

THE AUSTRALIAN

Malcolm Turnbull must beware the whims of the promiscuous voter

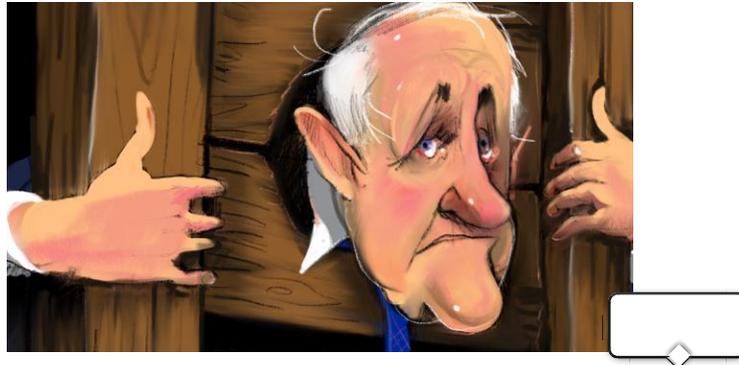


Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM December 5, 2016

Last Thursday, when he announced he would not stand for re-election, French President Francois Hollande became merely the latest victim of the year of political head-rolling. Hollande's fall at the guillotine of politics follows a string of errors and miscalculations that saw his satisfaction rating plummet to barely 4 per cent. But with the National Front fracturing the political equilibrium, it also reflects the difficulties both France's Socialist Party and its centre-right opponents have had in regaining their hold on the country's political system.

Yet the French are hardly alone in spurning the major parties: in our federal election in July, independents and minor parties picked up 35 per cent of first preference Senate votes — a three percentage point increase over 2013 — taking their share of votes cast to a historic high.

That the successive debacles that have dominated Australian politics since 2007 contributed to that outcome is beyond doubt. So did repeated breaches of trust, with Labor's pledge not to introduce a carbon tax and the Coalition's not to adversely alter superannuation being obvious cases in point.

But longer-term trends are also at work. The danger, as they play themselves out, is that our political system, like elsewhere, will find itself trapped in a spiral of poor performance, voter anger and weak, ineffective government.

At the heart of those trends lies the decline in party loyalty. In the 1966 election, more than 70 per cent of Australians had always voted for the same party; by 2007, that share had fallen below half. With few voters defecting directly from one major party to the other, it is the minor parties and independents that are benefiting from the electorate becoming more footloose.

The erosion of party loyalty is hardly surprising. Traditionally, party choice largely reflected social class, union membership and religious affiliation, but those markers of identity have all weakened. And even for the voters who primarily define themselves in those terms, the link between identity and party support is increasingly tenuous.

Adding to the weakening in party attachment is the rising share of the electorate born overseas, which has grown from 18 per cent in 1981 to 25 per cent today. How one's parents voted has long been a major factor shaping voting behaviour; but few recent migrants have a family tradition that maps into Australia's political landscape, making their party attachments looser and less well defined.

The overall result is that each postwar cohort has had a higher proportion than its predecessors of voters not wedded to a major party. With generational change therefore leading to rising electoral volatility, it should have been obvious that the shambles of recent years would cause large swings in outcomes.

To claim that those swings are incompatible with a successful democracy would be absurd. Nor would it be sensible to regard it as inherently undesirable for the electorate to be wary of government. "Put not your trust in princes," the psalmist rightly said, and democracy itself is an institutionalised form of distrust.

But it would be equally foolish to ignore the effects of an increasingly volatile and wary electorate. The more competitive the political landscape, the faster and more severely will errors be punished; governments will consequently be more risk-averse. They will also have even shorter time horizons, favouring policies whose benefits are immediately apparent compared with their costs, all the more so if party leaders are under threat whenever polls sag.

And with oppositions having a better chance of quickly returning to government, their incentives to obstruct and sabotage the government's initiatives are overwhelming, reducing the prospect that reforms will secure the political cover they need to be feasible.

That makes reform contingent on gaining the support of minor parties and independents, but they, too, are at risk of being displaced, and so they demand concessions whose cost, in terms of poor policy, skyrockets with the number of players whose approval must be bought.

Generalised voter distrust then aggravates those problems. Politics is inherently future-oriented but change brings dangers that can never be fully eliminated. A leap of faith is therefore required but it is one distrustful voters are rarely willing to make.

The consequences of that reluctance are far-reaching: entitlements are frozen into place; any substantial block of marginal voters must be overcompensated; existing means become confused with ends and are preserved regardless of their inefficiency

Instead of expanding national possibility, politics becomes entangled in a thicket of shabby deals, vetoes and contradictions — making voters even more exasperated and so perpetuating the cycle of disappointment and punishment.

No magic bullet can reverse those trends, much less set things right. That makes our future more dependent on the ability of the nation's leaders to steer a course voters can understand through politics' increasingly treacherous waters.

What that requires, first and foremost, is an intuitive rapport with the electorate and a capacity to build the goodwill that alone can give governments the room to act.

That is admittedly harder than ever. But Australian voters could be forgiven for thinking that since John Howard left office, governments have all too often seemed like clutches of illusionists who have fed for so long on self-deception as to lose any link to things as they are.

In the process, they have forgotten that reality — in Philip K. Dick's

memorable phrase — is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.

Last week, reality reasserted itself in Paris, bringing Hollande's brilliant career to an unpleasant end. Canberra won't take long to follow. Unless Malcolm Turnbull heeds the warning signs, next year's political environment will add his name to the world's burgeoning "vanitas, vanitas" file faster than the guillotine's swoosh.