

Opposition can be nasty, brutish and painfully long

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- From: [The Australian](#)
- January 04, 2010 12:00AM

LIFE in the state of nature is nasty, brutish and short, said Thomas Hobbes. The saga of the Liberal Party leadership makes clear that opposition politics can be every bit as nasty and brutish, without the moderating virtue of being short.

Of course, it is hardly news that oppositions struggle in our system of government.

Debilitating squabbles have characterised opposition life since Federation: inevitably so, in a structure where all the prizes go to the winner of the electoral competition. The question of the moment, however, is the extent to which the opposition, in coping with those difficulties, should sharply differentiate itself from the government.

The answer is partly dictated by the changes that, in recent years, have altered the terms on which political competition occurs.

Traditional cleavages in the electorate have become less pronounced, resulting in a rising proportion of voters with low party allegiance.

At the same time, the technology of politics has become ever more capital-intensive, as the mass media fragment and as many new ways of interacting with the electorate complement approaches based on localised, often personal, contact. These changes contribute to a politics increasingly centred on candidates and personalities rather than on programs and platforms.

This, in turn, encourages greater differentiation between the parties, for two reasons.

First, the proliferation of information channels, along with growing competition for attention, increases the importance of projecting a clear brand image that can rise above the noise.

This is especially crucial for a party challenging a powerful incumbent that seeks to muddy the waters by seeming to be all things to all voters.

Second, candidate-based politics are enormously capital-intensive and expensive.

Incumbent parties can underwrite those costs through contributions from benefit seekers, whose support reflects advantages they derive from the spoils of office: in the case of the ALP, the iron triangle of unions, developers and rent-chasing big business.

In contrast, a challenger, especially one poorly placed in the electoral cycle, has to rely on activists and supporters whose commitment is based not on patronage but on an identification with the party, its history, values and premises.

These activists are aware of the need for compromise to advance the party's prospects by appealing to the median voter.

But they are likely to have strong policy motivations and hence to expect, in exchange for their contribution of time, effort and services, clarity about the party's goals and congruence between those goals and their preferences.

Clarity and congruence in turn lead to sharper polarisation, in the sense of an increased distance between the parties on the spectrum of critical issues.

That polarisation, even if moderate in extent, involves risks, as it can secure greater intensity of commitment at the expense of a wider base of support.

But it also provides considerable benefits, not only to the opposition party but also to the political system. After all, politics is about conflict and how to resolve it.

As a result, some degree of polarisation is inevitable if underlying differences about the choices that need to be made are to find a voice.

In modern democracies, competition for power between political parties is the means by which those differences are articulated and resolved. That competition works best when it is based on what the American political scientist, E. E. Schattschneider called "responsible parties": that is, parties that have distinct, coherent and clearly articulated positions, such that the electorate can identify party actions and agendas, and reward and punish them in the voting booth. Political differentiation is therefore the key to political legitimacy.

International public opinion surveys consistently bear Schattschneider out.

These surveys find that the US and Australia, countries where politics has long been based on competition between two relatively clearly differentiated parties, score very highly in terms of the degree to which voters believe their views are reflected by a major party or political leader, with the US also being at the front of the pack in the proportion of the electorate agreeing that "elections ensure that the views of voters are well represented".

Moreover, a recent joint study by the Brookings and Hoover institutions finds that these measures of legitimacy increased significantly for the US from the mid-1990s on, a period of rising polarisation between the main political parties. Equally, contrary to what elite opinion persistently claimed, in the Howard years, also a period of sharpened polarisation, virtually every measure of legitimacy and of trust in government reported by the surveys increased for Australia.

None of this is to deny that polarised politics can readily degenerate into a spectacle insulting to our collective intelligence. But the reality is that whatever agreement there may have been between the two sides of Australian politics has evaporated into weakened consensus in some areas and sharp disagreement in others. Those increasingly deep differences need to be brought out more forcefully than they have to date.

This is not to suggest opposition for its own sake. Democratic government is never all good or all bad, and the Rudd government is no exception. Kevin 07 embraced reform like a man who had found a long lost relative. But the re-nationalisation of the telecommunications

network, the abandonment of any semblance of rigorous cost-benefit analysis, the capitulation on parallel imports of books, the waste built into the automobile plan and the splashing of billions of dollars of taxpayers' money on bribe after bribe to the Howard battlers, suggest a commitment to reform that too often is merely feigned, combined with a shabbiness of motives that, disconcertingly, is too often real.

Exposing such shams and pretensions is the job of the opposition party. This government is adept at the politics of convenience; the opposition's challenge is to develop an effective politics of conviction.

If that involves greater polarisation, so be it.

For the opposition, the alternative is descent into irrelevance; for the country, it is a weakening in democratic accountability, with costs every bit as great as they will prove difficult to reverse.