

***Double Disillusion: The 2016 Federal Election*, edited by Anika Gauja, Peter Chen, Jennifer Curtin and Juliet Pietsch. Canberra: ANU Press, 2018, pp. xxix + 690. RRP \$75.00 (print version).**

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It has been a wonderful tradition of Australian political science to produce a comprehensive review after each federal election. A long-awaited volume on the 2016 double dissolution election finally hit the book shops in April 2018 and it is truly a mighty book. I'd like to acknowledge the effort and hard work by the editors, Anika Gauja, Peter Chen, Jennifer Curtin and Juliet Pietsch, in organising 41 contributors to produce a book of this calibre.

The first review of an Australian federal election I read was *The Greening of Australian Politics*, edited by Clive Bean, Ian McAllister and John Warhurst for the 1990 election. *The Greening of Australian Politics* has around 230 pages and nine chapters, while *Double Disillusion* has 690 pages and 30 chapters. This massive increase, I suppose, symbolically illustrates changes in electoral contests and contexts in Australia. For example, election analysis now requires separate chapters on minor parties *and* Independents. By 2016, the policy areas to be covered have multiplied. On-line activists such as GetUp! have joined the ranks of interest groups. Analysis on the media cannot be confined to traditional legacy media. Separate chapters are necessary for online media outlets as well as social media.

Double Disillusion also has kept the series' tradition of having a witty title, building upon *The Greening of Australian Politics*, *The Politics of Retribution* (for the 1996 election) and *Mortgage Nation* (for the 2004 election). This time, a witty title is assisted by the excellent choice of cover photo by Mike Bower of press gallery journalist Laura Tingle during the 2016 Leaders Debate.

For me, the major interests concerning the 2016 election centre on the facts that this was the first double dissolution election since 1987 and the first election after major changes to the Senate electoral system since 1984. The 2016 election was also the third consecutive election in which the defending Prime Minister was not one who

had won the previous election. The 2016 election also saw the aggregate share of first preference votes for major parties reduced to its lowest ever level. I read the book interested in and seeking answers to the following questions:

- Why was the election result so close just one term after the landslide in 2013 and under the leadership of a supposedly charismatic and popular Prime Minister against supposedly uninspiring and unpopular Leader of Opposition?
- Who were the winners?
- What implications can we draw from the result?
- Was there any change to Australia's persistently high level of party identification, as originally analysed by Don Aitkin in the 1960s?
- What effects did the change to the Senate electoral system have?
- What was the consequence of Prime Minister engineering a double dissolution election?

The first question about the closeness of the election result is answered in Chapter 1 by Gauja, Chen, Curtin and Pietsch, Chapter 6 by Simon Jackman and Luke Mansillo, Chapter 10 by Clive Bean and Chapter 11 by Rob Manwaring. According to these chapters, there seemed to be a disconnection between the public and the political parties. This was intensified by the perceived manipulation of the election timing by Prime Minister. While the Prime Minister blamed Labor's 'Mediscare' campaign for the closeness of the result (and the Australian Election Study data reported in the book can be interpreted in this way), the downward trajectory of support for the Coalition Government could be traced back to Christmas 2015. By the time the Prime Minister prorogued the parliament in order to call the double dissolution election, the Liberal-National Coalition had suffered five percentage point fall in its support.

This indicates that to dissolve the Parliament in May and have the election in July was monumental mistake. Turnbull should have gone earlier, perhaps soon after he snatched the Prime Ministership in September 2015, when he was basking in an electoral honeymoon. However, Chapter 8 by Antony Green painstakingly explains that Turnbull was prevented from calling the double dissolution when it most suited him. Partly this was because the trigger was weak. More importantly, his desired changes to the Senate voting system were not in place in 2015.

Turnbull's was a Pyrrhic victory. As pointed out in Chapter 12 by Nicholas Barry, his position and status within the Liberal Party was diminished. It is clear that the Liberal Party was not the winner. The National Party, by increasing one seat at the expense of its Coalition partner, was 'back from the brink' but now faces the fierce challenge

from rural-based right-wing parties as well as Independent candidates with strong local networks.

While the ALP recovered from a heavy defeat in 2013 to the brink of victory by adopting a ‘policy-rich approach’ to compensate for its Leader’s limited appeal, Labor’s first preference vote was its second lowest in recent history. It was hardly a winner. Chapter 11 by Rob Manwaring points out that Labor ran an oppositionist campaign, focusing on the so-called threat to Medicare. Perhaps that is the reason why its campaign fell just short.

The Greens, as Chapter 8 by Green and Chapter 13 by Stewart Jackson point out, put large resources into campaigns for House of Representative seats in metropolitan Melbourne and Sydney. It should have been obvious that the ALP would defend the Members for Sydney (Tanya Plibersek) and Grayndler (Anthony Albanese). It is a mystery to me why the Greens in NSW put so many resources there. While the Greens secured nine Senators, losing one in South Australia but still recording a respectable overall result, concentration of resources on the House seats in Melbourne and Sydney could have been why the Greens won only three Senators eligible to serve six-year terms. Green also points out that for the first time the Green’s aggregated share of votes in the Senate was lower than that in the House of Representatives.

So the winners of the 2016 election seem to be minor parties, especially the Nick Xenophon Team (NXT), Pauline Hanson’s One Nation (PHON), as well as Independents. However, as Chapter 15 by Glenn Kefford correctly points out, both Xenophon and Hanson faced difficulties institutionalising their parties after the federal election. NXT stumbled badly at ‘the next logical step... to entrench themselves further’ at the 2018 South Australian state election.¹ PHON has had a string of section 44 disqualifications and resignations.

One of the highlights of Australia’s federal election series is a section dedicated to analyse the AES, a long-standing survey of voter attitudes and behaviour. For a very long time, as Aitkin noted in the 1960s, high and strong level of party identification with major parties has contributed to the stability of Australia’s party system. As Chapter 10 by Clive Bean points out, while it is still possible to argue that ‘party

¹ See also the article by Mike Dean in this issue of the *Australasian Parliamentary Review*.

identification continues to dominate the electoral landscape', evidence to support decline in major party identification has finally emerged.

One of the more interesting analyses of the AES deals with the question concerning 'what if' there had been no change in the Liberal leadership. Chapter 10 by Bean concludes that voter attitudes to Tony Abbott were so low he would have dragged the Coalition vote down by as much as two percent. It seems obvious that the Coalition would have lost had they retained Abbott as Prime Minister.

As far as the change to the Senate electoral system is concerned, Green explains why it was necessary, how it was done and what kind of effect it had. While the double dissolution muddied the result and we have to wait for the next half Senate election to see exact impact of changes, it seems certain that in 2016 preferences flowed between parties with similar ideological outlooks. When a minor party was excluded from the count, preferences flowed steadily to major parties. And among minor parties, the ones with better name recognition tended to attract preferences. In a nutshell, it appears that the changes achieved the Prime Minister's purpose. On the other hand, the Prime Minister's decision to call a double dissolution election, lowering the Senate quota, made it easier for minor parties to win Senate seats at the expense of the Coalition, which lost 3 seats.

This book is not only an excellent snapshot of the 2016 election. It also provides comprehensive narrative of political landscape between 2013 and 2016. The fact that this book was published in April 2018 means that readers can observe post-election developments while reading the book. No one could have foreseen the political cyclone in the form of the section 44 disqualifications.² However, Turnbull's internal difficulties, which ultimately resulted in his removal, NXT's and PHON's inability to institutionalise themselves and the environmental issue eventually putting political pressure on the Coalition are developments mentioned in the book's analysis that have all been realised since 2016. The book's discussion of the implications of the election for the 45th Parliament are spot-on (the discussion on p.683 mentions the 43rd Parliament, which must mean the 45th).

² See the articles by Anne Twomey and Mel Keenan in the Spring/Summer 2017 issue of the *Australian Parliamentary Review*.

If I have one major complaint about this otherwise excellent book, it is the lack of an index. This absence is perhaps understandable, as the book has 690 pages. Nonetheless, for a book of this genre, an index seems indispensable.

The book left me with a couple of questions about the news media and Australian elections. First, with regard to the ‘legacy’ media, it is disturbing to see one of the major Australian media outlets—arguably the most powerful—become so biased that it has effectively become a political player. Is there anything that can be done to rectify the situation? Second, why is Crikey.com omitted from Chapter 20 by Peter Chen, in his examination of the election coverage by non-mainstream media? Crikey.com is older than Chen’s cut-off point of 7 years but this cut-off means the book omits an important media outlet from its analysis of election coverage. One thing is certain: Crikey.com is not a part of the traditional ‘legacy’ media.

By late 2018, the most frequently asked question concerning Australian politics is ‘Why have we had so many Prime Ministerial coups?’. I suppose quite a few experts have started contemplating this question and their ideas will come out sometime in 2020 in the form of the 2019 federal election review. I’m looking forward to reading that.