

**BETTER CANDIDATES, BETTER PARLIAMENT, STRONGER
AUSTRALIA: THE CASE FOR PRIMARIES
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[W]e saw millions of Americans registering to vote for the first time, raising money for the first time, knocking on doors, making calls, talking to their friends and neighbors [sic], mothers and fathers lifting their little girls and their little boys on to their shoulders and whispering, "See, you can be anything you want to be"...

A record thirty-five million people voted in this primary, from every state, red, blue, purple, people of every age, faith, color [sic] and walk of life. And we have brought so many people into the Democratic Party and created enthusiasm among those we seek to serve.² Hillary Clinton.

There are those who say that this primary has somehow left us weaker and more divided. Well I say that because of this primary, there are millions of Americans who have cast their ballot for the very first time.³ Barack Obama.

Over the last few months the US has witnessed one of the most fascinating political contests in modern electoral history – the battle for the 2008 Democratic Presidential nomination. If the victorious and defeated Democratic Presidential nominees are to be believed, the 2008 primary has had a transformative effect on participation in that party attracting new supporters, campaigners, fundraisers and workers to the party. While Presidential primaries have been attracting the world's attention there have also been a range of other less newsworthy but still very important primaries for Federal House and Senate Seats for places in the State Legislatures.

The purpose of this paper is to advocate the consideration of primaries in Australia for Lower House seats in State and Federal Parliaments. As in the US, primaries may have a transformative effect on our body politic. They could encourage a wider pool of candidates to stand for selection and the galvanising effect of primaries may bring a new generation of people into the political process.

People, politics and political parties

According to the Democratic Audit of Australia:

Australians don't care much for political parties:

- 55% have not very much confidence in them; 12% none at all; and
- only 9% believe that parties have high standards in the conduct of their internal affairs.

This is reflected in Australians' reluctance to join parties... all the evidence suggests that party membership for the Liberals, Labor, the Democrats and the Nationals would total less than 2 per cent of the population.⁴

¹ Executive Director, Menzies Research Centre. This paper was first delivered as a speech to the Australian Liberal Students' Federation Annual Conference July 2008.

² Hillary Clinton, Election Night Remarks, New York, NY 3 June 2008 <<http://www.hillaryclinton.com/news/speech/view/?id=7897>> at 13 July 2008.

³ Barack Obama, Victory Speech, St Paul, Minnesota 3 June 2008 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/03/obamas-nomination-victory_n_105028.html> at 13 July 2008.

⁴ Dean Jaensch et al, *Australian Political Parties in the Spotlight* (2004) vii.

Political party membership has been in decline for decades. According to Ian Hancock, Liberal Party membership peaked in September 1950 with 197,984 members nationwide and 44,287 in NSW. The NSW numbers grew in 1974-1976 to in excess of 45,000 but have fallen away to 10,000.⁵ In 1950 the NSW Liberal Party membership to electoral support ratio was 7.3%; in 1999 it was 1.1%. According to the party website, today the Liberal Party numbers 80,000 members nationwide.⁶

The general population is no more enthusiastic about the ALP. Brett Evans, author of *The Life and Soul of the Party: A portrait of Modern Labor*, observes:

*Labor's individual rank and file membership only stands at about 50,000 or 0.5 percent of the electorate. In the 1930s and 1940s ...ALP membership got as high as 270,000, about 7 per cent of the voting public.*⁷

So why are people eschewing political involvement and why are political party membership numbers in decline?

In the past citizens interacted with other like minded citizens by joining local community organisations, religious and civic groups like the Rural Fire Service, service clubs like Rotary and the P&C. People joined political parties or various leagues (like the Australian Women's National League or the Australian Natives Association) as a way of expressing their political views. People were engaged in their society not only because it gave them a sense of purpose but because attending meetings and participating in debates was a way of finding out about the current state of the world. It was also a form of entertainment. Television changed civic participation and weakened all these groups - people no longer needed to leave the house for news or entertainment and so they stayed away from civic organisations.

As people stopped attending meetings and being involved in political parties, as the cold war ended and Labor rejected many of their policy shibboleths, party identification declined. People are now less likely to always vote for the same political party than they were one or two generations ago.⁸

Today when people do attend political meetings, often the political party structures work against the encouragement of interested participants. Party meetings are often procedural and boring and because parties operate on a delegate system, individual members often do not get a say in the running of the party or its policy development.

⁵ Ian Hancock, *The Liberals; the NSW Division 1945-2000* (2007) 3.

⁶ < <http://www.liberal.org.au/about/ourstructure.php> > at 13 July 2008.

⁷ Brett Evans, *The Life and Soul of the Party: A portrait of Modern Labor*, (2001) 28.

⁸ See for example John Howard, "Keynote Address" (Speech delivered at the International Democratic Union Luncheon, Ronald Reagan Building, Washington DC, 10 June 2002). < [http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4441.0Media%20Release2006?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4441.0&issue=2006&num=&view="](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4441.0Media%20Release2006?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4441.0&issue=2006&num=&view=) > at 13 July 2008. Howard observes "When I first joined the Liberal Party in the late 1950s and was active in campaigns in the early 60s, I used to think the Australian electorate divided on a sort of 40, 40, 20 basis – 40% always voted Labor, 40% always voted Liberal and we had 20% that would move around in the middle. I now have the sense that we divide on a sort of 30, 30, 40 basis. That the number of committed people on both sides of politics now is less."

The behaviour and ethics of some of the more involved party members is also a turn off. Take, for example, the description of a Labor preselection contest in 1989 in the NSW State seat of Liverpool:

On February 11, the night of the ballot, [Mark] Latham's sure win turned into a deadlock: he had 48 votes and so too did Paul Lynch, a local solicitor. Twenty-nine disputed votes would decide the preselection. What made matters worse was that a scuffle broke out as both factions tried to put their own padlocks and wax seals on the box containing the disputed ballots.

The right-wing returning officer then seized the box, leapt into his car and drove for hours around Sydney with a left-winger in pursuit 'at speeds understood to be brisk.'⁹

John Hyde Page's *The Education of a Young Liberal* provides a comparable set of scenarios from the other side of politics. Add to all of this the Australian general cynicism about politics and it is possible to conclude that all of these factors have contributed to a decline in party membership and involvement.

But things are changing. The internet is changing the nature of civil society for the better. Political organisations are becoming more network based. The internet and in particular social networking sites like Facebook are providing new ways of bringing new people from around Australia into the political process. The success of internet based political networks, the growth of mass member left wing protest organisations like *Get UP!* and the rise in civic participation in volunteer groups¹⁰ demonstrate that Australians are looking to reengage in civil society and have a greater say in public affairs through new networks and new media.

And yet, at the very time when there seems to be an increase in the level of interest Australians are displaying in the political process, some political parties are opting to make their processes and affairs less participatory. At a time when Australians want more of a say, the NSW ALP is giving them less of a say in candidate selection.

Through a combination of Labor's N40 "emergency" preselection rule and National Executive preselections there is a declining number of preselections where rank and file ALP members have any say. Ten federal ALP candidates or MPs, based in NSW, were preselected from a very small franchise of the National Executive or NSW Administrative Committee (between 20 and 40 preselectors) including: Maxine McKew, Peter Garrett, Jennie George, Sharon Bird, Greg Combet, Jason Clare, David Bradbury, Julia Irwin, George Newhouse and Belinda Neal. Mike Kelly and Greg Holland won their preselections as a result of factional deals. The large number of candidates selected in this way demonstrates that what Mark Latham described as "six union secretaries sitting around a Chinese restaurant table planning the future for everyone else", has become the standard method of preselecting Labor candidates.

⁹ Quoted in Barry Donovan, *Mark Latham: the Circuitbreaker*, (2004) 24-25.

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics "More Than 5 Million Australians Do Volunteer Work" (Press Release 9 July 2007)

<<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4441.0Media%20Release2006?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4441.0&issue=2006&num=&view=>> at 13 July 2008. The ABS reported the percentage of Australians volunteering rose from 24% in 1995 to 34% in 2006.

Labor's problems with George Newhouse and Belinda Neal indicate that limiting the franchise does not always lead to better candidates.

Elite decision making in the ALP is a far cry from the major centre left party in the United States – the Democratic Party – whose Presidential primaries attracted 35 million voters (or around 11% of the total US population). Translate this figure to Australia the equivalent would be 2.3 million people - voting in one party's primary alone – a far cry from between 20 and 40 people.

It would be needlessly partisan for me to suggest that this is a problem for Labor alone. Liberal Party preselection systems do not always throw up the best candidates or the most just results either. Perhaps Liberal Party structures are preventing quality candidates from considering putting their names forward for preselection because they think that the odds are stacked against them. Status and pay alone do not explain why the Party that at one time boasted four QCs¹¹ in its Parliamentary ranks has not selected a new practising silk for fifteen years to represent it in the House of Representatives.¹² While a party's success should not be measured by the number of senior barristers in its ranks – and indeed some senior barristers have made poor politicians – the absence of distinguished professionals is a problem for the party. The Liberal case is often under siege from the media, academics and other commentators. That is why Liberals need the most articulate, brightest and thoughtful people available to put and defend their case.

All of this is not to deny that the contest for parliamentary seats should be competitive - or that someone who has no commitment to a party, its philosophy or its values should be able to walk up and take a seat, but the processes needs to be more fair and transparent and allow all candidates an even chance to participate. There is a trend towards greater participation in the Liberal Party, with the ACT, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania adopting plebiscites of their membership to preselect candidates. And while plebiscites are a step in the right direction there is more that can be done to reinvigorate the political process and address some of these concerns. One of the things that can be done is to consider the adoption of primaries.

What is a primary

A primary is essentially a method of preselecting candidates via a ballot similar to a general election. Primaries originated in the US during the so-called Progressive era (1890s-1920s), an era of social and political reform. Primaries were introduced as a way of removing control of candidate selection from Party bosses who ran the local party machines.

The machine's political power arose out of the loyalty of voters to it, a loyalty purchased by the help given by the machine to its heavily immigrant electorate in coping with the vicissitudes of urban American life. In return for these services the machine gained substantial electoral support, which was frequently enhanced by a degree of corrupt voting practices. It controlled the

¹¹ In 1972 the Liberal Party was represented by Hon Tom Hughes QC (Berowra), Hon Nigel Bowen QC (Parramatta), Hon Billy Snedden QC (Bruce) and Senator Hon Ivor Greenwood QC.

¹² Daryl Williams AM QC was selected to represent Tangney in 1993.

process of party nomination and usually had little difficulty in winning the November election for its chosen candidate...Bosses were the inhabitants of the smoke filled rooms...They could deliver votes...Consequently they were courted by candidates and rewarded by presidents.¹³

By pressing for primaries Progressives sought to 'end the widespread corruption and venality' in American politics 'which they blamed on the power of the political machines.'¹⁴ Today almost all American States have some form of primary system. The rapidly modernising UK Conservative Party has also begun using them. They were used in the selection of Boris Johnson as a candidate in the London Mayoral elections. In that primary around 20,000 Londoners voted. People who were not party members registered beforehand via sms.

There are a range of different primary systems. At the one extreme are some primaries are known as "open primaries". In this system a voter may vote for any candidate regardless of whether the voter is a party member or supporter. For instance the State of Virginia holds open primaries where voters may vote in either the Republican or Democratic primary but not in both. At the other end of the spectrum is the "closed primary" in which only party members or supporters may vote. This is the system in New Jersey. There are many other combinations. In Massachusetts, for instance, the ballot is semi-closed, in that voters who are registered for a particular political party must take that party's ballot paper but independents can choose which party's primary ballot paper they would like.

Some Advantages of the Primary System

Open and transparent

Primaries are open and transparent. The public can see the method by which a candidate is selected. Faceless party bosses no longer make a decision on who the candidate will be. This is particularly important in "safe" seats where, because the seat is unlikely to be won by the other party, the contest to be the incumbent party's nominee is often a more significant choice than the contest at the general election. Primaries give a candidate greater legitimacy because a candidate is selected by the majority of supporters in an electorate not just by the people who are delegates of members of the political party.

Increased transparency would reduce the number of media stories about internal party machinations and internecine party battles. In a country which selects its candidates behind closed doors, the secrecy involved understandably goads the media into taking a greater interest in candidate selection. Often media reporting of these issues can be misinformed by aggrieved parties' selective and strategic leaking. This can cause collateral damage to the party as a whole. Demystify the preselection process for the public should lead to a reduction of these inaccurate stories as the media can more readily observe the working of the selection campaigns first hand.

A primary system tests a potential candidate and provides greater scrutiny than they might otherwise undergo behind closed doors in a preselection. The primary provides

¹³ Richard Maidment and Anthony McGrew, *The American Political Process* (2nd ed, 1991) 126.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 127.

a party with a better idea of how a candidate might fare in a general election campaign.

A primary system also indicates to the general public that the party is prepared to be open to all comers and outward-looking. It provides potential outreach for the party to the broader community and an opportunity to introduce a broader range of people to the party's values. If individuals can have a direct say in choosing the candidate they may take a greater interest and become involved in the activities of the party.

Level playing field

Primaries create a level playing field. They treat the conscientious campaign worker, the community stalwart and the successful businessperson equally. All three types of candidates have a real contribution to make to our parliament and our national life. Primaries give each the same chance at becoming a parliamentary representative. Some structural factors in political parties prevent candidates from considering standing for preselection. In certain seats one or a small number of candidates may "have the numbers": this discourages potential candidates from attempting preselection. Australia is therefore potentially denied a range of people who might make very good parliamentarians or ministers: because they have not lived and breathed the internal affairs of their party they are prevented from being seriously considered as candidates.

Increase the franchise

A candidate has more legitimacy if he or she is selected by a larger number of people in an electorate than a smaller number of people. Extending the franchise makes it more difficult for party bosses to "control" votes.

Extending the franchise encourages supporters to become more involved in the party. Campaigners who have engaged in doorknocking will have had the experience of visiting electors whose response is "You don't have to worry about me mate. I always vote for your party". These party supporters are potential primary voters. The challenge is to encourage them to become more involved in the party. Turning supporters into members was the challenge of a number of flagging AFL clubs who successfully turned their fortunes and finances around. In the past fifteen years AFL membership has ballooned to around half a million members. The challenge for political parties is not dissimilar. The hive of activity generated by a primary may help encourage more supporters to become members.

Increased community awareness of a candidate

One of the key challenges for a political candidate is to become better known in the local community. A primary might assist in this process, particularly in a marginal seat. A primary may help a candidate achieve longer and more sustained media coverage. At least for the first few primaries there will be increased media interest in the process and a candidate who can successfully take advantage of this will be rewarded. Added scrutiny presented by a primary also allows parties to test candidates in a simulated campaign. The party is able to ascertain the candidate's political skills

Finally if the primary is successful it will give whichever party tries it first a real advantage because their candidate will be well known, have already been subjected to scrutiny and have an established supporter network well in advance of polling day.

How a primary might work

There is a range of permutations and combinations for establishing a primary system. I want to outline one potential method for implementing primaries in Australia. A primary has three phases:

- Nomination
- Campaign and
- Primary election day

Candidate nomination and scrutiny

In order for a candidate to be considered for selection he or she would need to be nominated by a prescribed number of branch members in the electorate in which they were seeking selection. One option might be to allow local party members to nominate more than one candidate because they wanted to see a contest. Candidates would then be scrutinised by the State Executive/ Administrative Committee. The State Executive/ Administrative Committee would determine whether the candidate would be allowed to proceed to the next stage. Candidates would need to cooperate fully with inquiries made by the Executive/ Committee as to their suitability. In my view there should be very few reasons for not allowing a candidate to proceed to the next stage. Those reasons would include that the candidate's candidacy would bring the reputation of the Party into disrepute or that the candidate was a member/supporter of, or stalking horse for, another political party.

Campaign

A campaign of some weeks would ensue. Candidates would be able to spend whatever sum they liked on the election including receiving donations in kind.

However all candidates, whether they were successfully selected or not, would need to give a proportion of the money raised and their in-kind donations received, to the party's State-wide general election campaign. This sum would need to be paid on the Monday before primary election day. Failure to pay this money would result in the candidate's disqualification. This would prevent candidates from cannibalising party funds and potentially increase the total pool of donations received by the party.

As part of a campaign the local party could run a series of events so that the general public got to know the candidates. Community organisations like Rotary would probably also do the same.

Primary election day

On election day electors would arrive at the polling station – in Metropolitan electorates it may not be necessary to have as many polling stations as exist in a general election – the elector would state their name and address. The elector's name would be checked against the electoral role and the Party membership lists. If the

elector is a party member they would be given their ballot paper and sent to vote. If the elector is not a party member they would be issued a ballot paper after having paid a fee. The fee would need to be paid for a range of reasons. If non-party members can vote in a pre-selection without joining the party then, absent a fee, this may encourage a significant depletion of the Party membership. The second reason is to recoup the cost of running the primary for the party central office. The third reason is to act as a disincentive to members of other parties to vote strategically and select the weakest candidate. In addition to boosting party membership this system would provide significant benefits for political parties which would be able to widen their potential donor and supporter lists, based on the participation of people in primaries. Primary elections would also provide an opportunity to trial electoral reforms which have been mooted in the past such as requiring voters to present proof of identity before voting.

Who should face a primary

There is a question about whether there should be primaries in every seat or whether a sitting member should have to face a primary every election. Because of the cost in time and resources it might be undesirable to have primary in every electorate at every election. In some safe seats opposing parties may find it hard to recruit candidates (ie the ALP may find it hard to locate a candidate in Farrer and the Liberal Party might find it hard to locate a candidate in Blaxland). Due to the time involved Ministers, or at least Cabinet Ministers, could be exempted from a primary. Perhaps a special resolution of the local members can suspend or bring on the need for primaries; perhaps they should be held every other election. These are all issues for debate.

Pilot scheme

If the primary system was seen to be viable ultimately the Electoral Commission would be responsible for the conduct of primaries. However initially the parties would need to conduct the primaries themselves.

Primaries represent a significant cultural change in Australian voting practices. Therefore they might take a couple of elections to catch on. Perhaps the best way to evaluate primaries is to trial them in a pilot project. Primaries should be trialled over three elections in the same geographic area - say for two federal elections and one state election - before properly assessing their effectiveness. As it would be such a cultural shift the worst thing would be to attempt a primary pilot and then to abandon it as a failure after only one attempt. The primary could be attempted in an open seat (ie a newly created seat which is the result of a redistribution, a seat which the party does not currently hold or a seat where the sitting member is retiring). The seat should be one which the party has a good chance of winning.

Responding to some arguments against primaries

There are a number of arguments that can be made against primaries. It is important to consider and respond to them.

Only benefit the rich

One of the arguments against primaries is that they favour well resourced or wealthy candidates. Candidates who are personally wealthy may have an advantage in that they will not have to raise as much money as other candidates. However these candidates also have an advantage at a general election. In a primary system all candidates have the capacity to raise their own funds. One of the key skills needed in modern Australian politics is the ability to fundraise. Election campaigns are becoming more and more expensive. If a candidate is unable to raise funds for a primary campaign then they will be a less able to raise funds for a general election campaign. A primary tests the ability of a candidate to raise funds to support his or her work in Australian politics. While an ability to raise money will be a factor in a primary campaign it will not be the only factor. The ability to establish links with the community and reach out to individuals will be far more significant.

Celebrity candidates

Another argument against the primary system is that it favours celebrity or high profile candidates. While so-called celebrity or high profile candidates have an advantage because of their name recognition, mere celebrity will not be enough to win a primary. Australians are rightly suspicious of celebrity. Celebrity without substance will not survive in a hotly contested primary. In the course of a primary campaign a person's political mettle will be tested. Some high profile people will not undertake the campaigning required to win. Others might come unstuck due to a superior attitude. In the end primaries should favour people with real links to their communities. Even in US Presidential Primaries sometimes a candidate with low initial name recognition can win. President Jimmy Carter had a national name recognition factor of around 2% only six months before he became his Party's nominee in the 1976 elections.¹⁵

Perpetual campaigning

Another argument against primaries is that they will create a culture of perpetual campaigning. MPs will always be worried about raising enough money to compete in a primary at the same time as raising enough money for a general election campaign. This could lead to bad decisions or a lack of focus on their responsibilities. Indeed I think primaries will have the opposite effect. A primary system will more sharply focus MPs on the task of serving their electorate. Hard working MPs will be rewarded by reselection. Those MPs who do not concentrate on the needs of their community will suffer under a primary system as poor performance will be harder to hide.

Interest Groups and the Politics of extremes

In the US candidates for election have tended to adopt a "Nixon strategy". This term means adopting the strategy of former US President Richard Nixon, that a candidate courts the extreme wing of their party for the purpose of being selected as a candidate and then "runs to the centre" for the general election. This is unlikely to be a concern in Australia for two reasons. Firstly modern campaigning techniques, the quest for

¹⁵ Maidment, above n 13, 130.

authenticity and consistency and the growth in the internet has meant that politicians can no longer get away with telling one thing to one audience and another thing to another audience. This is even the case in the US, where the successful presidential nominees adopted an authenticity strategy whereas unsuccessful candidates – in particular former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney – tried to get away with a Nixon strategy and failed. The second reason is that Australia unlike America has compulsory voting – this means that the focus of the Australian political landscape is the political centre. Candidates who adopt extreme positions to court interest groups may find they have a difficult time in a general election. Finally interest groups can play a potentially significant role – as we have seen with the resources devoted to the Federal Labor 2007 election Campaign by the unions and GetUP! – but candidates who are seen as beholden to special interest groups may well fall victim to the charge that they are not their own people, or that they are not concerned with all the people in their electorate only special interest groups. This can be fatal in a political contest.

Difficult Choice for Voters

One of the difficulties for voters in primary elections is that the voter is being asked to choose between two candidates from the same political party. Absent a party label, so the argument goes, many voters will find the choice difficult or confusing. I think this argument underestimates Australian voters. Because of compulsory voting Australians have more experience of the voting procedures and elections than Americans. A similar argument can be made about candidates at a preselection under the current system and yet voters and candidates in that system are able to make a choice based on the available alternatives. The challenge for candidates will be to encourage voters to the view that they are the best representative for the area and their philosophical approach is the best for the country.¹⁶ Studies in the US suggest that voters participating in primaries tend to be better educated, more involved in politics and more knowledgeable about public affairs.¹⁷ Perhaps Australian primaries will initially produce the same results. They might also encourage more Australians to take an interest in politics and public affairs.

Weaker Party Discipline

Another argument against primaries is that they weaken party discipline because the Party no longer controls the candidate's preselection and there are therefore no sanctions against voting against the Party line. This argument does not really apply in a Westminster democracy like Australia. The nature of responsible government in a Westminster democracy discourages Parliamentarians from voting against the party line. The Government losing an ordinary vote in the lower house can be embarrassing or, if it is a no confidence vote, terminal. Unlike in the US the Executive Government in our system is formed by Parliamentarians. Ministers must be MPs or Senators. An MP may limit their prospects of being promoted to the Ministry if they are seen to display maverick tendencies. There is also a tradition of Liberal MPs and Senators voting against the party line on issues of conscience in Australia. A study of Members of Parliament who crossed the floor has revealed that:

¹⁶ Hugh Bone and Austin Ranney, *Politics and Voters*, (4th ed 1976), 75-76.

¹⁷ *Ibid* 33.

The act of crossing the floor does not appear to have adversely affected many floor crossers' careers. The number of floor crossers who went on to become ministers, parliamentary secretaries or presiding officers is substantial (43%) compared to the number of all MPs who attained such office (30%).¹⁸

The same study revealed that none of the floor crossers were penalized when their actions reflected the views of the State Branches of their party. Whether primaries would increase the frequency with which floor crossings occurs remains to be seen.

Privacy

An Electoral Commission managed primary system would entail Australians being comfortable with a government record existing that they are a registered voter for a particular political party. Australia is not a bumper sticker nation. We do not have tradition of wearing our politics on our sleeve. Politics has tended to be a private matter. Therefore appropriate privacy safeguards would need to be enacted to maintain a voter's privacy and prevent party identification information from being sold commercially.

Conclusion

The quality of our political organisations is a reflection of the quality of our democracy. If we have healthy political organisations they will select quality candidates who in turn will become quality MPs. Those MPs will become Cabinet Ministers who are responsible for making decisions about how our country is run. If we are not selecting the right people and our political parties are unhealthy, we cannot expect the Cabinets to make good decisions about economic, social, defence and international policy. When a broader group of people has a say over the selection of candidates the quality of people for selection may be vastly improved.

As Liberals primaries fit well with our basic values. Unlike Labor, which believes that choice is hard and people should be protected from choice, Liberals do not patronise people. We believe Australians are capable of making choices and indeed seek to reward them for making good choices. One example will suffice. In the 2007 election campaign the Liberal Party adopted an education policy which gave parents some financial compensation for education expenses. Our party put the choice of what educational needs were in the best interest of school students in the hands of those who knew their children best – their parents. Conversely Labor's education policy gave parents no choice. It dictated that the most important expenditure for the benefit of school students was a laptop. We argue that parents are in the best position to make that decision about their children's education. In the same way we should argue that electors are in the best position to choose which candidates will best represent them.

More direct voter participation is firmly part of our Liberal tradition. In the early 1990s Peter Reith – a great reformer and a parliamentarian who had the rare

¹⁸ Deirdre McKeown and Rob Lundie, *Crossing the floor in the Federal Parliament 1950-August 2004*, Parliamentary Research Paper No 11 (2006-2006) <<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rn/2005-06/06rn11.htm>> at 13 July 2008.

combination of an abiding interest in policy and robust political skills – put the case for more direct democracy. While Peter Reith has not written on primaries I would like to adopt some of his observations on direct democracy as they are relevant here. In a 2003 speech to the Samuel Griffith Society he noted:

I am opposed to too much power being accumulated in too few hands. The participation by citizens in the government of our society is the essence of our democracy...

Many people believe that political rights and society's political development will follow successful economic development. I think that is the wrong way round.

In my view, if you have the right institutions within a strong civil society, you'll end up with a successful economy, a vibrant culture, innovative industries, and a flourishing community in every aspect of human endeavour.¹⁹

The adoption of a primary system in Australia could help to strengthen our civil society which could benefit our economy, our political culture and our way of life. If successful a primary system should lead to better candidates, better parliaments and a stronger Australia.

¹⁹ Peter Reith, "Let's Give Democracy a Chance: Some Suggestions", in J Stone (ed) *Upholding the Australian Constitution* 15 (2003)
<<http://www.samuelgriffith.org.au/papers/html/volume15/v15contents.htm>> at 13 July 2008.