

Opinion Piece

TALKING AND DEMOCRACY

By Anglicare Australia acting Executive Director, Roland Manderson

Democracy is no longer about one person one vote. While on the face of it this principle still holds true, in contemporary Australia at least, not all votes are of equal value.

We can see this in the run up to this year's election. It is common knowledge that most seats in the Australian parliament belong in effect to one party or the other. And that for a party to win government it needs to pick up more of the marginal or closely contested seats on Election Day; which means it needs to appeal to those voters in particular: get to the things that matter to them.

Obviously, not all seats are the same, but in general terms the most contested seats tend not to be full of the richest, poorest, oldest or most vulnerable members of the society. Rather, the voters who make a difference in the seats that make a difference are likely to be people who are doing alright – who either hope to do a bit better, or are reasonably afraid they might end up doing a bit worse. So it is the mood, concerns and interests of this group that both parties are most concerned to capture.

Bearing in mind that when you ask Australians what matters to them in the decisions they make, you usually find it is their families, their health and their general well-being, rather than the environment, the balance of trade or the well-being of others. So it seems to me that this pragmatic strategy to win government uncovers fundamental cracks in the democratic process.

Part of the problem is the reductive nature of the process itself. It looks like an extension of the consumer economy, which invites us to make individual and family choices that serve a very narrow notion of self-interest. Most people can be generous or self-seeking, depending on circumstances, but the hyper-intensive world of modern media and marketing constructs us in its own image, and any wider social good – while often invoked – is not really what we are asked to vote for.

A larger part of the problem lies in the selective way our interests and choices are framed. Of course it's not any election period of a few weeks or months that really shapes the concerns or interests of any of us, voters in the marginal seats or not. Most people aren't all that interested in politics and elections, anyway. It is the commentary and reporting of politics and public affairs, the topics and concerns that get the attention and the column inches (as it were) between elections that tells us what's important, that guide us.

While government and politics are a part of shaping those concerns, what matters to us – especially those of us whose votes are important – also gives government direction. We help it decide on priorities, how it should seek to effect change, what care or

services or opportunities it ensures are provided and whose interests or needs it puts foremost.

And that's where we need more democracy. There are a lot of voices and perspectives that aren't in the mix, and can't contribute any of the ingredients that help Australia work out what's important.

It is often said that you can judge a society by how it treats its most vulnerable members. One way to treat people well, respectfully, is to pay attention to them.

That is a different thing to providing necessities such as affordable housing, secure employment and community mental health services, which people need in order to connect and participate in society. There are many advocates on this front. That's about being a fair and rational society but not, necessarily, about being democratic.

It's the voice and the views of the most vulnerable members of our community that we are generally missing out on: they are too small a part of media reporting and public affairs. And given this is a group that's unlikely to make the difference in marginal seats, we have to look for other ways to amplify the insights and concerns of the people who are marginalised in every other way.

Our Anglicare network has produced a postcard asking the opinion of people who use our services what they think about the election, and what changes they'd like to see across Australia. They may not point to the same issues and needs that we do. But everybody's voice should count. We recognise this may not make an immediate difference to the public debate or this year's election. But the more voices that are a part of this debate, the more that diversity might shape the next agenda.

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