

POLLS & TRENDS



John Scales

MOST VOTERS ARE RIGHT....

In all my years as a researcher I have never seen such a disconnect amongst voters with the political discourse. Granted, there has always been a healthy degree of cynicism and scepticism towards politics and politicians, but voters en masse have moved beyond being attuned and annoyed to simply switching off. This was highlighted to me in a recent focus group with the comment, “Why should I listen to them when they won’t listen to me?”.

This is about more than voters being frustrated with the antics of question time. It is fundamentally concerning for the health of participatory democracy. Now, the shutters are up and voters are disengaged and simply not listening. Many are largely unaware of the merits of most key issues and their opinions are being informed and influenced less and less by what the parties and politicians have to say on any matter.

To understand this let’s appreciate the landscape from the voter perspective. A revealing and albeit simplistic way to interpret polling is to look at what the majority of people think. Here is the majority (50%+) view based on JWS Research and other published polling:

Nationally on primary vote, most voters would not currently vote for the Labor Party, or the Liberal Party, or the Nationals or the Greens.

Most voters are dissatisfied with the jobs that Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott are doing as Prime Minister and Leader

of the Opposition respectively.

Most voters have a poor view of the Greens and Independents holding the balance of power in the Senate.

Most voters are unhappy about the introduction of a carbon tax in Australia and most voters in all States oppose the Government’s carbon tax.

Most voters don’t understand what the benefits of the carbon tax are either for themselves or for Australia.

How is it that a Government can get to a point where it is at odds with most people on most issues most of the time and yet despite this voters still don’t much like the alternatives? In large part, it is because the model for political discourse in Australia is broken.

Once again, let’s try to understand it from the voter perspective. Modern lifestyles are increasingly about connection and community, about understanding each other, about working together and about engaging in meaningful dialogues. Even the big banks have realised this and changed their positioning and marketing over recent years. They are now your trusted friend and counsel and have your best interests at heart! Ever wondered about the explosion and success of social networking technologies? It is about listening and being listened to, about feeling relevant. It is about living, not winning. Politics, which does not subscribe to these tenets of contemporary interaction, has become a contest just for the paid participants.

STAFFER'S SOAP BOX

No excuses. No mistakes.



Peter Capaldi aka Malcom Tucker. Courtesy of BBC Television

Not long ago many new to Club Fed spoke of wanting to be Sam and Toby. Now the name on the lips of newbies reaching Canberra is Malcolm!

The fictional characters of *The West Wing* and *The Thick of It* have a lot to answer for. Yes, they have encouraged a new breed of politically minded 20-somethings who are more aware than ever that the fast paced world of politics is nothing like the gentlemanly adagio often portrayed by Sir Humphrey and Bernard. However, what many involved in politics haven't yet grasped is that, unlike Malcolm Tucker, they cannot completely control the news cycle.

Having worked in and around politics for more than a decade, I regularly find myself pulled aside at functions by whinging and whining advisers bemoaning the fact that the boss has been the butt of the media that day, that week or for some time. "It was only a little slip up" or "caught on the hop" are among the usual excuses.

Voters are also confused. Political discussion resounds with the 'absolute righteousness' of the proponent and the 'complete folly' of the antagonist, with exaggeration and attack the order of the day. I understand we are involved in an adversarial political system and I also understand how this is played out through wedge politics and by other means. But does every member of the Federal Labor Government and the Greens believe that the carbon tax is the required solution to climate change and does every member of the Federal Coalition believe that it is not? No, they don't. Voters know this, they see it for the lie that it is and it feeds their distrust of politics and politicians – to saturation point.

Consensus is rarely achieved without negotiation and compromise. The grandstanding and chest beating that typifies

Excuses can get you only so far. From personal experience, making excuses usually means a period of hot water until rehabilitation. I was quick to learn that in politics there is no time for excuses. Moreover, there is even less time to make mistakes.

If you work within the world of politics, or more precisely, if you are engaged as a media or policy adviser and you blame a score of negative column inches or a slump in the polls on the actions of the media, then you're no better than the proverbial builder who blames his tools.

current political discourse in Australia has simply left voters dazed and confused, not confident and informed. There is understandably a lot of passion involved for many involved in politics on a professional basis, but most voters do not see the issues so clearly and are not so convinced.

Voters are certainly not convinced by the loudest and most forcefully presented argument. In fact on the whole they actually have far more important priorities centred on work, family, friends and community interests. They don't have the time to research and understand an issue and all they typically hear through the media is argument and disagreement, much of the time about things they themselves don't care too much about. Everyone can't be right and so probably no-one is, noting that

Only Malcolm Tucker can get away with saying, "it's in their interests to say you said it, because if they don't, they're not gonna get what you say tomorrow or the next day when I decide to tell them what it is you're saying."

In politics you don't get to decide what the media ultimately decides to report and we definitely don't get to decide what the media find interesting but we should never stop endeavouring to influence their copy. ■

the GFC put a large dint in the credibility of traditional institutional authority.

It is time for all political parties to come out of their respective corners, stop the slugging match and enter into reasonable, respectful debate. It is time to end the union versus employer, 'us versus them' style fighting where voters and consumers simply get whacked in the middle regardless (aka Qantas). A bit of prudence, humility and self-regulation is required because you can't expect to get respect until you give it. ■

John Scales is the founder and Head of Research and Strategy at JWS Research, an independent market and social research firm. He has many years of experience in political party and public opinion polling.