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TITLE: Time for the major political parties to acknowledge their significant others

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Australia has listened, it has voted and it has decided.

Australia wants political arrangements 'other' than what the major parties intended.

It's not what Sophie Mirabella expected before being 'outgunned' by the independent forces of Cathy McGowan and Tony Windsor.

It's not what ALP faceless man, Don Farrell, expected when he gave up his number one SA Senate position to Penny Wong.

And it's not what PM-elect Tony Abbott expected when he warned voters away from independents and minor parties.

Both major parties stated in the Election campaign that they respected the 'will of the Australian people'. Well, what is that will? Clearly, it is other than the will of the major parties.

And if the election was a referendum on the illegitimacy of independent voices in the parliament after the 'chaos' of minority government - then it was soundly defeated.

Australians want more voices in parliament, not more power in the hands of a Prime Minister.

A one per cent swing to the Liberals in the Lower House and a one per cent swing away from them in the Senate is hardly a landslide. Indeed, can this result really be called a 'mandate'?

But while the Coalition's vote barely moved, voters fled the ALP and the Greens in droves. Both lost around four per cent of votes (or around 400,000 voters a piece).

The big winners from the 2013 Federal Election were the 'others' - that is, the independents, micro parties and candidates like Adam Bandt (who successfully managed to campaign on his own brand in an election where his party went backwards).

Despite concerted efforts by the majors to win back the seats of Melbourne and Denison, Adam Bandt recorded a 7.7% swing to hold his seat and Andrew Wilkie recorded a 14% swing in his favour.

Claims of Independent's Day have been made before (including after the 2007 and 2010 Federal Elections). These resulted in (what at the time seemed) a complex shared balance of power in the Senate and a hung parliament in the House respectively. Both were deemed aberrations, but history seems to suggest that it might be time for the majors to acknowledge their significant 'others'.

The presence of 'independents' and 'other's in Australian politics is not a new phenomenon; it has occurred in various forms since Federation. There have been eleven 'independent' members in the House since 1949.

Rodrigues and Brenton (2010) provide a detailed historical analysis of 'independents' in Australian parliaments, to find that in recent years, the overall level of support for 'independents' has plateaued, but the numbers of 'independents' continues to grow. They argue that the greater number of 'independents' now being elected to parliament is due to more experience (or advice) in where, when and how to be elected.

With this recent growth in 'independent' members, Australia continues to be home to more non-major party members than any other comparable western country. What is also unique to Australia is the potential influence of a handful of these 'independent' members on the outcomes of the Australian Federal Parliament. This influence is due to two historical characteristics of Australian politics.

First, the two party system in Australia has amongst the strictest voting disciplines internationally. This sees members who are not bound by a party platform in a position to make a deciding vote when neither major party has a majority. There is some disingenuity in major party warnings about the unrepresentative influence of minority MPs, when it is their blind adherence to major party discipline that gives them this power.

The second characteristic is shared by many other western nations, namely a steady increase in non-major party support. This Election the informal vote was up, but so was the other than majors vote. The combined vote for the major parties was just over 79%. This was down from 81% (in 2010), 85.5% (in 2007) and 84% (in 2004).

Clearly, the Australian people do not accept the major party premise that minors equal mayhem.

Instead, they opted for minority as a safeguard in the Senate. There it looks likely that Australia will have the most complex (even eclectic) Senate composition since proportional representation was introduced in 1948. Potentially, ten Greens and eight 'other' Senators will hold a shared balance of power after the Senate changes in July 2014.

In South Australia, the Xenophon Group won an unprecedented 25% of the vote, outpolling the ALP. This exceeded Xenophon's previous record in the state Legislative Council (where he won 20% of the vote and nearly outpolling the Liberals in his own right).

Senator Xenophon provides a pertinent illustration of what might be in store for the next 3 years. With the Greens likely to show their hand by voting in the House, he may well become the 'Elder Statesman' of the shared balance of power in the Senate.

In 2007, the incoming Rudd Government ignored key Senators of all persuasions, such was its hubris and lack of understanding of the unique powers of the Australian Senate. In 2008, it stood back and waited for the minors to fall in the face of the looming Global Financial Crisis. It took Senator Xenophon voting down an Economic Stimulus Package proposal to reset the *modus operandi* in the Senate.

Senator Xenophon will have lost none of his resolve over the last three years as a self-described 'feather duster', and his electoral success will only embolden him further. Neither will he have lost his capacity to bring together coalitions of 'others' from different political persuasions.

Only time will tell if PM-elect Abbott will be humbler and shrewder in his dealings with the Senate.

But the signs are not good.

In order to wreck the Gillard government Tony Abbott campaigned relentlessly against 'minority government'. He was ruthless in his depiction of Gillard's willingness to compromise her party's policy position to secure the support of the Greens as 'lying' to the Australian public.

And now, we see Tony Abbott taking a tough line with future crossbench Senators warning them not to 'stymie' the Coalition's 'mandate'. That sort of approach did not work for Rudd I, and it was certainly not the Howard approach to minority in the Senate.

The Coalition has looked at the last three years and promised a style of leadership that is not open to negotiating with the views of 'others'.

Could Tony Abbott's perceived strength and single mindedness turn out to be one of his biggest weaknesses?

The weekend's election result leaves us with many questions. Will the carbon price be abolished? Will the senate voting rules be changed? And, if major parties refuse to listen to the will of Australian people, will there be another election in the not too distant future?

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