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# The Case for Politics

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Paper

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30 November 2006

## **Abstract**

Politics can either be described in terms of its purposes (bringing people together to make decisions for the community) or by reference to the way it is actually practised in Australia today.

This paper focuses on the latter and asks whether the activity in the form it takes today justifies our participation.

The critics say that the narrowing down of political purpose, the self-defeating warfare within parties, media simplification, the politics of personal destruction, and the role of money and power in debate and decision has so corrupted the system that it should be avoided by idealistic people. Rather they should use their own decisions about consumption, water and energy use, transport, investment and life-style to seek change in the world. Alternatively they could become involved in grassroots politics in the community building social capital through local charities, sporting and community organizations.

Running counter to these arguments is the thirst for change within parts of the community, the residue of idealism within the souls of the power-brokers and the role of chance in creating circumstances for change.

Added to those factors is the political space given to political leaders to set agendas and seek changes to party processes, government structures and public policy outcomes.

Organized politics has its defects and limitations but is needed to facilitate some of the objectives sought by the critics (for example the protection and promotion of community life and civil society) and to bring about broader changes in society.

Compromises are inevitable. Change is not guaranteed. Triumph and tragedy tend to follow each other. Personal as well as political challenges are involved. However, if the field of politics is not to be left to the manipulators and the populists those of idealism should be encouraged to consider a political career.

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## The Case for Politics

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## Introduction

To be giving a Public Lecture at the Curtin University of Technology (John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library) fills me with pride.

That my topic tonight is about politics should be no surprise. I have been interested in politics since school when one of my Aunts called me 'The Senator'. For twenty-three years I was a political representative, firstly in a part-time capacity as a City Councillor in Fremantle and then on a full-time basis as the Member for Victoria Park in the Western Australian State Parliament.

I am under no illusions about what a decision to enter politics means. Not everyone is suited. It is more than a profession but slightly less than a vocation. It is the subject of much comment, increasingly critical. Opinion polls indicate that politicians are held in low esteem. With these thoughts in mind I want to examine whether or not organized politics is a rational and sensible course of action for an individual in today's world.

It may seem strange to ask such a question in the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. In many ways John Curtin's career not only answers the question for us but sets up a useful framework for considering the issues.

Curtin was dedicated to the Labor cause and the integrity of the Australian Nation<sup>1</sup>. Through independent study he developed his own views on what needed to be done to secure our defences and was forthright in his commitment to the creation of a Labor Government when others pressed upon him the case for national government in times of war. He was dedicated to Labor unity despite the deep divisions within the party in the 1930's. He overcame personal problems and a degree of doubt about his own capacities to become the greatest of all our Prime Ministers.

John Curtin was both a true believer and a politician. He understood the meaning of compromise but thought deeply about its terms and conditions. Even during the war he was capable of seeing what needed to be done to secure justice after the war. He took his long-term responsibilities seriously even when devoted to the defence of Australia in the here and now.

His career presents a good case for the role of the individual in politics, the importance of party and the need for pragmatism as against utopianism on the one hand and cynicism on the other.

What more do I need to say!

Well, I think there is more that needs to be said, definitions to be given, contemporary critiques to be examined, and the evidence from my own experience explored. Times have changed since Curtin's time, as have the culture and techniques of politics. I trust you will note, however, that some of the questions that Curtin asked and answered through his career are as relevant today as they were then.

### 1. DEFINING POLITICS (1)

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<sup>1</sup> See David Black, "Biography of John Curtin".  
<http://john.curtin.edu.au/resources/biography/details.html>.

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There are two ways we can approach a definition of politics. We can look to its purposes and define it as it ought to be or we can look at it as it is, as it is actually practised in a modern, post-industrial society like Australia.

Let me begin by describing politics as it ought to be, as we imagine it when we think of our responsibilities as human beings. Here the focus is on citizenship and collective action, the coming together of people to make decisions about safety and security, jobs and opportunities, family and education, lifestyle and amenity and other matters deemed important to human beings.

In some traditions the emphasis is on maintaining inherited values and an ordered society. In others it is on freedom and human rights. It may involve direct decisions or it may be based on the sort of representative institutions we see in Australia today. In any nation it may involve centralisation or decentralisation of the powers and functions of government. It may mean more or less government.

When you enter this territory of purposeful activity in the public interest the case for politics is very clear. Isn't this what we believe in despite the differences that exist amongst us? Isn't the democratic ideal we share the glue that holds our society together? There is no better way to illustrate this than to refer to Australia's citizenship pledge:

I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its People, whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect, and whose laws I will uphold and obey<sup>2</sup>.

This is a straightforward and clear statement declaring for democracy, rights and liberties and the rule of law. These are, I hope, our "Australian" values and they embody an enduring view of politics as the peaceful resolution of conflict. Both philosophical inquiry and the study of history deliver a strong case for these values.

## 2. DEFINING POLITICS (2)

Tonight, however, I'm going to move from theory to practice and ask: What is the case for organized politics, in particular organized party politics? Does it support or undermine the values just referred to?

You might say that the answer to this question is quite straightforward. For the generation that survived the Great Depression and the Second World War it was obvious, just as it was for those who lived through the Vietnam and Watergate years. They saw politics as the pursuit of power to protect and expand political liberty and to ensure economic justice.

For many today, however, it is not so obvious. Politics, they say, can be practised by other means - by the way we live, by what we consume, by how we invest, by the impact we make on the local and global environment and by the jobs we take. This view that the personal is the political was a slogan in the 1960's but has become a reality for many people today. It is a view emanating from or consistent with the great religions in that they call on people to live out their values.

What is interesting, of course, is that such a view is in no way inconsistent with participation in organized politics. The crucial link in the argument comes from the belief that politics is so

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Citizenship Act 1948.

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corrupted that participation cannot lead to the public interest. In his Public Lecture "Ten Reasons Why Young Idealistic People Should Forget About Organized Politics" Mark Latham put it this way:

The system is fundamentally sick and broken, and there are other more productive and satisfying ways in which you can contribute to society<sup>3</sup>.

The "more productive and satisfying ways" include joining social movements and helping local charities, sporting and community organizations.

Latham's argument is based on the well-researched concept of social capital and the radical tradition of grassroots politics based on social co-operation and mutuality. This he contrasts with organized party politics and the media culture within which it operates. Latham's approach moves beyond "the personal is the political" to the "politics of the community". Indeed he condemns the trend for people to "withdraw further from civil society and pursue other forms of personal recognition and self-esteem".

Both of these alternatives to organized party politics have much to commend them in that they make the crucial link between personal responsibility and the public interest. We do have responsibilities to others not just in how we live but also in how we connect. We cannot leave these things to others. I'm reminded here of the story told in Ajahn Brahm's book *Opening the Door of Your Heart*. It concerns the Emperor who was not satisfied with the religions and philosophies of his day. He embarked on his own search for the truth and came up with three questions and three answers.

When is the most important time? Now - this is actually the only time we ever have.

Who is the most important person? The person you are with (and if you are alone that is you).

What is the most important thing to do? To care<sup>4</sup>.

Hopefully, then, I have advanced the argument some distance along the track of enlightenment. We are still left, however, with the problem of the ugly duckling - organized party politics and how it is practised today. Not only has Mark Latham on the Labor side given it the thumbs down but many on the Liberal side have said the same thing, most recently John Hyde Page in his book *The Education of a Young Liberal*<sup>5</sup>.

### **3. ORGANIZED PARTY POLITICS IN THE MODERN ERA**

Let me begin with the criticisms that have been made by Latham, Hyde Page and others. A number of headings can be identified:

- The narrowing down of political purpose in a world of machine politics and media simplification,
- Needless and self-defeating warfare within the parties, courtesy of the factions,
- The politics of personal destruction and the loss of personal privacy, and

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mup.unimelb.edu.au/publicity/lathamlecture.html>.

<sup>4</sup> *Opening the Door of your Heart and other Buddhist Tales of Happiness* (2004), pp.112-116.

<sup>5</sup> Melbourne University Press, 2005.

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- The role of money and power in debate and decision.

It is a pretty bleak picture and it is having an impact on the decisions of many to seek alternatives or drop out of the process altogether. The problem is that you can't have a democracy without politicians and you can't have politicians without some form of organization. Organizations are imperfect and rarely held together as tightly as one might imagine. Inevitably there are differences over rules, objectives, strategies and, certainly, tactics. Factionalism is a permanent feature of organized life, often fed by petty jealousy and rumour-mongering as much as it is by real difference of opinion.

Nor has it ever been possible to have politics without those who talk about it, write about it and comment on it. Words are weapons as the great Australian humorist Lennie Lower noted in his famous essay from 1938 "How to Become a Journalist":

To be a working journalist one needs tact, aplomb, a wide general knowledge, an inventive mind, a faculty for quick action, a nose for news, an ear for scandal, and a mouth for drinking purposes. Also a pencil and some paper. The three last items are absolutely essential.

Supposing you are walking along the street and a car full of passengers gets out of control, turns over three times and finishes up in a shop window. The first thing to do is to walk over to the first passenger who becomes conscious and say, 'I represent the "Daily Terror". Would you kindly tell me your name, age, height, weight and favourite author? Are you on a holiday or merely out for pleasure?'

Other things will suggest themselves to you as you go along. Then get into a tram, make straight for your newspaper office and fill in an expense account for your taxi fare.

In writing the story of the accident be brief, yet leave out nothing.

For example:

'Turning over four times (there's seldom any argument among the passengers about the number of times) a speeding car deposited its passengers in mangled heaps in So-and-so Street on (leave out the date, for you're bound to be wrong. Anyhow, the printer will fix that). While the gruesome remains were being dragged, screaming madly, from the wreckage, which was not insured, our representative gave valuable advice from the other side of the street.'

The rest is easy. Just follow on with the names, number of stitches, write 'address unknown' next to the lot of them and then point out the danger of verandah posts and demand that all shops be equipped with cantilever awnings.

That's what is called ordinary, straight reporting<sup>6</sup>.

One can only imagine what Lower would think about political journalism today where all too often opinions become facts as commentary and reporting merge in a swirling sea of cynicism.

This leaves us with the point of it all - the power of government to make decisions, tax and spend, legislate and regulate, provide services and define the boundaries between the public and the

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<sup>6</sup>The Legends of Lennie Lower, ed. Tom Thompson (1988), pp.133-134

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private. Money follows power and seeks power. According to some it is power, if only because it is investment that brings employment and security and the votes that so often follow.

Becoming involved in politics is to enter a room full of vested interests - the party factions, the media tribes and the business fiefdoms. Mark Latham describes these three interests as "the key power - blocs" of modern politics who "like their politicians to be cautious, predictable and easily brought under control".

Is this unpleasant reality and the challenges that flow from it a reason for avoiding politics? Having given twenty years of my life to the endeavour you wouldn't be surprised to hear that my answer to this question is no.

#### **4. A CRITIQUE OF THE CRITIQUE**

In saying this I believe it is important to acknowledge that organized politics is not - and shouldn't be seen as - everything. The alternative approaches outlined earlier are not only valid in themselves they should be crucial features of a contemporary approach to improving our society. Indeed, one of the objectives for public policy should be to facilitate personal involvement in areas like energy use, water use, transport, lifestyle and consumption. We can all make a difference.

So too should our governments encourage community involvement. This means incorporating these concerns when considering broader policies in areas like work and family as well as facilitating self-help, voluntary activity and co-operative endeavours in the economy and society. As Henry Mintzberg noted in an important essay in the Harvard Business Review a variety of economic forms are necessary for the health of the community - privately owned organizations, publicly owned organizations, co-operatively owned organizations and not-for-profit organizations. Of the last three as against the privately-owned organization he says the following:

My argument here is not against business as business; rather it is for balance in society. We need balance among our four sectors, and we need to balance our public concerns as individuals with the private demands of institutions<sup>7</sup>.

Individuals working together can contribute to this and governments should help rather than hinder diversity.

I trust the implication of what I have just said is obvious - being in power can make a difference to the very objectives rightly seen as important by those who condemn organized politics. If you are serious about improving the world power is, as the philosophers would say, a necessary if not a sufficient condition.

I return then to the problem of the machines, the media and the money.

There are many aspects of contemporary politics that ought to be questioned and changed. However, just as changing the world via politics is complex and difficult so too is the task of changing politics itself. We are not just dealing with institutions but also with cultures. We are not just dealing with ideas we are dealing with interests. Such change is made all the more difficult

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<sup>7</sup> Vol. 74, May-June 1996, Issue 3.

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when people of goodwill and idealism drop out, leaving the task of reform to an ever diminishing class of true believers.

Let me now give the idealists three good reasons for staying the course.

Firstly, there are forces for change within the community.

Campaigns directed at changing institutions, structures, even cultures have been successful in the past and will be in the future. Note too that the Internet has opened up the prospects for better information flows and dialogue at an international as well as a national and local level.

Minorities do become majorities and circumstances for serious change do present themselves. To be bold is not always the risky option as my own government found when we embraced the policy of ending the logging of W.A.'s old growth forests, reformed our state's drug laws, and removed all forms of discrimination against gays and lesbians.

All too often governments become so locked into a conservative state of mind that they can't see these opportunities for serious reform when they present themselves.

Secondly, there are usually residues of idealism within the souls of even the toughest of factional operators. This may not be apparent to the outside observer - and I must admit, wasn't always apparent to me! Indeed the very use of the word 'soul' is highly problematical when applied to some of our better known apparatchiks.

Remember, however, that people involved in politics more often than not join up because of their beliefs. Such beliefs may lay dormant, they may be almost extinguished by self-interested manoeuvring and they may be suppressed in the interests of the wider good. But they do exist.

Let me illustrate the argument with an example.

Most here tonight may remember Labor's 1999 State Conference held at the Fremantle Passenger Terminal. It was the Conference that saw Labor change its forests policy. It was a historic moment. Some elements in the party went passionately opposed to a ban on old growth logging. They campaigned hard to win the union delegates to their cause and had a fair bit of success. It was a close vote and the position of Kevin Reynolds' C.F.M.E.U. became crucial. As you would know Reynolds was never truly convinced of my Labor credentials. Indeed he publicly criticised my leadership on many occasions.

Despite the fact that most of his factional colleagues were against my proposed change Reynolds held the line and supported the new policy. Put simply he is a forest conservationist and when the time arrived to display that belief he did so.

Thirdly there is the role of chance in politics. You can never be sure when an opportunity may present itself. Unless you are occupying the crease at the time such opportunities will pass by. Politics requires patience and persistence. Take for example Labor's commitment to one vote one value. It was taken through the Legislative Assembly on many occasions only to fail in the Upper House. We took the principle to the High Court and failed there. On one occasion it passed through parliament only to be invalidated by the courts because it was ruled to be an amendment requiring a constitutional majority.



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Then, after the 2005 elections, an opportunity presented itself with the disaffection of a disendorsed Liberal Member of the Legislative Council who had until May to complete his four-year term. He provided the crucial vote that gave us electoral reform. John Cowdell's eyes and ears and Jim McGinty's negotiating were also part of the story that saw the Gallop Government succeed where its predecessors had failed. How often in politics do you see the unprepared fumble the ball when it is presented to them? Chance is no more than its own description. If it is to be used to good effect you need organization and expertise.

## 5. THE TWO WORLDS OF POLITICS

You may say that reliance on chance, a residue of idealism within the party machinery and forces for change within the community are insufficient to justify a commitment to organized party politics. What about the times when public opinion pushes politics in other directions? What about the compromises that have to be made? What about the imperfections of all who participate? What about the pressures from vested interests and the narrowness and unaccountability of the media? What about numbers as opposed to values? What about working in a system where ideals have been replaced by strategies and strategies replaced by tactics and where the long-term is the next television news bulletin? These are all realities but there is another reality as well and it relates to political leaders and the role they play.

In our modern presidential-type system the focus is on leadership. Associated with that focus on leadership is the creation of new political space that provides for a degree of freedom in respect of both method and policy. Its extent is as great as the political skills of the leaders who exercise it. Freedom is both an opportunity and a constraint. It can be used to bring about reforms. It can be used to insist on due process. It can be used to promote democratic engagement and a competitive economy. It can be used to ensure respect for the environment and concern for the long-term.

It can even be used to promote reform of party processes and structures. Most importantly it can be used to bring the community together despite the differences that result from history, politics and culture.

This room for leadership is the most invaluable space in modern politics. It can give idealism a home and change a chance. It can be used to support the forces for progress and grasp the opportunities I mentioned earlier. It is not a blank sheet on which you can write anything and judgement is needed in its exercise. Indeed there is nothing inevitable about these possibilities and there are many factors working against their realization - outside pressures, the temptations of short-term advantage and political power, the fear of the new and limited support from within.

Leadership itself carries burdens and responsibilities which cannot be avoided and which narrow the time and space for change. Its challenges are both personal and political. Carlos Fuentes put it well when referring to some of the twists and turns that are required to cope with changing circumstances. "Sometimes", he said, "politics becomes the art of swallowing toads without making a face"<sup>8</sup>.

The realities of modern politics, then, are contradictory in their implications for good outcomes in the public interest. Some of the forces work against the public interest. Some work in its favour.

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Geoff Mulgan, "Good and Bad Government", L.S.E. Lecture, 4 May 2004.

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When it works well organized politics has enormous potential to free us from the constraints of the present, to break long-standing deadlocks through negotiation, and to inspire people to think and act beyond their self-interest. It can open us up to the future and provide a check on the privileged and powerful. None of this is inevitable but it is possible.

## 6. THE NECESSITY OF POLITICS

Our world needs its prophets. It needs its saints. It needs its community activists but it also needs its politicians. Someone has to take a lead and put their hand up for public office. For that person there may only be pain and tragedy. With a good amount of hard work and luck there may also be satisfaction and the occasional triumph. Hopefully the world will be a better place as a result but only if those who take up the challenge devote themselves to the means as well as the ends, to the way we do things as well as the outcomes we seek.

However, in response to those who say organized politics should be avoided until party processes, media culture and relations between government and business are changed I would ask: How can these aspects of modern politics be changed without engagement at the highest level? Opting out means vacating the field and increasing the power available to the manipulators and the populists. Pressure from without is one thing but to be successful reformers also need influence within. Indeed there are times when I think that the critics and the critiqued actually enjoy each other's company as they feed off each other in an orgy of self-righteousness and indignation.

Nor, as I noted earlier, is there ever a blank sheet upon which history can be re-written. America came close in the late eighteenth-century when the new constitution was written but even there it was impossible to eliminate significant baggage from the past. Many of those involved with the spirit and ethics of the Enlightenment couldn't find a way out of the moral prison created by slavery.

We live in an imperfect world that is neither a Franciscan monastery nor an Athenian polity.

It is a world that requires organized politics and benefits from a democratic way of practising that politics. All types are attracted by its lure - the straight men, the fixers and the maddies - as Tony Benn once observed. The straightmen focus on due process, the fixers engage in wheeling and dealing and the maddies take the big risks, occasionally winning but most often losing as they plunge into the darkness which is the future.

Politicians who preach order may create chaos. There are no guarantees and certainties. Loyalty and betrayal are political twins and, as Phillip Adams wrote back in 1997: "Every politician is involved in a game that veers between the farcical and the tragic. So much is expected of them, so little forgiven."<sup>9</sup>

But ... it has to be done and it can be done well. Consider these words of Theodore Roosevelt:

'It is not the critic who counts, nor the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doers of deeds could have done better.

The credit belong to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred with dust and sweat; who strives valiantly; who errs and may fall again and again, because there is no effort

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<sup>9</sup> "An uncertain profession most foul", *Weekend Australian*, 18 October 1997.

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without error or shortcoming, but who does actually strive to do the deed; who does know the great enthusiasm, the great devotion; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold or timid souls who know neither victory or defeat.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Fred Chaney, "After Dinner Speech", Australasian Study of Parliament Group, 10 October 1997.