

Dead Centre:  
How political  
pragmatism  
is killing us

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Democracy thrives on high expectations and starves on a diet of cynicism. But for decades the lowest common denominator of “centrism” has stifled serious debate about what kind of country we want to be and how best to get there. We are one of the richest countries in the world, yet our health, education and public transport systems are a pale imitation of what many Europeans enjoy. We are the second largest energy exporter in the world, but while the Saudis, Qataris and Norwegians get rich when world energy prices surge, we watch our power and petrol bills soar and our elected leaders pretend there is nothing they can do to help. We are the twelfth largest economy in the world and claim to be punching above our weight on the world stage when in reality we are barely raising a glove. Maybe Australians are happy with the way things are, but I suspect not.

The endless centrist droning about the need for tax reform and a productivity agenda stifles

genuine debate about what Australians want more of, what we want less of, and how to redesign our system of taxes, subsidies and publicly provided services in ways that would deliver happier, healthier and richer lives for the vast majority of us. Rather than actively participate in democratic debates about whether we should have a health system that is more like that of the US or Norway, most Australians have been bored into silence by the endless technocratic econobabble about fiscal sustainability and effective marginal tax rates when the truth is Australia can easily afford to have the nice things they have in Europe.

Labor's recent landslide victory in the lower house, combined with the majority it can form with the ten Greens senators whenever they agree in the upper house, means there is simply no progressive reform the prime minister can get through his own party room that the Coalition can veto. The 2025 election result provides the Albanese Government with the opportunity to be either the most progressive parliament in modern history, the dampest of squibs, or the centre of the centrists. The choice is Labor's.

John Howard never gave Labor a veto of his reforms and in turn he did whatever he needed,

including radically amending his GST plan to get it through the Senate. He bribed Senator Mal Colston to quit the Labor Party and sit as an independent. The price was providing Liberal support for Colston's nomination for the well-paid position of Deputy President of the Senate, and the legislative dividend for Howard was Colston's vote to privatise Telstra.

Likewise, when Anthony Albanese was serious about reform, as he was with industrial relations in his first term, he was happy to cut a deal with the Greens. Indeed, the idea that Labor would have waited for bipartisan support from the Liberals before delivering the "Secure Jobs, Better Pay" or "Closing Loopholes" bills is simply absurd. But when it came to environmental policy, climate policy, electoral reform and the powers of the promised corruption watchdog Labor was happy to let the Liberals veto Labor's ambitions. In those instances, it was Labor's preference for dealing with the Liberals that led to watered-down legislation.

No major party MP gets preselected, elected, promoted to cabinet or installed in the top job without knowing how to count votes in their branch, their electorate and their party room.

Knowing the voting rules and knowing how to count the votes *is* the job. And every prime minister knows that an ugly win is still a win. The single vote that made Tony Abbott opposition leader in 2009 did nothing to diminish the impact he went on to have.

And all prime ministers know how to look like they are trying. Like a call-centre worker claiming that your call is important to them, all professional politicians can say they are hard at work on their publicly stated priorities while doing nothing to actually deliver on them. Most people understand that bold speeches, summits and inquiries can conceal a lack of ambition behind a cloak of activity. But few people realise that introducing legislation to parliament, legislation designed in such a way that it will not pass through the Senate, is the secret weapon of Australian politics. Used well, such strategically drafted legislation, sometimes called “bluff bills”, can convince the whole country that a government is desperate to do something that it would rather leave undone.

The best bluff bills are designed to make the government seem centrist and paint their opponents as extreme. It is easy for outsiders

to confuse the willingness of a government to introduce legislation to parliament with their determination to fight for an actual outcome. The key skill of university debaters is to sound like they care about the case they are making, and our parliament is full of former university debaters.

No one negotiating a free trade agreement, an enterprise agreement, or even the purchase of a second-hand car expects their first offer to be accepted. Likewise, any government that drops a piece of legislation into parliament and says “respect my mandate” isn’t serious about driving change. Like gorillas thumping their chests in lieu of a real fight, governments often thump their tables and shout “mandate” in lieu of engaging with the Senate as our Constitution demands.

Labor has become particularly skilled at playing “the game of per cents”, drafting legislation that focuses debate on arbitrary percentage targets (or sometimes amounts of expenditure) which are designed at the outset to draw criticism from the Greens on the basis that Labor is not doing enough and from the Coalition arguing Labor is going too far. Having used their arbitrary targets to extract the desired response from