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Part 2: Election essays

Australia and the world

Mark Beeson
Murdoch University
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As the federal election campaign draws to a close, The Conversation asked eminent thinkers to reflect on the state of the nation and the challenges Australia — and whichever party wins government — faces in the future. Today, Mark Beeson writes that although this election decides the Australian government, managing our relationships with the rest of the world will be a key priority.

All politics is local. To judge from the current election debate in Australia, this old adage — popularised by former US Speaker of the House of Representatives Tip O'Neill — remains as true as ever. Even those issues that have an unambiguous international component, such as asylum seeker policy, are discussed primarily in terms of their impact within Australia.

The fact that the governments of Papua New Guinea and Indonesia find themselves being reluctantly drawn into Australia's frequently brutal domestic political scene ought to be a source of bipartisan concern. It largely isn't, because internal affairs continue to trump the foreign variety.

There is something rather odd about this. Even the most disinterested voter must have noticed that the world out there is important in ways that go beyond providing exotic holiday destinations. For starters, we're still at war. True, Afghanistan is a long way away, and if it wasn't for the occasional Afghan asylum seeker the non-enthusiast might be forgiven for forgetting about it all together. But Australians are still fighting and dying there. It

would be interesting to hear from our prospective leaders quite why that is, and what they intend to say to the parents of the last Australian to be killed there before we beat our inevitable retreat.

Australians have a long history of fighting in other people's wars. One of our foundational nation-building moments is remembering the pointless slaughter of thousands of young men at Gallipoli in a conflict that served no purpose for its principal protagonists, let alone Australians. Putting people in harm's way is perhaps the most serious responsibility of government and yet it continues with almost no debate. Strategic hardheads will no doubt tell us the issues are too complex and specialist for the general public. Perhaps so. But how would we know, given the almost complete absence of serious debate?

Part of the problem is a remarkable uniformity of opinion among policymakers. The only question about the alliance with the United States, for example, is which side of politics can be the most obliging and supportive. The decision to establish a permanent American troop presence in Darwin was taken with almost no public discussion and enjoys bipartisan support. The Obama administration's so-called "pivot" toward east Asia marks a very significant recalibration of American strategic priorities that could have major ramifications for the region generally and Australia in particular. Yet it remains unmentioned, much less debated.

The pivot is a somewhat belated response to China's rapid economic and strategic re-emergence at the centre of east Asian affairs. From an American perspective, China represents the most substantive challenge to its position since it emerged as the dominant force in international politics in the aftermath of World War Two. Australia has a potentially very different view, but we would never know it.

The unquestioned conventional wisdom in Australia is that America's strategic dominance has been an unambiguously good thing. East Asia has been stable in ways it might not have been if left to its own devices. And yet it is also worth remembering that maintaining this stability involved fighting major wars in Korea

and Vietnam — in both of which Australia contributed significant amounts of blood and treasure.

Plainly, Australian foreign policy now is a good deal less black and white than it was during the Cold War. The great challenge now is what to do about China. The good news for Australian policymakers is that China, despite the label, is no longer a communist country. On the contrary, it's one of the most successful capitalist countries in the world, even if they organise it rather differently than we do. Chinese demand for "Australian" resources has, as we all know, made a few people in this country very rich. It's not China's fault if we haven't made the most of all this externally generated good fortune.

The bad news is that all this wealth and power may not be bringing the best out of China. Over the past couple of years, China's leaders have adopted an increasingly assertive attitude to unresolved territorial claims throughout the region. It is not just Australian policymakers who have been unsettled by this turn of events. From Japan to the Philippines, anxiety levels are rising as the region discovers that China's rapid development contains threats as well as opportunities.

Although the great hope is that China has too big a stake in the increasingly integrated regional and global economy to do anything foolish, the possibility of accident or miscalculation cannot be discounted. Ominously, it is not just China and the United States that are engaged in a major strategic rivalry. Even more importantly, Japan and China are moving to defend what they see as their vital national interests. In the event of accident or misadventure, the United States might feel compelled to go to the aid of Japan, which has long since based its entire foreign policy on the expectation that America will guarantee its security.

While conflict remains a remote possibility at this stage, it is worth asking what Australia would do in such circumstances. We would probably do what we have always done since we assumed that the United States would guarantee our security, too. We would fight alongside our American allies.

Now, however, the justification for immediately joining any conflict America found itself in looks less compelling. Not only is China our principal trade partner, but Australia's armed forces would make absolutely no difference to the outcome of any superpower confrontation. Unless, of course, it was to tell both sides in bracingly Antipodean fashion to "pull their heads in".

To do that, however, might require an independence of mind and strategic posture that is unlikely to emerge from this election campaign. Such intellectual timidity and rigidity begs the question of what Australia will do with its expensively acquired seat on the UN Security Council.

A very safe bet would be that Australia will never voice an opinion, much less vote against, any position the United States — or even Israel, for that matter — adopts. There may be compelling reasons for not taking a more independent attitude that is potentially more in synch with other non-aligned middle powers in the region. But if there are, let's hear them.

It is not anti-American to suggest that Australia may have interests and perspectives that are not identical with those of the United States. It could hardly be otherwise — they are a great power, we are a middling one at best. The United States necessarily sees the world in a different way than we do. Our primary goal ought to be encouraging China to address critical issues of common concern such as climate change, which unambiguously do threaten our long-term security. There is nothing to be gained and much to be lost in getting involved in what looks to the Chinese like a new form of containment.

Such ideas are unlikely to be taken seriously by the main parties in this election race, however. Australian prime ministers generally wait till they have left office to develop foreign policy ideas that challenge the conventional wisdom. Former prime ministers Paul Keating and Malcolm Fraser now advocate much more unorthodox positions now than they ever did in office.

But surely it's not beyond the leaders of both parties to display a bit of imagination and creative thinking about foreign

policy while they're actually in a position to do something about it? Having a debate on the subject might be a good place to start.

The state of Australian democracy

Marian Sawer
Australian National University
3 September 2013

Marian Sawer writes on what this election campaign reveals about the state of two of Australia's key democratic processes: the electoral roll and campaign finance.

Given that Australian voters will do their democratic duty by heading to the polls this Saturday, now seems a perfect time to pause and ask: what does the 2013 federal election tell us about the health of Australian democracy?

With politicians increasingly prone to meddle with laws surrounding the electoral roll and the power of money in our political campaigns, the pulse of Australia's democracy may not be as strong as we had once thought.

Electoral roll

At the beginning of the 20th century there was no doubt about Australia's democratic leadership. In 1903, through a massive nationwide effort, Australia enrolled more of its population to vote in the forthcoming election than any country had done before. Commonwealth electoral officials estimated that 96% of the adult population, including both women and men, were on the roll.

The cause was further advanced in 1911 when enrolment was made compulsory, largely at the urging of the Chief Electoral Officer. Australia pioneered the creation of professional electoral administrators with a professional interest in the achievement of an electoral roll that was comprehensive as well as accurate.

How does Australia compare in 2013? Since the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) ceased door-knocking to register voters (in 1999) we have experienced a "shrinking roll". At its worst, up to 1.5 million eligible voters were missing from the roll. Reliance on data matching meant the AEC had become very good at removing voters who were no longer at their registered address, but not nearly as good at getting them back onto the roll. There were anachronistic requirements for voters to sign and return paper enrolment forms.

Unlike other democracies, the AEC could not use the data at its disposal simply to enrol eligible voters at the right address. This situation was exacerbated by the amendment of the *Electoral Act* in 2006 to close the rolls on the day the writs were issued. Many Australians were only prompted to enrol or re-enrol by the announcement of an election and were now disenfranchised. We had fallen well behind other democracies who allowed enrolment up to the day of the election (Canada) or the day before (New Zealand).

Pressure mounted to repair this democratic deficit. One of the top demands of Kevin Rudd's 2020 Summit in 2008 — and of the Youth Summit that preceded it — was for direct enrolment. But it is difficult to gain bipartisan agreement for any action concerning the roll. Conservative parties tend to argue that making it easier to get onto the roll opens up the possibility of electoral fraud. However, making it more difficult has a disproportionate effect on young people and disadvantaged sections of the community.

Online activist group GetUp! took matters into its own hands with two successful High Court actions in 2010. One overturned the early close of the roll, with a majority finding this was an unreasonable restriction of the universal franchise. The other decision upheld the validity of electronic signatures and hence allowed online enrolment.

Of even greater long-term significance, the *Commonwealth Electoral Act* was finally amended in 2012 to allow the Electoral

Commissioner to update details or directly enrol new voters after informing them of his intent.

The combination of direct enrolment, restoration of the week to enrol after the issuing of writs and the possibility of enrolling online contributed to record enrolment for the 2013 election. In the week after the election was called, over 162,000 people were added to the roll and nearly 490,000 updated their enrolment. Over 85% of these enrolments and updates were done online. The shrinking roll was finally being reversed, although the percentage of eligible voters enrolled had still not returned to the 1903 level.

Campaign finance

Unfortunately, all these voters restored to the roll were then exposed to an election campaign unlikely to boost their faith in the democratic process.

One of the reasons for this is the huge increase in the role of money in Australian election campaigns since the removal of limits on political expenditure in the early 1980s. There has also been a growing arms race involving television advertising and other new campaign weapons.

A majority of European countries, including the United Kingdom, do not allow paid political advertising. They uphold the principle of a level playing field and allocate broadcast time in accordance with a fairness criterion rather than the power of the purse. The problems with allowing such advertising include not only the damage to the equality principle, but also the increased dependence of political parties on wealthy donors.

Public funding was intended to lessen this dependence, but in Australia the major parties simply added corporate funding on top. In the election year 2010–11 the Liberal Party alone received income of A$105 million, 80% of which was from corporations or wealthy individuals. Dependence on large donors not only brings suspicion of undue influence but pays for the negative advertising that serves to bring the whole of democratic politics into disrepute.

In 2013, the major parties reached an agreement behind closed doors that would at least improve the disclosure of political donations. There was a public outcry when it was revealed that substantial "administrative" funding for parties was part of the package to compensate them for the alleged costs of disclosure. The bill was dropped, but not before adding to the distrust of political parties.

As this example shows, the loss of trust in parties and politicians is not only about access purchased by corporate donors or unions. It is also about the misuse of public money for party purposes. The spike in government advertising in election years, such as this year's full page asylum seeker advertisements, is one blatant example.

There is also the use of parliamentary allowances for electioneering purposes, which has become the norm. Even training in the use of party databases has been paid for under the *Parliamentary Entitlements Act*. It gives an unfair advantage to incumbents, as well as diverting public resources for party benefit.

Political parties now also launch their campaigns in the last couple of weeks of a campaign because of the convention that they can charge electioneering to the public purse until the actual launch. This means people are voting at pre-poll voting centres before political parties have revealed their official campaign policies.

In 1903, money had a much smaller role and there was no scope for billionaires like Clive Palmer. The Labor Party's Manifesto proudly promoted the new *Electoral Act*:

> Elaborate precautions exist to prevent wealthy men practically purchasing seats: the expenditure of a senatorial candidate is limited to £250 and of a candidate for the other House to £100.

Full reports of the campaign speeches of party leaders appeared in the newspapers, covering the major issues of free trade and protection, the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill, White Australia and even nationalisation of monopolies. Three parties were

treated as serious contenders, unlike the leadership debates of 2013, which have involved only two leaders.

In many ways Australia has lost its vanguard status as a democracy. Our electoral administration continues to be the envy of the world, with its completely professional and non-partisan approach. Unfortunately, our electoral legislation is in the hands of political leaders who again and again place short-term party interests over the longer-term interests of electoral democracy.

It is a sad day when decisions to ensure voting rights have to come from the High Court.

It's the economy, stupid

Colm Harmon
University of Sydney
4 September 2013

Colm Harmon discusses the true deficit of this campaign: clear, rational economic thinking and policy.

As we enter the final stretch and look over the campaign that was election 2013, we see a period of political and social debate brimming with rich economic thinking as politicians plan their way forward for Australia, right?

Er, no actually.

The election has been remarkably light on any serious effort to debate economics at a time when the economy should have been the cornerstone of the whole campaign.

Economics figured solidly as the firing pistol sounded. Prime minister Kevin Rudd provided a rather downbeat assessment of the economy in transition, coupled with a series of political clichés about improving productivity and replacing the mining boom.

In response, the Coalition locked into the portrayal of Labor as a party of spendthrifts, frittering away the Howard era

but perhaps forgetting the global financial crisis that came in between.

However, both parties were aware that the world had changed, and in some respects the macroeconomy was now in the hands of the gods. This suggested that the campaign would unfold in line with this starting point — a global macroeconomic context and a focus on smart microeconomic policy to promote better distributive outcomes for society.

Labor would flesh out their ideas to promote workforce flexibility while also promoting workplace protection. They would finally begin to join up the dots on their education policy to promote enhanced productivity. The Coalition would look to promote less waste, less regulation.

This has just not evolved.

What actually followed has been a whirlwind tour-de-force presentation of clientalist politics of the worst kind — a dollop here, a dollop there, the prime minister and prime minister-in-waiting hanging out in fluoro vests and hard hats at manufacturing facilities, talking up a sector which has shrunk as a contributor to the Australian economy over the past decade.

Neither side has delivered a serious policy option that is remotely close to being inspiring. To some extent, Labor doesn't have to. They came into the campaign with a suite of policy options on the table and with no real reason to change them.

The Coalition, on the other hand (or rather their leader), unleashed a fanciful paid parental leave (PPL) policy. This, it must be said, is just plain old vanilla bad policy. It costs a fortune, and while paid parental leave is in general a policy that promotes many economic benefits, the PPL policy proposed by Tony Abbott will be riddled with what economists call "deadweight".

Higher earning, higher educated women — the main beneficiaries — will have as many children and be as likely to return to work under either the Labor or Coalition policy — but for massive extra costs under the Coalition plan. Lower-income women will be no more likely to return to work because of PPL

as that is not the pinch point — child care is. It is a total mess of an idea and regrettably ill-thought out.

Oddly, the attempt to use PPL to get the voting middle on side has backfired. The polling on the Coalition PPL policy suggests that it does not have the sort of backing that might have been expected from the middle class vote.

And that, perhaps, is the real message of the 2013 federal election when it comes to economics. The electorate is a good deal savvier to the reality of what is going on than the politicians give them credit for, but instead are treated to what is a quite superficial presentation of the arguments.

The other dominant jostling has been over costings of policies, with both sides goading each other over the details — or lack thereof — behind their plans and the potential "budget blowouts". Through fluke rather than design, largely as a means of offsetting the negative campaign portrayal of the LNP as "austerians", but partly to reflect the dawning reality of where the economy is sitting right now, the latter period of the campaign has taken the return to surplus off the agenda from both sides, and more importantly has killed off the faux austerity discussion.

The surplus promise is important — as noted in an insightful essay by the University of New South Wales' Geoff Garrett. Australia does not have a public debt problem, and does not need to behave as if it has.

There is now a unique opportunity to reshape the economy. This "glass half full" perspective does treat the end of the mining era as a move to a new equilibrium, and the war chest is ample enough to avoid the need for a slash-and-burn budget on the expenditure side.

However, the economy is not strong enough, thankfully, to have the resources to provide stimulus. Perhaps it is an example of one of those laws of unintended consequences at work, but this fiscal straightjacket stops politicians from doing crazy things.

Institutions in Australia are also relatively strong. The Reserve Bank has shown itself to be responsive to the global

economic situation. It has sister agencies, such as the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority, that have kept the banking sector from the sort of bonkers decision-making that so many other countries have suffered under (even if the Australian banking sector remains uncompetitive). The much-maligned Treasury has a very clear perspective on where things are going. Again, the macroeconomy is in the hands of folks who know what they are doing.

In short, the economy is, in my view, landing relatively softly. But to extend the analogy, it also has enough runway to gather pace and take off again.

In macroeconomic terms, the global economy has moved into a different space, with the tapering of quantitative easing in the United States poised to deliver, inadvertently, a stimulus to Australia through its impact on the Aussie dollar. That leaves the burden of the transition to that new equilibrium as coming from smart and clever microeconomic policy. Few of the potential options have come to light in the campaign, with little serious presentation of credible, well-articulated policies.

For the Coalition, the paid parental leave idea and loopholes around health insurance are middle-class perks that are millstones that will need to be dumped fast. Far too much energy is going into finding the money for these plans. Both sides will need to swiftly examine the range of bizarre restrictive practices such as parallel importing in key markets.

Both sides also need to avoid the idea that selling houses to each other to get rich again is a good idea. The key policy areas of health and education need a strong effort to get alignment of motive and desired outcome — robbing one education sector to pay for the experiences of another (as in the Gonski schools funding review) is a very short-sighted plan.

To give them credit, the Coalition is the only party giving serious consideration to the revenue side of the budget. A commitment to a review of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) option with a view to going to the country in 2016 with a policy

on increasing the GST would be a smart move. It sensitises the electorate to what is coming, but I suspect the options on GST and other elements of the tax base (including deeper examinations of the tax loopholes in property and other investment) will actually happen sooner and in the life of the next parliament.

All in all, this has been a pretty muted affair in the economics space in terms of tangible, coherent policy choices.

What is government for?

John Daley
Grattan Institute
5 September 2013

John Daley considers whether government actually does what it says on the tin.

Despite the election's sound and fury, our major parties enthusiastically agree about much. They agree that budgets should balance — but don't want too much virtue in the short term. They agree we should keep spending on health and education, spend more on infrastructure soon, and more on defence — eventually. No-one is attacking Australia's welfare programs with a big knife.

Lurking beneath the consensus, however, are expectations of government that cannot be met, and budgets that in the long run will not balance. The deepest contradiction is the size and role of government. Voters want governments that are small, but do a lot.

Some say Australia already has "big government", meaning government activity is a large proportion of the economy. The Centre for Independent Studies, for example, has launched a campaign to reduce government spending beneath 30% of gross domestic product.

The reality is that for a developed country, Australia has small government. This is so even if one notionally includes

compulsory superannuation payments as part of Australian government, on the basis that they are analogous to compulsory social insurance and pension payments in other countries.

Of course, government in Australia is much larger than in Somalia. This is not surprising. As countries get richer, they almost always spend more of their money on welfare and health. Indeed, welfare, health and education are more than half of government expenditure. Add defence and infrastructure and you have two-thirds of Australian government spending.

Not only is spending on services high, but it is also popular. Both major parties recently agreed to increase income tax to pay for a new national disability insurance scheme, and there was barely a mutter of public protest. Public support for welfare is not surprising: many benefit from the safety net of social security. A survey shows that 23% of households under the age of 57 relied on some kind of welfare at some stage over nine years, although only 10% relied on welfare for more than four years.

Spending on seniors in Australia is more of a universal benefit than a safety net. Despite 20 years of compulsory superannuation, most retired households still receive a substantial age pension. Unpublished Grattan Institute work shows that 70% of retired households receive at least a part pension — generally more than A$200 a week.

Again, however, there is little sign that age pensions will be constrained. Age pension expenditure has increased by over $13 billion in real terms since 2003. Much of the increase was the result of explicit government decisions to increase the rate and eligibility for pensions rather than the ageing of the population.

Given all this spending, how does Australia manage to keep its government relatively small? In short, we have the world's most tightly targeted welfare system. Although benefits are relatively generous for those in the bottom 20%, governments provide relatively little in welfare payments to those in the top 80%.

Middle-class welfare in Australia is all but extinct, at least for those under 60. With the baby bonus and Family Tax Benefit A

confined to low income families, and the opposition promising to abolish the schoolkids bonus, all that remains is some Family Tax Benefit B — and it is estimated that only $2 billion of this goes to households not in the bottom quintile.

Government size is further constrained in Australia by two distinctive policy innovations: the FEE-HELP scheme that funds higher education through income-contingent loans, and superannuation. These facilitate private funding for higher education and for retirement that governments fund directly in many other countries.

Although change won't necessarily reduce the size of government, there are questions about the role of government in delivering social services. Government pays for many social services that companies and non-government organisations provide. These include drug and alcohol rehabilitation, homeless services, and child care. The highest profile example is perhaps the private firms and non-government organisations that took over the role of the Commonwealth Employment Service in job services.

Such outsourcing forces governments to articulate more carefully the outcomes they want. However, as the job services industry illustrates, the transition can be difficult. Many believe this outsourcing was poorly designed so that private firms were rewarded for outcomes that would have happened anyway. And subsequent reform is made harder as private providers become vested interests.

But even if the role of government in welfare, health, education and social services changes, public spending is unlikely to shrink much in these areas. Government will still foot much of the bill.

Government size — and economic efficiency — is also driven by government spending on services such as electricity, water, telecommunications and transport. In more developed economies these services are often privatised, and implicit cross-subsidies give way to "user-pay" pricing. The Commonwealth government has largely sold out of airlines, telecommunications

and banking. Its major remaining commercial asset is perhaps the postal service. Australia has relatively few services left to privatise, although there remains some way to go in privatising utilities in Queensland and New South Wales.

There is perhaps more opportunity to reduce government size by re-examining the multitude of government programs that emerge in response to political pressure for government to "do something" to fix social problems. *Australian Financial Review* journalist Laura Tingle identified the "great expectations" that Australian governments must solve every social ill. Many programs for regional development, innovation promotion, and manufacturing support fall into this category.

Yet taking the axe to such programs is unlikely to radically change the size of government — they are a small portion of total government spending. Nor is cutting this spending ever easy: every program has a group with a vested interest in its preservation.

So, despite the rhetoric, the size of government in Australia is unlikely to change radically. Should we be worried?

Some claim that countries with bigger governments tend to have less economic growth. All taxes discourage economic activity; if government is bigger and more tax is levied to pay for it, there may be more disincentives to investment and working. However, correlations between size of government and economic growth don't imply causation.

The economic drag of government depends more on the efficiency of its tax system than its size. Consumption taxes such as the GST don't distort economic activity much, and in particular they don't discourage investment or workforce participation. Some other taxes, such as stamp duty, are inherently much more distorting, and can be substantial obstacles to using resources productively.

Tax reform is one of three major reforms that could make a big difference to Australian economic growth over the next decade, as the Grattan Institute discussed in its *Game-changers* report. Our corporate taxes are relatively high, our consumption

tax is relatively low, and we have a host of small taxes that drag on the economy.

Therefore, for a developed economy, Australia has relatively small government and few opportunities to reduce its size. Our tax system could improve. Does the absence of big economic reforms in the election campaign reflect an absence of big challenges?

Australia's big challenge is that government is likely to spend more than its income for a long time. This has little to do with the size of government. Around the world there are small governments with deficits, and big governments with surpluses. It has everything to do with discipline: being prepared to cut lower value activities, and otherwise to increase taxes, so that government income matches the services people want. In the process we need to avoid taxes that severely distort economic activity — even though such taxes tend to be more politically palatable.

The alternative is that Australian governments continue to run deficits, increasing the interest bill — and therefore taxes — for future generations.

What might happen after the election? Recent history suggests little desire for substantial cuts to government services. There may be opportunities to cut some lower value activities. But few have been prepared to offend any voting minority in an election campaign. The appetite of the successful party to take on vested interests after the election remains to be seen.

Even so, the media and the voters seem ahead of our political parties in understanding that government budgets face long-term challenges that will require much more painful decisions than those foreshadowed during the campaign.

As Grattan Institute research has shown, in the next ten years Australian government budgets are looking at deficits of around 4% of GDP — $60 billion in today's terms. Improving the budget balance by just $10 billion would require lifting the GST from 10% to 12%, almost doubling municipal rates, or reducing the health budget by 10%. These unappealing measures illustrate the size of the task.

Australia is blessed with a high standard of living, governments that deliver much that people value, and relatively efficient administration. Unfortunately, however, the size of government that voters want is not currently matched by the taxes we are prepared to pay. The task of Australia's next government will be to deliver the bad news that something has to give.

Australia for the long term

Peter C. Doherty
University of Melbourne
6 September 2013

Peter Doherty takes a scientific big picture view of the election to call for informed and effective debate to become the norm in all facets of Australian politics.

What do we want from the next Australian government?

I expect we are all agreed on a few major requirements: prosperity, accessible and high-quality medical services, responsive democratic governance, a good education for our children and jobs when they graduate from an apprenticeship or college/university, the preservation of basic freedoms and mutual respect, the sense that our nation holds its head high in the international community.

Who would disagree with any of that?

As a political observer, I'm convinced that governing Australia is not easy. All sides of politics make mistakes and can be blindsided by global events such as the global financial crisis.

I also think that politicians are, in the main, decent and committed people. However, like the rest of us, they can sometimes get caught up in their own rhetoric. As everywhere, the realities of power are such that those with the big dollars can have far too much influence, sometimes in ways that are bad in the long term.

Science policy

Science is my thing, of course, and I believe that it is vastly important for our future. Science is central to our national story.

Modern Australia was founded as the result of a scientific expedition: the voyage of the HMS *Endeavour* to observe the transit of Venus. There were serious scientists on board, including Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander. Banks, the longest-serving president of Britain's science academy, The Royal Society, pushed the idea that convicts should be sent to Port Jackson (Sydney).

The identity of the science minister matters a lot. Too often, this is regarded as a minor portfolio. We have been extraordinarily fortunate in having Kim Carr. My total disillusionment with the Gillard government began when he was stripped of his portfolio, owing to the toxic internal politics of the ALP. This country deserves better.

If, as seems pretty certain, the ALP finds itself in opposition, we should all hope that they go through a process of soul-searching and major reform.

Is there a potential science minister in the ranks of a putative Coalition government? Senator Brett Mason made the effort to put together a book, *Future Proofing Australia*, expressing a number of views (including some of mine) that do not support LNP policy. That, and the title itself, is encouraging.

As a medical researcher, I've been impressed by the performance of the current health minister, Tanya Plibersek. The shadow minister, Peter Dutton, has always seemed to be a reasonable guy. Opposition leader Tony Abbott, a former health minister who was well regarded by those researchers who worked with him, has also said that medical science will be protected.

I don't know how long incumbent chief scientist Ian Chubb is continuing, but he has done a great job and my sense is that he would find it no harder to work with an LNP government. My Nobel colleague Brian Schmidt is also in Canberra, and I believe that he will continue to be a very effective lobbyist for big, physical science/engineering projects, no matter which party is in power.

Former prime minister John Howard also seemed genuinely interested in the activities of the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC), and we might hope that Abbott will follow suit. Both in Australia and the United States, research and innovation generally appeal to conservative politicians, and they are less likely to sacrifice excellence and genuine effort to pay for ever-expanding entitlement programs.

However, one thing Australia's conservatives sometimes miss (perhaps because they recall their experience over 20 years ago in a law, economics or arts faculty) is that much of our research capacity is underpinned by the resources, both physical and human, in research universities. Cutting universities to the bone, while neglecting necessary infrastructure, compromises research and innovation capacity.

From time to time, we do find the money to build major science facilities. Before embarking on such initiatives, it would make great sense to develop and underwrite a realistic 10- to 20-year plan. The Australian Synchrotron, for example, is operating just 9 of 38 possible beam lines that could be exploited for a spectrum of research and industry-based applications. This is much the same for Australia's only neutron source, the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation's light-water nuclear reactor.

Apart from the need for additional hardware, which can be designed and fabricated here, both resources are massively under-utilised because of the lack of personnel. The economic potential of such major instrumentation will only be realised if we train and employ more first-class young people.

National Broadband Network

Our universities are strong, rank highly on the international scene, and are sophisticated when it comes to global and distance education. They remain substantial dollar earners and, beyond that, every international student who has a good experience here

and returns home is a potential ambassador. The higher education game is also changing rapidly and, with fast internet connectivity, a great deal of sophisticated course content can be delivered online.

Given an effective National Broadband Network (NBN), we could network all our universities, allow some to specialise and give course credit between institutions, at little added cost. Australia is still, as pointed out recently by Glyn Davis, working with a 19th century model. We need to think big and move forward.

Provided there is the option of a fibre-optic connection to commercial premises, both the ALP's and the Coalition's NBN approaches should promote the development of web-based businesses, for example, in the outer suburbs and regional towns. The same is true for telemedicine to doctors' offices, though the lack of a high-speed connection to the home could limit possibilities for monitoring the elderly and delivering sophisticated educational content.

My personal view is that the "fibre to the node" model will, at best, prove to be a transitional strategy, but at least it starts the process and there is no reason why those who can afford to do so should not pay for fibre to the home.

Climate change

Australia is especially conflicted with regards to anthropogenic climate change. In the end, however, what happens in international energy markets will not be up to us. Looking to a possible future of extreme climate unpredictability and disrupted food production, it would seem sensible to emphasise agricultural innovation and the development of, for example, drought-resistant grains using the best available technology, including GM.

The goal should be sustainable agriculture, and we must protect our limited resources of good arable land, together with the precious water in aquifers, from inappropriate use and degradation. Toxic actions that serve only short-term needs are potentially lethal for this country.

Both sides of politics are committed to a 5% reduction (below year 2000 levels) in CO2 emissions by 2020, with a provision that we will go to 15% — or even 25% — if that challenge is taken up globally. The 15–25% option would, of course, only come into play if there was a major natural catastrophe, such as widely disseminated deaths from heat stress or, as occurred last year in New York, the flooding of major coastal cities, subway systems and the like.

Business as usual would be impossible, and nations could decide to move to rapid adaptation programs. These programs would, in a sense, be equivalent to a war footing. The consequences for an economy that relies heavily on selling fossil fuels are obvious. The more we diversify the better. And, while carbon sequestration and storage seems to be falling off the map, the development of clean coal burning technology by CSIRO and others should surely be a major, national priority.

Energy alternatives

Australia has immense resources of solar, wind and perhaps even geothermal energy. Sugar cane, like in Brazil, provides a ready source of ethanol, and technology for using this biomass is evolving. From what has been happening internationally, it's clear that promoting "clean and green" innovation both drives economic activity and provides jobs.

While we may not have to go in that direction for our own needs, many passionate environmentalists are now convinced that modern, safe, nuclear fission reactors have to be a major part of the energy solution for the colder northern countries until we can get nuclear fusion to work. As we have all seen, more moisture in the air due to ocean warming can result in much greater snowfalls and severe winter weather. Europeans and North Americans will not be prepared to freeze.

As argued most recently by former prime minister Bob Hawke, we need to re-open discussion on our possible role in the international nuclear power industry.

Given Australia's robust democracy and vast, geologically stable landmass, any such debate should include the option that we take responsibility for securing and sequestering the nuclear waste from the uranium that we sell. Technologies like Synroc, which can be used for this purpose, have been available for decades. Hopefully, this will be one area where a more conservative government can advance the agenda.

Also, apart from the various uranium-based reactors, India in particular is looking at thorium as a fuel source. Thorium is widely available and is much less adaptable for any malevolent purpose.

Mining will, as now, inevitably drive a major component of Australia's economy in the long term. Apart from any other consideration, metals, the rare earths, and so forth are essential for the development of new technologies for energy generation.

Looking to the future

When we are talking about physical (as distinct from political or emotional) reality, actions should be grounded in real data. There is no left or right of the equation when it comes to science-based reality.

Part of the job of our publicly funded scientific community is to talk truth to those in power and to the Australian community. The country loses out if we do not engage in an atmosphere of mutual respect. One of the many functions of The Conversation is to promote such broad-based discussion.

No federal government could be unaware that the science of Australia's unique flora and fauna is our responsibility. As the principal scientific player in this hemisphere, it is therefore essential that government provides the necessary resources for monitoring the southern oceans and weather, accessing the satellite data that tells us what's happening with anthropogenic climate change, researching the health of our fisheries and coral reefs, supporting our science in Antarctica and so forth.

Those functions are central to our role as substantial global citizens, no matter which party takes government after tomorrow.

The philosophy of voting

John Armstrong
University of Melbourne
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John Armstrong ponders the eternal question of elections: why do we actually bother to vote?

There's an anecdote about German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that gets quickly to one of the core problems of modern democratic voting. The great man had just been in council with the Duke of Weimar — they were trying, with immense difficulty, to work out how their small state should deal with its more powerful and quite aggressive neighbour, Prussia.

Goethe comes out of the meeting and goes for a walk with one of his friends, who asks him what he thinks of the new idea of popular elections. Goethe is aghast — he looks over at the gardener, trimming a hedge: "… if I don't know what the foreign policy should be, what's the point of asking him?"

It's probably an apocryphal story, but Goethe is right: in one sense democracy is an insane idea. He was thinking of voting as an attempt to reach the best decisions about what to do. In a boardroom it might feel that a vote is the right way to pool collective intelligence, and that the majority of experienced, well-informed people might be wiser than any individual.

But of course, in another sense Goethe simply did not understand the moral point of democracy. It is not about good decision-making but about legitimacy. A government gains its right to govern by the assent of the people. From that point of view it does not matter how wise or informed or intelligent the voter is, or voters in general may be.

In other words, modern governments face two quite different fundamental issues: they have to be legitimate, in the sense that they have to govern with the broad assent of the people; and

on the other hand, governments have to try to find good solutions to complicated problems.

Simply put, there is no solution available to us which can succeed simultaneously in both fields. The fantasy that education could transform the electorate is a fantasy because that could only be undertaken if the public elected a government determined to reorient society massively towards a re-education agenda; but there is no reason to suppose any electorate would collectively vote in such a humiliating way (in effect, saying we recognise our inadequacy, please make us wiser).

Either elections can be just — you have a right to vote irrespective of how you use the vote, because this is part of the moral status of being a citizen. Or, your right to vote is dependent upon the quality of your insight into the tasks of government.

In the United Kingdom this transformation in the concept of voting — from decision-making to moral right — can be traced in the two principle reform bills of the 19th century.

The first bill, from the 1830s, was primarily designed to bring wealthy manufacturers — the emerging commercial elite — into the decision-making process of government. This was recognition that government needed to harness the knowledge and capacities of this sector of society.

Roughly speaking, the second bill from the 1860s extended the franchise to respectable artisans — but mainly on the grounds that if they were not included, they would cause trouble.

In Australia, we find such a history deeply unsavoury. We are so deeply committed to an egalitarian ideal that it is inconceivable that we should see voting as any kind of privilege. This means that we are locked into precisely the kinds of elections we have become familiar with — which to the serious observer seem (as elections tend to) shallow, vulgar, banal. That is what happens when democratic elections go well. Their rationale is not to find the best government (let alone to excite people); their function is to reflect the average, collective, widespread attitudes of the nation.

At root, democratic voting reflects a radical Christian attitude. In the moral sphere Christianity took the breathtaking leap of saying that everyone has a soul and every single soul is of equal value in the eyes of God — the soul of the shirker is as precious to God as the soul of the hard worker. The soul of the peasant weighs the same in the divine balance as that of the king.

And this is the beautiful moral idea at the heart of modern democracy. It never looks at a person and says you are not worthy of voting. It says, instead: whatever you are like (almost), the vote belongs to you.

One problem, however, is that a vote feels like a tiny, fragile thing. Your single voice can hardly be heard. It takes another kind of faith to keep in mind that of course your vote does count — only it counts a very little. Of course you should have hardly any say in the government, because there are so many other people to be accommodated. This is maddening to the ego. Why should my vote be so tiny?

It is in the end the thing we hate about democracy — other people, and the fact that your considered, careful vote will count for exactly the same as that of someone you think utterly misguided or mean. This abasement is part of the ethical education that democracy seeks to inculcate. You are one among very many; society exists to satisfy average preferences, not to fulfil the longings of the best; a society is entitled to fail in its own way; the voter is always right — especially when you think they are wrong.

Government has such massive influence over our lives and yet we — of course — cannot feel that it is responsive very much to our own concerns. An intuitively appealing solution might be to have more elections. Suppose you got to vote every week: if enough people "liked" a proposed policy it would become law. One good consequence of this — if such voting were mandatory — is that we would learn how terribly difficult politics actually is. We would not be able to blame politicians, but would have to blame ourselves.

The relationship between government and people is becoming more intimate — which is what we mean by "presidential". The concentration of power in the hands of one person, the prime minister, may be disastrous, but it is inevitable. It is produced not by scurrilous or ambitious politicians but by the ruthless activities of voters. Anyone can offer anything to the public — but it is up to the public whether they buy it or not. If they buy the presidential brand, that's it: it may be dreadful but no-one knows how to make the public buy anything else.

Consumerism in politics is the logical result of mass democracy. All it means is that voters get to choose and that anyone who rails against their choice is out of the game.