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Is Australia becoming ungovernable?



by Nigel Bowen

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Our lack of faith in politics is spinning out of control...

With pundits widely declaring Tony Abbott's leadership terminal, it's perhaps time Australian voters considered their role in a political system that has quickly descended into what the PM memorably described as *Game of Thrones*-style chaos.

Over the last decade or so, Aussies have fallen in and out of love with John Howard, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, Kevin again and now Tony Abbott. And is there any doubt that, no matter how popular they may currently be, we'd go off Malcolm Turnbull or Bill Shorten just as quickly if they were in the top job and having to make the hard decisions?

The same process is playing out at the state level, with revolving-door premiers and voters showing an unprecedented willingness to turf out first-term governments.

The easy – all too easy – way to explain the parlous state of Australian democracy is to blame the politicians. They break their promises (“no carbon tax under a government I lead”), they stubbornly hold out on breaking the promises we want them to break (to implement a rolled-gold paid-parental-leave scheme, for just one example), they don't communicate well enough with the electorate, they communicate too much and are obsessed with getting positive media coverage.

Personally, I don't think our elected representatives are beyond criticism, but I also doubt they're of a lower calibre than they were half a century ago, when Prime Minister Robert Menzies could spend 17 years running the country, then retire at a time of his own choosing, never having had to endure the humiliation of a leadership challenge. In fact, one could make a good case that today's politicians are better educated and harder working than their predecessors. Certainly they're a lot more diverse in terms of gender; age; and ethnic, religious and occupational backgrounds than in the past, when old Anglo men overwhelmingly dominated parliaments.

Say what you like about the 'pollies' on both sides of the ideological divide; the reality is they've delivered more than two decades of unbroken economic growth and prevented Australia from getting embroiled in any Vietnam War-level foreign-policy misadventures. Do they get any gratitude from the voters? No, they most certainly do not, and whenever they suggest we might need to make any kind of sacrifice – be it paying a little more for electricity to help combat global warming or reconsidering the level of penalty rates businesses pay their staff in an increasingly 24/7 world – we go ballistic. One can only imagine how the voters – increasingly coming to resemble spoilt children – would cope if this country had to deal with an economic downturn or war. Unlike our grandparents and great-grandparents, we're no longer willing to sacrifice our personal comforts for the greater good.

There's an old saying that nations get the governments they deserve. If voters are going to punish politicians who make decisions that involve short-term pain for long-term gain, then they can't be surprised when politicians lose their appetite for doing so. Thankfully, Australia's still in great shape thanks in no small part to the courageous leadership of past PMs and the reasonableness of previous generations of voters. But, sooner or later, if voters don't start cutting their elected representatives some more slack, the Lucky Country's luck will run out.

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