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Labor's broader narrative resonates at the ballot box



Illustration: Erik Lobbecke

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That genius of modern politics, Edmund Blackadder, could have had Labor in mind when he said “we in the Adder Party are going to fight this campaign on issues, not personalities ... because our candidate doesn’t have a personality”.

Of course, judging by the opinion polls, Bill Shorten’s problem isn’t that he lacks a personality — it is that he has one the electorate doesn’t like. Yet that didn’t stop voters from backing Labor on the issues in the Super Saturday by-elections.

And however much voters may prefer Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister, the Liberals' campaign, which cast the ballot as a leadership referendum, proved singularly ineffective in altering their decision. That campaign always seemed ill-judged: clearly, the choice was not between alternative prime ministers, as it would be in a general election.

Moreover, it was apparent that Labor could blunt the attack by running hard on health and education, while reframing the by-elections as a chance for voters to express their views on whether public funds ought to be used to pay for increased services or to cut company taxes.

That voters, given that framing, would have voted against the tax cut is unsurprising. The question, however, is why Labor's framing was so readily accepted.

After all, the company tax cuts are not an alternative to funding health and education. They are, on the contrary, needed to ensure the economic growth without which all social goals will be harder to finance and achieve.

Convincing voters of that proposition was never going to be easy. Americans instinctively believe their country's prosperity depends on the prosperity of its businesses; Australians do not.

And the complacency bred by many years of expansion, as well as by a rise in house prices, which creates a sense of affluence, impedes recognition of the risks our economy faces, including from uncompetitive tax rates.

Add to that the furore over the banks, and the government had its work cut out for it.

But if the going has proven as tough as it has, that is because of a far deeper problem: while Labor has a broader narrative within which its framing of individual issues makes sense, the government does not.

Indeed, the government's inclination is to treat contentious issues as if they were merely technical questions rather than basic political choices. Its rhetoric around the national energy guarantee, with Turnbull calling on the NEG's critics to move "past ideology and partisanship", is an extreme case in point; but much the same could be said of its approach to policies across the board. It is true that all governments try to depoliticise their decisions, portraying them as matters of expertise and of common sense. Nor is it difficult to understand why: doing so allows the government to exploit its superior access to advice, helps paint opponents as irresponsible and facilitates agreement across the political divide.

But those benefits come at a high price. Having presented the issues as primarily technical, the government invites a squabble with policy wonks that leaves the public cold. At the same time, because each issue is treated separately, the government's identity becomes blurred, making its policies seem a jumble rather than an integrated package. As a result, voters don't know what it stands for, and how that relates to its plans and actions.

Every bit as importantly, depoliticising issues muddies the relationship between the government's decisions and its underlying values — yet democratic politics is first and foremost about a clash of values.

Thus, there are no right answers to politics' great dilemmas, only trade-offs. Redistribution undermines aspiration and self-reliance; the search for equality tangles with the freedom to pursue opportunity; intervention may seek to correct market failures but introduces inefficiencies of its own.

Successfully navigating those trade-offs requires the consistent application of principles; and, for those principles to cohere, they must reflect core values.

That is all the more important as it is not the details of individual policies that motivate and mobilise a party's supporters. Rather, it is those core values, and the way they are woven into a narrative that — to use Abraham Lincoln's words — tells the party faithful, and the wider public, “where we are” as a party, and “whither we are tending”.

The other side of politics has grasped that all too clearly. Nearly everywhere, the Left has shed the ill-defined “third way” that Bill Clinton and Tony Blair promoted in favour of an increasingly radical egalitarianism. Even the German social democrats, who long hewed to the centre, are moving in that direction, as are their Scandinavian counterparts; in most of the other centre-left parties, including the ALP, the swing has been even more pronounced, veering into a class warfare mentality redolent of an earlier era.

It is certainly possible to criticise that approach on its substance; but it is undeniable that it has broadened and re-energised the Left's base, while leaving the Centre-Right — which has struggled, and largely failed, to respond to the Left's rhetoric of fairness — hopelessly on the defensive.

Lacking any integrating narrative does not just cripple the Liberals in the battle of ideas: it also compounds the problems they face when a policy encounters strong opposition, as the company tax cuts have.

Were they to stick by that policy, they would cast themselves as the arrogant victims of the delusion that if a policy is unpopular with the electorate, virtue requires making it the centrepiece of your program and thrusting it down voters' throats. If they abandon it, they show themselves to be forced by currents they do not control to jettison on one day the policies they had taken as a lodestar the day before.

That is how the Liberals now risk appearing: all sail and no anchor. Perhaps, like Blackadder, their cunning plan is to remind the electorate that with the wrong people in charge, “we'll be back to cavorting druids, death by stoning and dung for dinner”.

Indeed we will. But at least we'll know what's coming.