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TITLE: For true democracy, rules of the game must change

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PUBLICATION: The Canberra Times

PUBLICATION DATE: 10/08/10

LINK:

When football coaches start implementing boring but effective tactics sometimes those responsible for the success of the game have to change the rules or the fans will stop coming. Unfortunately those responsible for election campaign tactics have two things running in their favour. First, we are all forced to turn up to vote and second, only the political parties can change the rules for elections.

The problem with modern elections is that they are designed to actively prevent community debate about the big issues. It is not an accident, it is not the media's fault (well not entirely), and it is not the fault of new technology and the 24- hour news cycle.

It is simply the consequence of two major parties that are determined to 'stay on message'.

Each day is simply seen as an opportunity to focus the media, and in turn the public's attention to the issue that the parties have decided wins them the most votes.

But it doesn't need to be that way.

Imagine if all political parties had to put all of their policies on the table four weeks before the election. Imagine if rather than dribbling little bits and pieces of policy out day after day they instead had to put forward their entire policy agenda at the beginning of the campaign.

If such information was in the hands of the media, policy experts and the community themselves then ideas and priorities could be scrutinised and debated. Of course, this is exactly why the major parties work hard to keep their policies to themselves for as long as they can. But who is running this democracy, the voters or the political parties?

The major parties like the status quo for a number of reasons. First, they like the capacity to control their daily message. At this election, for example, the ALP started the campaign keen to focus on the Coalition's stance on industrial relations. The Coalition, on the other hand, was keen to talk about government debt and the appropriate treatment of asylum seekers (which they like to call 'border protection').

But what if voters were interested in climate change policy or the timetable for withdrawing our troops from Afghanistan? Bad luck. Voters just have to wait for the parties to talk about what we are interested in.

The second advantage is that because policies are dribbled out in the most unlikely, but most photogenic, locations the only people on hand to 'analyse' the policies are the media pack who follow the party leaders around. While some journalists have expertise in some policy areas, obviously no journalist has expertise in everything. From the political party's point of view this makes them the ideal people to describe their daily announcements.

Imagine if health experts had weeks to compare and contrast health policies and climate scientists had weeks to evaluate emission reduction policies. And imagine if community organisations, business groups and the media organised genuine debates about the issues they were actually interested in. Under the current system, by the time that policy experts have analysed what few policy details have been released the 'debate' has moved on.

While this approach makes it hard to ensure that policy announcements are reported within the context of expert analysis it can also make it virtually impossible to compare and contrast the policies of the major parties for the simple reason that both policies might be released weeks apart.

Political parties make much of the differences, however small, between each other during elections but there is also much they have in common. In this election both major parties clearly do not want to talk about climate change, the timetable for withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, voluntary euthanasia or a clear definition of a 'sustainable population'.

Under the current rules of 'political debate' it is safe to say that if neither side wants to talk about an issue then there will be few opportunities for anyone else to talk about them either.

There are some pragmatic obstacles to forcing political parties to disclose their policies and allow the public to debate them. The first is that under the current arrangements only the government knows when the election will be called. The obvious solution to that problem is to abolish the year long phoney election campaigns we currently endure and move towards fixed election dates.

Another argument may be that if parties are forced to reveal their policies four weeks out from the election then they would be unable to respond to community feedback and expert scrutiny. The solution to this could in turn become one of the highlights of election campaigns; let all political parties revise their policies one week before the election. There is nothing like an election to bring out the differences in values, priorities and objectives of all Australians.

But during this campaign there is almost universal acceptance that the campaign is too contrived and too narrow to do justice to the issues facing the country. While booing boring play can provide short-term relief, if we want our democracy to flourish it looks like we are going to have to change the rules.

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