



A GRASS ROOTS OBSERVATION WHY THE LIBERAL LOST

Abalinx - Phillip Daw - 20 February 2015

Caption. There are more grassroots than the foliage at the top. Both are dependent upon each other to survive the elements of change.

Editorial comment. *Seldom in the annals of Liberal Party has history of a Victorian Liberal Government come under such scrutiny. In this article, Cr. Phillip Daw examines the reasons why the Liberal party lost and provides strategies upon which to build on for a return to Government. Many have blamed Tony Snell and his management team, others on the disunity, some on the Federal influence, a few on the poor advice being presented to Denis Naphine, the factions, the dilution, lack of input and reduction of branch members at the grassroots level, the interference of the Parliamentary party, the David Kemp reforms and/or the weaknesses within the Secretariat that have torn the Victorian Liberal party apart.*

Whoever is responsible is not the point. What is at stake is the credibility and brand name of the Victorian Liberal Party. A party that has alienated its members to such a degree that one hopes for a miracle or a revival of its past fortunes. All are looking at Michael Kroger to bring about the changes necessary for a revival amidst a storm and chaotic environment. To be sure, there is none other than Michael Kroger, a man whose magnetic personality can but win over any recalcitrant individual or those that seemingly stray from the core values of the Liberal party.

Philip Daw does well in examine many aspects of what ails the Victorian Liberal Party and yet one wonders what impact it will have on the membership. Phillip Daw is a grass roots member who is well known amongst long serving members and has not been afraid to question the validity of decisions which at times appears incompatible with traditional conservative values and paradigms. Whatever the case may, Phillip Daw article is meant to question the past paradigms with the aim of looking forward to a brighter future that involves rather than alienates the broader church of Liberal party members. It is an article worth considering.

Members climbing the so-called social ladder and the hierarchy within the Victorian Liberal Party should take heed of the grass roots whose voice is not normally heard but in most of not all cases is being suppressed from voicing their anger.

*Anger encapsulated by a seething resentment that has grossly been underestimated by the management team and parliamentary members. Anger aimed directly at those who deliberately went about character assassinating others and in doing so alienate a swathe of honest conservative Liberals of shapes and sizes. Those contemplate on taking the reins will do well to listen to the concerns of the grass root members who make up the majority of the membership. Technologies, campaigning and use of outdated paradigms are no longer valid and a fresh look is required in order to regain the initiative and win back government under a Matthew Guy/Michael Kroger political leadership and guidance. United, even the impossible is possible. **The Editor***

VICTORIAN STATE ELECTION LOSS & STRATEGIES FOR RETURN TO OFFICE

Strong election policy promises, such as those for public transport, that was not implemented once in government and/or was deferred. The Liberal Party went into the 2010 election with many very strong and attractive election promises that attracted voters and groups that included people who would not normally be expected to support the Liberals. This included, for example, our transport policies that, among other things, alluded to a move away from a road-centric focus to a public transport focus and more holistic approach – blending public and road transport, and planning issues.

I suggest that this, for many voters, triggered a leap of faith in the Liberal Party. Clearly the Labor Party had failed in many areas and was seen as tired, out of touch, and not listening. Many voters moved to give the only alternative (the Liberals) the opportunity and, notwithstanding the close election results, they did so by a clear direction rather than a protest vote to minor parties and independents. After the election, these election-winning policies were often seen to be postponed or mothballed. For many non-traditional voters who voted Liberal on this occasion this was interpreted as broken election promises, and exploited as such by our Labor opponents.

Again by way of example, the decision to prioritize the East West Road tunnel (which was not an election promise) in preference to promised public transport projects was seen by many as a broken promise – and the Labor Party were not backward in exploiting and encouraging that perception. I understand that this was difficult not to do in the light of an offer of \$3 billion from the Liberal Federal Government. I have more to say about the Abbott Government's role in the State election loss later in this submission. At the time I wrote to the Premier and Minister

for Transport strongly advising that it was sending the wrong message. I did not at that time and still do not oppose the East-West link (I think it is essential) but its priority and timing was lousy and its adverse consequences to public perception profound.

Lack of direction in first two years (Ted Baillieu premiership). The first two years of the Liberal/National State Government was seen to be characterized by a lack of decision-making and direction. The Government, whilst having only a slender majority and a growing Geoff Shaw issue, should nevertheless have done everything possible to consolidate its position. It did not. It was not seen to be moving towards implementation of policies and the perception was that the public service bureaucracy was running it rather than the other way round.

Many of the more senior public servants were likely or actual appointees of the previous Labor Government. Whilst this may not be true of some or even most, the loyalties should have been carefully scrutinized and, where necessary, some removals or redeployment undertaken. (Jeff Kennett would have had no hesitation to do so and did do so in 1992!)

Nepotism. Another disturbing aspect of the first two years of the Liberal/National Government (and possibly beyond) was the level of nepotism and cronyism. I suggest that the practice was rampant. The rumour was that Premier Baillieu had a list of people that he could not or would not appoint. I know that I was recommended for an appointment and it has been suggested to me that my appointment was blocked at the behest of someone (who I will not name here) who I have never met and who has never met me! I do not think my case was isolated. When I told a Liberal colleague that I had been recommended for an appointment his response was, "Are you near the top of the list of 600 or near the bottom?"

I do not think that this type of activity in the Liberal Party is positive or helpful in getting the best people or the best outcomes. The strength of an organization is in its diversity and collective talents – not on favoritism or rewards for mates who may not have the right skill sets for the position they are slotted into. For example, respectfully, I suggest that Petro Georgio, whilst talented in many fields, may not have been the best person to review the Local Government councillor election process. It would have helped to have someone who is inclusive and who can work with the Local Government sector to develop the most optimum voting process for that level of Government.

Interpersonal skills. Nepotism and cronyism is a fairly good segue into interpersonal skills. Many of our people are not very good at interpersonal skills. They are often authoritarian, disengaged and not understanding of the best ways to motivate and engage with people or involve them in a process or program or conversation. This may seem removed from any analysis of why we lost the last election, but I suggest it, nepotism and cronyism are very much linked to how the community perceives us. See also "Telling versus Selling" a few headings further down in this article.

Denis Napthine. When Ted Baillieu chose to resign as Premier, bravely into the breach stepped Denis. I believe Denis did a good to excellent job under very difficult

circumstances that he inherited. These difficult circumstances included, but are by no means limited to, the Geoff Shaw situation, a Federal Liberal Government with a different and often conflicting agenda to the State Government's, (more to say on that shortly), a bureaucracy often with its own agenda and often dysfunctional across many of its departments. For example, the Education Department (simplified title) versus the Department of Planning and Community Development (old title). For the sake of brevity I won't elaborate here.

Denis, from my observation, was a decisive Premier who worked hard and consistently against the odds to bring it all back on track.

I was disappointed for Denis when he did the traditional Liberal Party "fall on one's sword" defeated leader thing. I think circumstance and history have not treated him well, and he deserved a better outcome. However, it has happened and I must say that his successor, Matthew Guy is an excellent choice of leader.

Geoff Shaw and the Liberal pre-selection/endorsement process. After the election of a Liberal government in 2010, Geoff Shaw, with his self-serving approach and disregard for established codes of conduct, quickly became very problematic for the Government. The Premier should have taken a more decisive position earlier rather than later. But far more significant than that is the question: How did he get pre-selected and endorsed in the first place? Clearly, I suggest, our pre-selection process and due diligence when assessing candidates is fundamentally flawed. His case, whilst arguably extreme, is not isolated.

Much more needs to be done to address the pre-selection process to ensure candidates of the highest calibre who add specific skill sets and capabilities to the parliamentary party that are either lacking or need strengthening. Furthermore, we need parliamentarians with a strong demonstrable life experience record and not just electorate office staffers and favourites.

Values versus ideology. The Liberal Party has a long-standing practice of emphasizing ideology, although, increasingly members as well as the general public don't have a clear understanding of what that ideology is! There are too many mixed messages. I believe it is high time we focused more on values with an emphasis on aligning them to those of the wider community. Menzies wrote of The Forgotten People. They don't seem to have a high priority or value in the modern Liberal Party. Are they here for the Party or is the Party here for them? Have they once again been forgotten – by the very party that championed their cause? We need to develop a new platform to take into account changing community values, and we need to be cognizant of what those changing values are.

Have we drifted from our ideology or has a major portion of the voting public drifted from it?

I grew up in the Menzies era. I was born the same year that Menzies became Prime Minister and he still was when I turned twenty-one. Like many of my generation, my entire adolescent political and life exposure was under Liberalism. Today we have a younger generation who for a large part of their lives has grown up under Labor

Governments. They are not as predisposed to Liberalism. Increasingly, the Labor Party is seen (especially by these younger people) as the Party of choice. Whereas, in my youth, it was completely the opposite.

Why? One reason I suggest is that Labor has moved to the centre – but is this the only reason? (Increasingly, however, younger people are becoming disillusioned with Labor and are turning to The Greens. I will come to that shortly.) When analyzing past election losses the assumption is that we have failed to deliver our message. We assume that our message and ideology is the same as it was fifty years ago. Is this so? There is a disconnect somewhere and these are the possible options that come to mind. Have we:

- Failed to get our message across. (The common conclusion, which may have several derivative causes.)
- Drifted away from our original ideology.
- Failed to recognize that the values and aspirations of a large percentage of the voting public have changed and our ideology no longer resonates with them.
- Failed to adapt. (If our values and ideology no longer resonate with a large section of the community – especially younger generations - we can seek to educate them (a very difficult task that we have not mastered over the last decade and a half), or we can adapt (change, evolve). OR, we can go the way of the dinosaurs.

The question is often asked today, by many Liberals as well as others: What is Liberal ideology? Is it relevant? We are not good at adapting/evolving. We must change that. It is a serious weakness. And we must do it in a structured and meaningful way with a clear purpose and targeted outcome. We spend a lot of time and emphasis on telling the voting public how good we are at economic management, and it is undoubtedly true. We are much better at it than Labor. However, is this attractive to the voting public? I suggest it is a given.

What the public wants to know is how this is going to benefit them? The slogan “Building a better Victoria” is important to me both as a Liberal and an engineer, and I have no doubt it is important to you. However, does it resonate with the average voter? Or is it the outcomes arising from it that is his or her prime consideration? If the pain of the process outweighs the benefits, will they vote for us?

The Australian voters’ psyche. One thing I have observed about the Australian voting public over many years – It does NOT like political extremes. The Liberal Party from its formation and leadership by Menzies and for the following thirty or more years was politically centre of the road. I suggest that when Whitlam became Prime Minister he did not last long because of his extreme ideology and Government. When Hawke and Keating gained power they seized the political centre of the road and the Liberal Party moved to a more extreme position. In my view, that was a major political mistake.

What I believe the Liberal Party needed to do then was to stay in the centre and define/differentiate itself by process rather than ideology. I am still of that view. There are

people right now in the Liberal Party who are advocating that our response to the recent election loss should be to move further to extremes. I do not agree.

Past analysis of election losses. After each election loss over the last fifteen years (hopefully with the exception of this one) the Party has brought in a stalwart to analyze why we lost. I suggest these analyses have been largely limited to identifying a perceived failure to get our message across, sometimes the wrong message, and the constraints and circumstances influencing the election. NEVER have I seen an in depth analysis of your ideology and values, (things that are seemingly sacrosanct and beyond question), whether they resonate with the electorate, or whether they are relevant in today's environment. I hope for the sake of the Liberal Party that this time will be different.

Telling versus selling! Recently in a post election discussion another Liberal stated that one of the problems is that "the Liberals Tell whilst the Labor Party sells". On reflection I have to conclude just how penetrating and accurate to the core that remark was. It is time we placed much more emphasis on listening and engaging with the community and listening and engaging with our own membership across a broad spectrum. This is not just an activity we should do in opposition and in the lead up to an election. It is something we should and must do at all times, including when we attain government. We are not here just to win an election. We are not here to madly govern for a brief period before the electorate throws us out. We are also here to provide a stable government that remains in office for the long term. The process of winning and retaining the hearts and minds of the community does not stop the day we win government.

Young peoples' aspirations and values. During the last election I spent a considerable amount of time at pre-poll booths at Victoria University, Melbourne and at Tullamarine Airport. What struck me was the noticeably large number of young people, **especially young women**, walking past both me handing out Liberal *How to vote* material AND Labor, and going straight to The Greens. It was something I had never seen before in all my years of handing out *How to vote* cards. Furthermore, many were not seeking *How to vote* cards for the seat of Melbourne, they were seeking *How to vote* cards for all over Melbourne and, to a lesser extent, Victoria. Generally, they were well dressed, articulate, and mostly "white collar" workers from offices around Melbourne. They were clearly not yobbos, or "tree huggers", or alternative lifestylers.

Clearly, their political values were quite different to those espoused by the Liberal Party and those espoused by Labor. I suggest that their focus was on societal issues rather than business or economic management and they appeared not to see the Labor Party as providing solutions to their aspirations. These people are going to become a substantial percentage of the mainstream of society in later years, and if we want to remain politically relevant we need to address their aspirations and values. As you know, Labor lost Melbourne to The Greens and we similarly lost Prahan. Were it not for us preferencing Labor ahead of The Greens, Labor would have lost more inner city seats including Richmond, (held narrowly by Richard Wynne who is now the Minister for Planning in the Andrews Government), and others.

The Greens. In the lead-up to the 2010 election The Greens went out of their way to court the Liberal Party. I suggest that in parliament they were relatively accommodating and collaborative, and often voted with us on many important issues and legislation. Similarly, they were approachable and approached us outside of parliament. Many may argue otherwise, and I would argue that it is all relative. But nevertheless there are clear indications that they were more accommodating and collaborative at that time. I further suggest that they had an agenda that might not have been as altogether sinister as we seem to have assumed, although I have no doubt that they also had an embedded hidden agenda within a wider agenda.

I put it to you that The Greens (as with the Liberal Party) is not a homogenous unified entity between the States and Federally. Their strategies and what they do in Canberra and Tasmania might not be the same as here in Victoria. (Neither are ours! And, as I have already alluded to and will further expand on shortly, that may have been part of our undoing.) Very close to the 2010 election WE walked away from any accommodation and collaboration with The Greens, and they have born a grudge ever since!

Contrast the lead-up to the 2014 election. The Greens were openly hostile to the Liberals. I wonder why? We seem to have this strange idea that people and other political parties have long term memory loss and that "what goes around comes around" does not apply in politics. I beg to differ. Could it be something to do with limitations on interpersonal skills and motivational understanding – lack of empathy? Could it be something to do with resentment by a losing side about a "win – lose" approach rather than a "win – win" one? ("Win – Lose" approaches all too often result in "lose – lose" outcomes, and lasting resentment!) The Liberal Party has said for several elections that "A vote for The Greens is a vote for Labor!" I believe this is neither an accurate or soundly based conclusion.

The Greens preference votes roughly go 2 : 1 in favour of labor. They also rarely direct preferences on their ballot papers and usually put the option of how to preference the Liberals or Labor at eh discretion of the voter. I put it to you that most preferences flow to Labor because those voters are disaffected Labor voters rather than first time voters. If this is the case, the whole "vote for The Greens is a vote for Labor" is a fallacy. If The Greens were not in the ballot these voters would directly vote for Labor anyway! If you want them to vote Liberal find out what they want in a Party and reflect it in our policies and actions. If you are not prepared to do that, write them off and move on – but I put it to you that we cannot afford to do that if we want to win elections.

The damaged Liberal brand and the Abbott factor. Earlier I suggested that the federal Liberal Government had a significant role in the State Government's election defeat. The Victorian Liberal Government was a moderate centrist Government that should have had a lot of voter appeal. The Federal Liberal Government of Tony Abbott is a far more extreme Government and there were bound to be conflicting messages to the electorate. As well as shutting down the country's automotive industry with its headquarters in Victoria there were a

number of Federal announcements weeks out from the State election that were disastrous to our state election prospects.

As a Councillor I come into contact and work with a number of Labor Party people. I quote one of them: "The Liberal Party lost the State election because of Tony Abbott..... But don't replace him; he is the best thing we have got going." I also recollect a comment of about two years ago made by a prominent (Victorian based) Federal Liberal politician who said we needed to get out of much of our manufacturing industry and concentrate on high value specialized manufacturing. I would have thought that submarines were a good fit for that segment but apparently not! When the previous Federal Liberal government was in power under John Howard I seem to recall that there was a time when not one State or Territory was in Liberal hands!

I suggest that Federal Government have a responsibility to govern the country, whilst also being cognizant of Liberal State Governments and the need to take actions that do not damage them. The Liberal brand has been seriously damaged by recent events – not just the leadership issue but also the total lack of empathy and engagement shown in recent times. It may take years to rebuild.

Daniel Andrews. Already Daniel Andrews has revealed a number of failings: He is a political opportunist. He is not a centrist, he is at eh political extreme (remember voters don't like the political extreme). His judgment is highly questionable as is his integrity. His economic management credentials are non-existent and he has a rapidly growing reputation for breaking election promises. I could elaborate on each of these points in considerable detail but I will refrain from doing so here. The Liberal Party cannot afford to let him define himself; we must be on the front foot and define him in the way that best suites us. He and his Government must be destabilized and there are growing opportunities to do so.

A one term Andrews Labor Government. We must develop strategies and policies and take actions to ensure that the Andrews' Labor Government is a one term Government. This is a significant challenge but is achievable. The fact that it does not control the Legislative Council and does not have a lot of support from The Greens and independents is helpful. Andrew's weaknesses are the Labor Party's weaknesses. The assumption that we can't oust it in one term is defeatist and if accepted is likely to become a self fulfilling prophecy.

The Liberal Party's future. If we continue as we have done in the past and if we don't question and critically analyze and adopt significant changes and organisational reform, I believe that the future of the Liberal Party in Victoria is bleak. We may well become a minor Party. We need to:

- Engage with The Greens and explore ways that we can undermine and destabilize the Andrew's Government.

- Be prepared to work with The Greens on an ongoing basis in a collaborative way and not assume that our goals and objectives and theirs are mutually exclusive.
- Not treat them as our primary enemy.. Our enemy is the labor Party. It is folly to preference the Labor Party ahead of the Greens. It is likely The Greens will win Legislative Assembly seats in the inner metropolitan electorates and we must be able to accept and accommodate this.

I am aware that this poses a high level of risk and a high level of trust on both sides. It will be a long time building up such a relationship. We have three and a half years. The alternative is a long time in the opposition wilderness and a strong possibility of relegation to a minor Party. I believe that Matthew Guy has the capability to do all of this at the parliamentary Party level. It needs to be matched within the organisational/administrative side of the Party.



Phillip Daw is a qualified engineer with a Master of Business Administration. A Councilor, political grass roots member and campaigner His interests include transport; planning; enhanced community houses, sporting grounds and pavilions; active participation by the elderly in the community; building a vibrant economy; maintaining neighborhood character and improving open spaces.