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TITLE: Major parties pay the price for lack of courage on big issues

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The most boring election campaign in living memory has delivered the most interesting election result since World War II. While the major parties, and many of the commentators, are struggling to figure out what it all means, the result is actually quite simple to interpret. Australia's voters do not think that either the ALP or the Coalition deserved a mandate to form a government in their own right.

In 2007 the ALP primary vote was 43.4 per cent while on the weekend it fell to 38.5. The 4.9 per cent swing against Labor translates into 494,000 fewer votes. That's a lot of unhappy Australians.

But despite the 'heroic' efforts of Tony Abbott to stop the boats and stop the debt the primary vote swing to the Coalition was only 1.4 per cent. To put that in context, the increase in the informal vote is currently around 1.7 per cent.

So where did all the votes go? The Greens. The 11.5 per cent primary vote recorded by the Greens is a record for a minor party in Australia in a federal election. Put simply, since 2007 they picked up more than 540,000 new votes. The 3.6 per cent swing to the Greens means that nearly 75 per cent of the swing against the ALP wound up with the Greens.

Can anyone really describe the weekend's result as a lurch to the right?

One explanation for why the election was so boring, and so unsuccessful for both the ALP and the Coalition, is that the so-called major parties were determined to talk about minor issues. Consider the non-issues we were forced to endure. First we had the interminable debate about how many debates we should have and how they should be conducted.

Then we had the pseudo economic debate about the best way for proposed policies to be costed. Should all the costing be done by Treasury or by an accountancy firm? Maybe Paul the Octopus should tell us. But despite all the talk about how hard it is to manage our 1.3 trillion dollar economy there was barely a mention of whether we are paying enough taxes to fund all the services we need.

Neither side wanted to discuss how their party would handle a double dip recession. And there was no mention whatsoever of how it is that parties that claim to be responsible economic managers can completely ignore the overwhelming economic advice that a carbon price is the best way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

And then there was the endless talk about stopping the boats. While the Coalition claimed that it would reduce boat arrivals to just three each year the ALP went to great lengths, literally, to fly David Bradbury, the member for the Western Sydney seat of Lindsay, to Darwin so that he could be filmed on a navy patrol boat protecting us from refugees.

Both major parties spent far more time talking about the imagined 'threat' of refugees than the real threats faced by the brave soldiers serving in Afghanistan.

Twenty Australians have now sacrificed their lives for this war on the other side of the planet, but neither party spelt out a clear plan for why we are there and how long we will be staying.

Wars end when one side conquers the other or surrenders. After five weeks of campaigning, I have no idea which we are working towards.

The most extraordinary thing about our potential hung Parliament is that it is seen as extraordinary. There is nothing in our constitution that mentions political parties, indeed, there is nothing in our constitution that even mentions prime ministers!

Our system of constitutional democracy relies on the fact that we delegate our decision making powers to our local members and to our senators. It's up to them to sort out how to make that work. Most democracies rely on shifting coalitions to form a majority and most democracies allow members of parliament to 'cross the floor' and vote against their party leader.

The ALP is busy trying to convince us that the swing against them was all due to the 'Rudd Factor' with some 'state issues' thrown in for good measure.

The Coalition is busy trying to convince us, and potentially the Governor General, that a big swing against the ALP can be interpreted as a ringing endorsement for them. Both are kidding themselves.

Australia is one of the richest countries in the world and we are living in the richest period the world has ever known. Yet we are told by our major parties that we cannot afford to address indigenous disadvantage, we cannot afford to subsidise dental care and we cannot afford to prevent dangerous climate change.

And in the middle of a losing a 'war on terror' we are declaring war on 'boat people'!

Australia is blessed with honest and hard-working politicians, but we are cursed with a moribund parliamentary system that hides from big issues like climate change, population and income distribution. Some of the best debaters in the country have been trained to 'stay on message' rather than 'speak like a human' whenever a microphone can be seen. It's banal. Let's hope the rise of the independents leads to an outbreak of independent thinking.

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