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**Future directions in Australian party competition:
some strategic considerations and speculations**

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss a number of what I consider to be the main strategic considerations related to attitudes underlying voting behaviour that are likely to influence the nature of party competition at the federal level in Australia in the near- and medium-term. I also speculate on a number of possible scenarios that might eventuate.

Introduction

Following the ALP victory at the 24 November 2007 federal election, the Liberal-National coalition parties are in government nowhere at federal, state or territory level, something that will inevitably lead to reviews and reconsideration of electoral and political strategies (e.g. Franklin 2008b; Maiden 2008; Roberts 2008; Salusinszky 2008). This makes writing about future directions somewhat heroic but I shall attempt to avoid being overtaken by the pace of events in the political world by concentrating on one of the main underlying aspects that I think requires consideration in thinking about possible future developments viz. the consequences for the party political system of the structure of underlying voter opinion and attitudes.

Firstly, however, it is important to acknowledge that (as has been argued elsewhere), several important aspects of the institutional framework appear to provide a considerable degree of inertia by dampening the responsiveness of voting behaviour to economic and social changes. One result of this is to serve to limit the field for debate. For example, the existence of compulsory enrolment and voting makes some future directions, based on the effective exclusion of some social groups (whether externally- or self-imposed) unlikely or impossible, which undoubtedly simplifies the range of possibilities considerably. One illustration of the impact of the institutional structure is that survey evidence from 1967 to 2004 suggests that although the levels and strength of party identification with the ALP and Liberal-National coalition have decreased somewhat over the period, it has not been by very large amounts (see, for example, McAllister and Clark (2007: 10)). I think it can be cogently argued that this is, at least partly, a consequence of the institutional framework.

Framework for analysis

Since my purpose here is to discuss the consequences for the party political system of underlying voter opinion and attitudes, there is some advantage in considering models (most obviously ones based in rational actor theory) that link together voter and party location. One of the simplest, and most widely used in both academic and popular circles, draws on the notion of a 'left-right' spectrum. Although there has been considerable debate in the past several decades about the adequacy of this for understanding political behaviour, research in the last 10-15 years has shown that the attitudes and values associated with the most frequently argued new dimension (that of postmaterialism or postmodernism, most strongly associated with Ronald Inglehart) are fairly strongly correlated with those on the left-right dimension, thus serving to constrain the policy options available to political parties (Charnock and Ellis 2003, 2004; Kitschelt 1994, 1995). It also has the practical effect of making discussions of strategy and tactics based on a single dimension more useful and relevant than would otherwise be the case, since the practical effect is that attention can be focussed on the resulting 'diagonal axis' within the two dimensional space.

A brief survey of some of the most relevant Australian studies shows that questions about respondents' self-identified position on a left-right spectrum have been asked in major Australian academic surveys for 40 years, beginning with Aitkin's 1967 survey. There have also been questions about the respondents' perceptions of where on the spectrum the main political parties have been located. Although the use of differing survey methods (including changes in question-wording and the details of fixed response categories)¹ makes exact comparisons over time impossible, it is possible to

draw some useful general conclusions. The most important of these is that the overall balance is predominantly self-located in the centre and right portions and that this has been so for the whole of the last 40 years². Depending on exactly where one ‘draws the lines’ to define the categories, around 55-70 per cent lie in the centre, and the right:left ratio of the remainder tends to be in the order of 2 to 1.

While the meaning given to the left-right framework is clearly not the same for all respondents³, and may also have altered over time, the large majority of respondents are also able to provide a sensible ordering of party locations. For example, in the 2004 and 2007 AES the mean locations assigned to the main parties were as follows (with 0 corresponding to extreme left and 10 to extreme right):

Year	Greens	ALP	Democrats	ONP	Nationals	Liberals
2004	3.2	4.3	4.4	5.9	6.6	7.0
2007	3.6	4.4	n/a	n/a	6.6	6.9

McAllister and Clark (2007: 23) show this pattern was relatively unchanged from 1996, the main variation being in 2004, with a perceived leftward move of the Greens and a rightward one of the coalition parties, particularly the Liberals.

In a different place it would be both interesting and useful to explore in more detail the underlying meanings that voters associate with the idea of a left-right spectrum⁴, but my main purpose in giving this brief discussion here has been to provide an argument in support of my later direction i.e. that it is reasonable to base discussion of future strategic electoral possibilities on the ‘diagonal axis’ mentioned previously.

Recent Aggregate Voting Patterns

Aggregate first preference votes at elections in the last decade (see Table 1) show a relatively stable pattern of combined votes for the major parties, with between about

Table 1

First preference votes: House of Representatives and Senate, 1998 to 2007

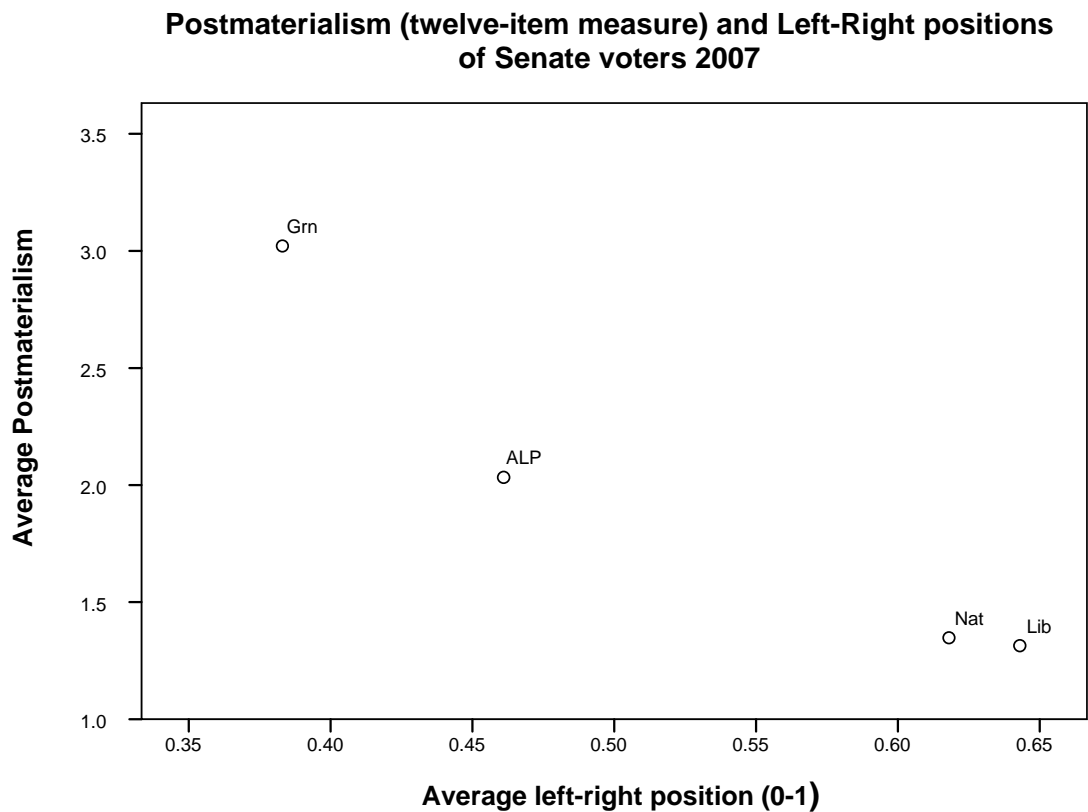
	ALP	Dems	Greens	Liberals	Nationals	ONP/Pa uline
2007 Reprs	43.4	0.7	7.8	36.6	5.5	0.3
2007 Senate	40.3	1.3	9.0	39.9		1.5
2004 Reprs	37.6	1.2	7.2	40.5	6.2	1.2
2004 Senate	35.0	2.1	7.7	45.1		2.6
2001 Reprs	37.8	5.4	5.0	37.1	5.9	4.3
2001 Senate	34.3	7.3	4.9	41.8		5.5
1998 Reprs	40.1	5.1	2.6	33.9	5.6	8.4
1998 Senate	37.3	8.5	2.7	37.7		9.0

80 and 85 per cent in the House of Representatives and 75 to 80 per cent in the Senate. The lower level in the Senate (with differences generally about 5 percentage points) indicates a degree (albeit probably not large) of ‘split ticket’ voting⁵, almost certainly associated with the smaller proportion of votes required to win a seat in the

Senate because of the PR electoral system used since 1949. This, of course, helps to influence the vote for minor parties. For example, throughout the course of their history, the Australian Democrats' Senate vote has always exceeded their House of Representatives vote, with the largest differences (4.6 and 4.4 percentage points, respectively) being in the two government-changing elections of 1983 and 1996.

In view of these fairly small but potentially significant Senate-House of Representatives' voting differences, and the fact that the electoral system makes it easier for non-major parties to win seats and have practical influence, I will concentrate hereafter on the Senate (though patterns for the House of Representatives are actually very similar).

Figure 1

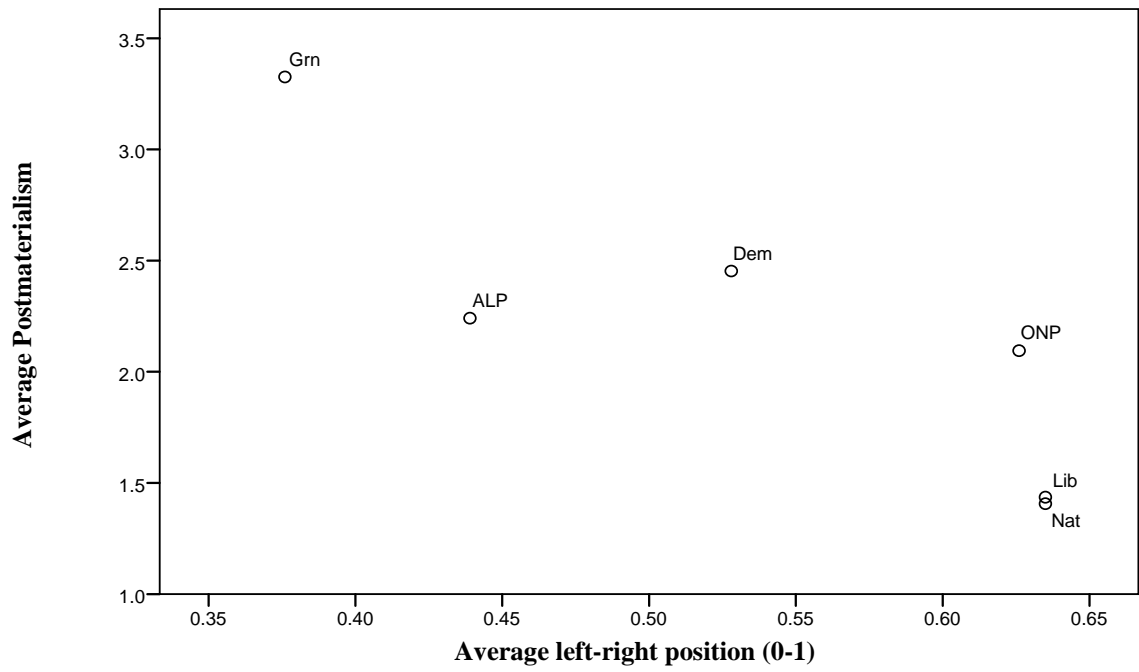


Source: Australian Election Study 2007

Analyses of individual survey data from the 1998-2007 Australian Election Studies locating the average positions on each of Inglehart-type postmaterialist/postmodern and left-right dimensions of respondents who voted for the main parties show very little change in the overall structure over the period covered by these elections (see Figures 1-4).

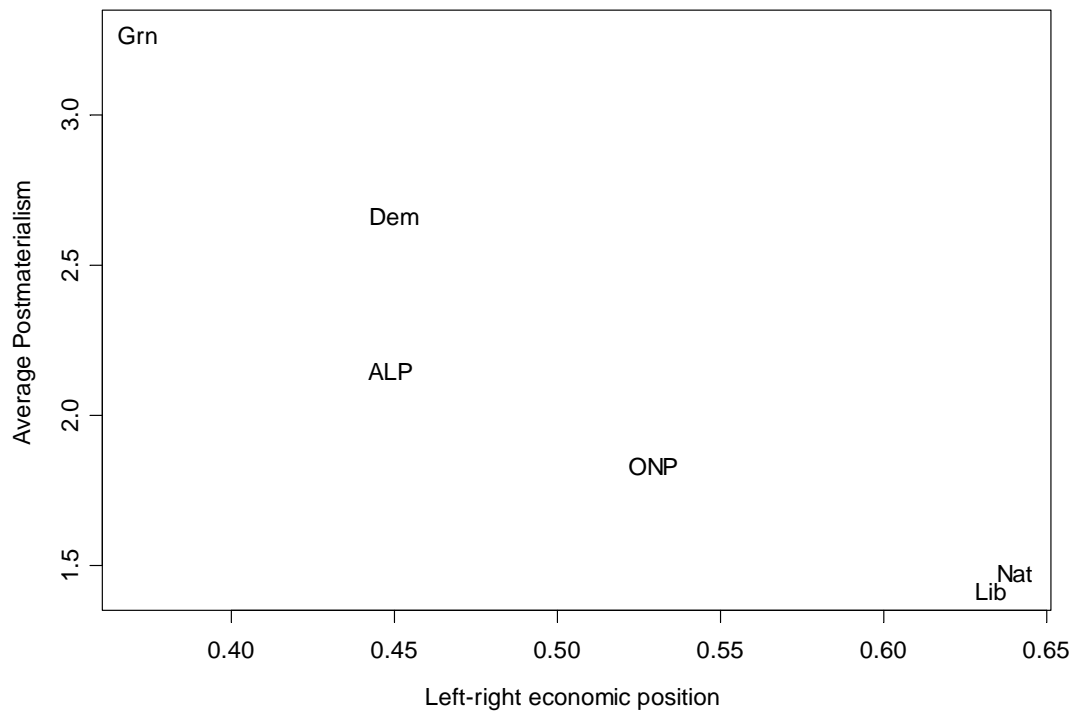
Figure 2

Postmaterialism (twelve-item measure) and Left-Right positions of Senate voters 2004



Source: Australian Election Study 2004

Figure 3
Postmaterialism (twelve-item measure) and Left-Right economic positions of Senate voters 2001

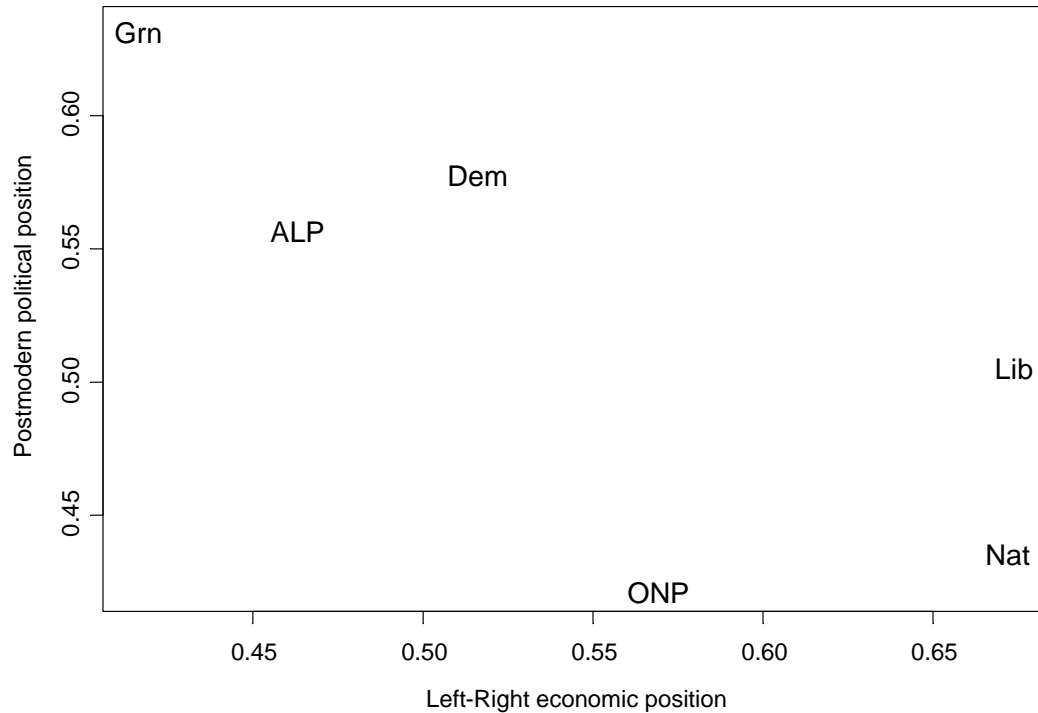


Source: Charnock and Ellis (2003: 430)

The main features are the association noted above between left attitudes/location and more postmodern or postmaterialist attitudes, and the existence of left and right voting blocs centred around positions that correspond very closely to the average party left-right positions identified and outlined above. These features imply that, while it is obviously not capable of dealing with all nuances, using a basic left-right framework to explore strategic implications and possibilities does offer a good deal of analytical traction.

Figure 4

Postmodern political and Left-Right economic positions of Senate voters 1998



Source: Charnock and Ellis (2004: 56)

However, before beginning to explore some of the consequences of this structure, since the group of voters who do not locate themselves on the left-right spectrum is not insignificant (at about 10-20 per cent), it is worth asking the question as to whether they differ in some systematic way from those who do. If this were so, then it could mean that conclusions drawn on the basis of the left-right analysis would be deficient.

In fact, however, as is evident from Table 2⁶, there are very few and only slight

TABLE 2
Comparison of Left-Right users with those who are not, AES 2001

Characteristic	Answered Own Left-Right position question?	
	No (percent)	Yes (percent)
None or Not Much interest in politics	32	22
None or Not Much interest in election campaign	36	28
No access to internet	54	38
Party ID: Liberal/National	41	41
Party ID: ALP	37	35
Party ID: None	15	15
Not very strong PID	35	34
Cared a good deal about which party won election	62	66
Decided which way to vote before election was announced	61	58
None or Not Much difference between ALP/Liberals	33	30
Followed a 'How to Vote' card for H of Reps	53	50
Ticked party box above line in Senate	85	84
Always voted same party	51	47
Not at all or Not very satisfied with Aust democracy	28	26
Govt usually look after themselves	42	40
Govt mostly or entirely run for big interests	48	48
Definitely or Probably would not have voted if not compulsory	19	10
Agree or Strongly Agree that no difference between Liberals and Nationals	43	43
Strongly Agree would rather be Australian than any other country	69	68
Corruption Very or Quite widespread in politicians	54	45
Corruption Very or Quite widespread in public servants	60	51
<i>First or Second most important issue during campaign</i>		
Taxation	27	25
Education	27	34
Health and Medicare	37	36
Refugees and asylum seekers	28	24
Financial hhold situation a little or lot worse than 1 yr ago	47	40
Very worried hhold member unemployed in next yr	29	23

<i>Agree or Strongly Agree:</i>		
High tax makes people less willing to work	67	70
Trade unions have too much power	50	47
Big business has too much power	73	71
Income and wealth should be redistributed	60	55
Death penalty should be reintroduced for murder	61	55
Asylum seekers should be turned back	70	60
Immigrants are good for the economy	43	57
Immigrants take jobs from Australians	43	32
Migrants should try harder to be like other Australians	60	46
<i>Accept some more or a lot more migrants:</i>		
Well-educated	50	57
Asian	8	14
British	30	28
From Middle East	5	11
<i>Gone too far or much too far:</i>		
Equal opportunities for migrants	42	33
Number of migrants allowed into Australia	44	33
Nudity and sex in films and magazines	56	43
Aboriginal land rights	54	49
Equal opportunities for women	13	10
Mean score on 12 item postmaterialism measure	1.83	1.98
Agree that 'Most people can be trusted'	36	48
<i>Favour or Strongly Favour:</i>		
Australia becoming a Republic	58	65
Head of Republic being elected by voters	88	80
<i>None or Not very much Confidence in:</i>		
Armed forces	17	15
Press	79	82
Trade unions	73	74
Police	33	32
Australian political parties	69	67
Major Australian companies	53	54
Banks/Financial institutions	75	67
Australian political system	54	44
Own no shares	67	53
No post-school qualifications	42	35
Occupation last week Retired or Keeping House	43	32
Female	59	52
Born in Australia	73	76
No religion	14	21
Own home outright or Buying	71	75
Working class (self-identified)	54	42
Live rural area or Small country town	31	21
Gross annual family income below \$20,000	35	22
Aged 60 or over	35	24
Managers or Professionals	25	36

differences between the groups in terms of electoral behaviour, with the distributions of party identification levels and strength being practically identical between those locating and not locating themselves on a left-right spectrum, and the timing of the vote decision etc also being extremely similar. Probably not surprisingly, the latter group tend to be somewhat less interested in politics and were about twice as likely to have not voted had it not been compulsory. Socio-demographically (and, to a more limited extent, attitudinally) there is a degree of overlap with the group of nativists identified by Jones (1997) whose existence was important in the initial success of ONP and whose dissatisfaction also helped to defeat the Republic referendum in 1999 (Charnock 2001). However, the differences are not sufficiently large to make conclusions based on the left-right structure unreliable to any significant extent.

Given the existing electoral framework, the practical consequences of the structure apparent in Figures 1-4 mainly flow from preference arrangements. Furthermore, because of the very high usage (almost 97 per cent at the 2007 election) of group ticket ('above the line') voting, the consequences are clearest in the case of the Senate, because of the resulting almost non-existent 'leakage' of preferences away from directions negotiated by parties. In contrast, recent AES have consistently shown only just over 50 per cent of respondents stating they followed a 'How to Vote' card for the House of Representatives.

The relationship between the ALP and the Greens will undoubtedly be one of the most interesting future aspects. In terms of votes, given the relatively small proportion of voters who self-locate on the left, the consolidation of the Greens as the most left party seems to give them relatively little scope for expanding much beyond around 10% of the vote in their own right. A further result of this positioning is that, despite Senator Bob Brown's attempt on occasions to make the argument during the 2007 campaign, I do not think it likely that they could persuade many centre/centre-right voters that they could act as a safe 'balance of power' party in the Senate.

In some respects, this makes the Greens' electoral position rather more difficult than that which was occupied by the Democrats for a long period. A good illustration of this is the quite large differences between the levels of votes in the two chambers for the Democrats in the government-changing elections of 1983 (5.0% v 9.6%) and 1996 (6.8% v 11.2%), compared with the small difference for the Greens in 2007 (7.8% v 9.0%). It also, of course, makes it difficult for the Greens to negotiate preference deals with the Liberal-National coalition parties, leaving them in a somewhat vulnerable position because of their dependence for preferences on the ALP.

Up to now, one might characterize the Nationals as having the key policy differentiating area of promoting regional interests, combined with an overlap of right/centre-right attitudes with Liberal voters that has provided the basis for the coalition. Even if the Greens were to attempt to emulate this strategy by having one key differentiating area (presumably environmental issues) plus an overlap of left/centre-left attitudes elsewhere, the more diffuse nature of their vote (than the Nationals) offers them less scope in the House of Representatives for providing any impetus for the ALP to form a formal coalition with them.

In legislative terms, even after July 1, 2008, the Senate is probably going to be a source of frustration at times for the current government. Longer-term, in the event of

the ALP winning again in 2010 or 2011, the Greens will probably hold the balance of power in their own right from 1 July 2011 and that raises many interesting possibilities, not all of which the ALP would find comfortable. Nor is it likely that a double dissolution in the near future would provide a satisfactory solution for those in the ALP not wishing to be reliant on the Greens for a Senate majority, since the Greens would almost certainly continue to hold the balance of power in the Senate.

Structurally, the difficulty for this section of the ALP results mainly from the decline of the Democrats, since their options have become more limited. If a belief that the ALP was likely to remain in office for some time becomes widespread, then one could imagine that some of the more pragmatic members of the business community might wish to encourage a revival of a party similar to the Democrats, on the grounds that a right-leaning ALP government supported by a centrist party in the Senate would be preferable to an ALP government dependent on a left-wing Greens party. Under the right circumstances, it is even possible to imagine splits occurring in one or both of the ALP and Liberals, though either of these would obviously be extreme occurrences.

What about the Liberals and Nationals? Whilst the survey evidence on voter perceptions that I quoted earlier suggests a move somewhat too far to the right by the Liberals (even prior to *WorkChoices*), the location of these parties on the spectrum leaves them in a reasonable position as far as the location of voters is concerned, provided they are flexible enough to do some readjusting. However, how easy this will be is difficult to know, given the right-wing capture of several state branches. Moreover, being out of office at state government level for so long means there is a lack of political career paths compared with the ALP.

As far as a possible merger between the Liberals and Nationals is concerned, it is not obvious to me that it would be a useful strategy, at least in the short-term. Assuming strong party discipline, it would certainly limit the tactics open to senators from the Nationals while the ALP is in office. I am not convinced that the 'countrymindedness' that has at times been a significant influence favouring the coalition (cf Charnock 2007) can be maintained as an electoral force in the face of an ALP Prime Minister from Queensland and in the absence of a separate party claiming to articulate the concerns of the regions. It would be rather ironic if the Liberals, having helped to counter a threat to the Nationals from the One Nation Party, were now to become the dominant force (at least) in a merged party. As noted in Charnock and Ellis (2003: 440), it would be a rather risky strategy to end up with a single party to replace what was effectively (in terms of voter attitudes) a three-party cluster in both 1998 and 2001.

Conclusion

Several of what could be regarded, depending on one's perspective, either as interesting features or frustrating tensions, result from having different electoral systems in the House of Representatives and Senate, in a constitution that gives the two chambers almost equal powers. When combined with the structures outlined and discussed earlier, the consequence is the existence of potentially competing imperatives in the two chambers. On the one hand, for example, in the House of Representatives the ALP needs a disproportionate flow of Green preferences⁷ but, at foreseeable levels of first preference votes for the Greens, ALP preferences are

unimportant for the Greens. Although both could be said to need each other's preferences in the Senate, the Greens are potentially more vulnerable because they have, at present at least, virtually no other opportunities to obtain significant preferences. With the decline of the Democrats, however, the ALP government requires Green votes in the Senate to pass legislation but also needs to be careful not to appear too far to the left to lose votes in the House of Representatives.

Depending on the behaviour of other parties and significant external pressure groups, this situation has the potential to become unstable. The past experience of the Keating ALP government in a situation where Green (and also Democrats) Senators' votes were required to pass legislation was one they found very uncomfortable at times and the possibility of changing the procedures for electing Senators was actually raised by them, though no action was taken. Altering the procedures, of course, is (possibly) achievable only because section 9 of the Constitution leaves it up to the Parliament to decide on methods for choosing Senators, rather than requiring a constitutional amendment (which would almost certainly fail). However, although the ALP and Liberal parties did combine to modify the electoral system in Tasmania in an attempt to minimize the influence of the Greens, it is difficult to see why the Liberal party would see this as being to their advantage in the Senate (since this would primarily serve to reduce difficulties for the ALP).

I can only see one possible caveat to this, based on the possibility that the position of the Greens might become sufficiently well-entrenched that both the Liberals and the ALP might see it as being in their interests to reduce or, if possible, eliminate any Greens parliamentary representation because of the resources and bargaining power that might attach to such representation. That, however, would be a rather difficult position for the ALP to overtly adopt in the absence of a centrist minor party. Adopting changes (such as those recently proposed by members of the Democratic Audit (Kelly et al 2008)) to the group ticket voting system allowed in the Senate might provide a more slow and stealthy approach, but its outcomes would also be much less predictable and would presumably only be very reluctantly adopted by the major parties⁸.

The Liberals and Nationals have difficulties because, while they might maximize their vote in the short-term by remaining separate parties, this might be offset by any organizational advantages that result from merging. There are also issues that are linked to state politics: the different demographic structures of the two main states in which the Nationals are a significant force, with Queensland remaining much more decentralized than is New South Wales, while the lack of a second chamber in Queensland is a further complicating factor.

All in all, and assuming that the ALP is re-elected at the next federal election, I think the subsequent period in Australian party politics is likely to be a very interesting one, not least because Prime Minister Rudd has been reported as believing that classical left-right divides are no longer relevant (Franklin 2008a).

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¹ Aitkin's 1967 and 1979 surveys both included a preliminary filter question ("Do you think of yourself as being to the left, the centre or the right in politics, or don't you think of yourself that way?"), followed by asking those respondents who replied positively if they were Left, Centre or Right. None of the AES have included a filter question. From 1987 to 1993 the AES asked respondents to locate themselves (and, in 1987 only, the major parties) on a scale running from 1 (most left) to 10 (most right); from 1996 onwards, this scale was modified to one running from 0 (left) to 10 (right) and respondents were asked to locate both themselves and major and some key minor parties on the scale.

² As noted by Aitkin (1977, chapter 5), in the 1960s this was unlike the UK, but results from the 2005 British Election Study and the 2004 Australian Election Study now show a remarkable similarity in distribution.

³ Indeed, in the Australian Election Studies (AES) since 1990 around 10-20 per cent have not given any response at all to the question.

⁴ Interested readers can find some discussion and relevant empirical analysis for the 1998 and 2001 elections in Charnock and Ellis (2003; 2004).

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of split ticket voting up to 1990 see Bowler and Denmark (1993).

⁶ I have chosen to use data from the 2001 AES for this table because the rate of non-response to the left-right question was at its highest in that year (at 21 per cent of respondents); conclusions from other AES are, however, very similar.

⁷ At the 2007 election, 80 per cent of Greens' voters' preferences went to the ALP and only 20 per cent to the coalition (Australian Electoral Commission 2008).

⁸ A pointer here might be the very high proportions of Green votes in the NSW 2007 Legislative Assembly election (using optional preferential voting) that exhausted before preferencing the ALP or coalition (see Green 2008)