can buy influence is hardly news. What makes Clive Palmer different is that he flaunts it. Repeatedly, he tried to seize control of the Liberal Party in Queensland. When that failed, he set up his own political movement.

Now he has bought a seat in the re-run of the West Australian Senate election. That Palmer succeeded was partly a fluke.

As was clear in 1970, when the last separate Senate half-election was held, voters treat those elections as having little impact on who governs. That strengthens independents and minor parties, whose share of the vote soared in that year. But more durable factors are also at work.

Before the introduction of proportional representation in the Senate in 1949, minor parties played little role in state and federal politics.

Excepting the Country Party and breakaway movements such as Lang Labor, only the Social Credit Party in 1937 and the Protestant People's Party in 1946 came close to the share of the vote that would have been required under PR for a Senate quota.

As a result, the Chifley government, in shifting to PR before a looming election defeat, assumed the main effect would be to cushion its loss of Senate seats, thus extending into the life of a new government the upper house power of the outgoing government. That indeed happened, with the 1949-51 Menzies government facing an obstructionist Senate controlled by the ALP.

However, the Labor split and the election of a Democratic Labor Party senator in 1955 durably altered the political dynamics.

From then until its collapse in 1974, the DLP used the upper house as a powerful platform for keeping its agenda before the public.

In the process, the Senate's role was transformed, and by the late 1960s large numbers of voters had learnt to separate their voting in the two houses.

That was the foundation on which the Australian Democrats and then the Greens built after the DLP's collapse.

And, as party loyalty weakened, so the share of independents and minor parties in voting for the Senate rose, climbing from 11 per cent of first-preference votes in the 50s and 60s to 17 per cent in the 80s and 90s and to 23 per cent in the last decade.

That share, however, would not have reached its 2013-14 levels without an additional, critical, factor: the precipitous fall of trust in government. While the Howard years saw trust in government rise, the initial enthusiasm for Kevin Rudd boosted even higher the proportion of Australians who thought government could be counted on to do the right thing. But reality didn't take long to set in, with an unprecedented near halving of that proportion from 2009 to 2013.

That drop was Rudd and Julia Gillard's crowning achievement; but it needs to be seen against a longer-term trend of decline. From 1969 on, each successive high point on indicators of trust in government has come in somewhat below its previous peak.

With governments trying to do ever more, and making promise after promise they cannot keep, disengagement from the major parties has blurred into disillusion, and indifference has more readily given way to anger.

Australia is not alone in that respect. In western Europe, average voter turnout fell from 82 per cent in the 80s to 76 per cent in the first decade of the 2000s, with 11 of the 15 countries recording their lowest ever decade averages in the most recent 10 years.

At the same time, support has surged for movements such as France's Front national, which scored record results in the recent municipal elections.

The result has been a split between the process of government, in which mainstream parties negotiate, bargain and adjust, and the popular voice, which increasingly finds expression in parties that rarely govern and that actively denigrate office-seeking motives.

It is on that fertile ground that Palmer has cast his millions. Nor is there much mystery about the scope of his appeal: just as the Greens attract better educated, younger voters in areas with a high share of taxpayer-funded employment, so the Palmer United Party fishes at the other end of the age, income and education spectrum.

And, while the count is still under way, Palmer's investment in reaching out to that audience doesn't seem to have been wasted.

Rather, applying to the likely Senate composition one widely used measure of effective voting power (the Shapley-Shubik index, which analyses the share of possible voting combinations in which a player will determine whether legislation is passed or rejected), the WA election will have increased the PUP's voting power by 50 per cent.

But claims that will nobble the Abbott government's effectiveness are greatly exaggerated. After all, in the 43rd parliament, nine of the 11 crossbench senators were consistently left-leaning; in the 44th parliament, with its record crossbench of 18, eight will be in the centre or on the Right. Moreover, the Greens are zealots who confuse matters of interests with matters of principle; if anything, the PUP is more likely to err the other way around.

And the PUP will certainly face its share of challenges once the horsetrading begins. Even if "Palmer United" can stand together until the next election, minor parties are skilled at ultimately hanging apart. But unlike Pauline Hanson, Palmer is both well-resourced and an experienced political operative. Unless his business fails, he could be there for the long term.

It would therefore be a mistake for Tony Abbott to count on the PUP's demise. Instead, the best way to marginalise Palmer's sound and fury is to restore the trust Labor did so much to tarnish. If voters choose a buffoon, it is because they prefer the ridiculous to the hypocritical, the frankly absurd to the smugly dishonest.

Only responsible government, that delivers what it promises, and promises no more than governments can deliver, will reverse that loss of faith.

