

Modern campaigning and the federal system

Richard Allsop

Received a newsletter from your local Federal MP lately?

If you have, it was probably full of the MP's 'achievements' in delivering grants to local State schools and funding for local roads. Perhaps it also offered you the chance to complete a survey on crime in the local community. Now you probably thought that these were all matters that fell within the responsibility of your State, rather than Federal, MP, so you may have been a little surprised. Why are Federal MPs taking such an interest in State matters?

Of course, the relationship between the Commonwealth and the States has been a topic of endless debate since 1901. For most of that time it has been relatively easy to pick which side of the political divide centralists or federalists would be on—centralists on the Labor side and federalists on the liberal/conservative side.

There has always been a natural tendency for both liberals and conservatives to favour federalism over centralism. Greg Craven summed this position up succinctly:

Balanced power, contained government, local control of local affairs and respect of regional difference: there hardly could be a governmental creed more palatable to conservative tastes.

And yet the Howard Government has confounded the stereotypes. Craven himself laments the fact that 'the Howard Government is spitting out Australian federalism like so much constitutional gristle'. The Prime Minister's biographers, Peter van Onselen

and Wayne Errington, commented in 2005 that Howard Government ministers were full of 'bright ideas' that 'trample all over the principles of federalism'.

So what is driving the Howard Government's increased centralism? An apologist might argue that it is a genuine desire to fix some of Australia's most pressing problems. A cynic might claim that all politicians have an in-built tendency to seek extra power and control wherever they can.

There is, however, another important force behind this trend of federal incursion into the traditional areas of State responsibility in Australia's Federation.

The dictates of modern campaigning

Whereas campaigning used to be largely confined, for most MPs, to the five or six weeks of the campaign, now it is a continuous process.

A key cause of this continuous campaigning has been the vastly increased communications resources provided to MPs. At the same time that technology is making the production of material much easier, Federal MPs are also receiving large increases in their printing and postage budgets which enable them to produce regular newsletters and information bulletins during each parliamentary term. In any given financial year, the total possible expenditure by all Federal Members on these printing, stationery and communications allowances is more than \$25 million. Add to this the resources provided by the public funding of election campaigns and MPs have almost limitless scope for the production of material.

All these newsletters, bulletins and

pamphlets need to be filled. It has become campaigning holy writ that communications with the electorate should be localised as much as possible. Hence, there is a huge demand from Federal MPs themselves and from Party Secretariats to give Members opportunities to provide funding to key parts of their electorate's infrastructure, such as State schools and roads.

It was clear to the Founding Fathers that school education should remain the responsibility of the States which, as colonies, had adopted the mantra of free, compulsory and secular education. The government-run school system operated in tandem with a self-supporting private school sector, largely funded by churches. Thus the situation remained until the lead-up to the 1963 Federal Election, when Robert Menzies announced that the Commonwealth would provide funding to build science blocks at Catholic schools. Although Catholic schools were no doubt among the most needy in the community, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Menzies' policy was driven more by a desire to lock in Democratic Labor Party preferences than a desire to address that hardship.

By 1967, the Bolte Government in Victoria was providing State Government funding for private schools but, unfortunately, this did not make the Commonwealth consider departing the sector. Through a series of steps and an endorsement by the High Court in 1981, it became the *de facto* position that the Commonwealth provided the bulk of government funds to private schools, while the States continued their traditional role as the funders of the State school system.

The trouble with that position

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was that it meant Federal MPs had no business with some of the key institutions in their electorates. While people may work and socialise well away from home, most children attend the local government school, particularly at primary level.

The current Federal Government's answer is the *Investing in Our Schools* programme, under which all schools, regardless of their needs, can qualify for up to \$150,000 of Federal Government money. Interestingly, a condition of funding is that schools which receive funding under the programme have to invite a Coalition politician to the official opening of any new facility.

Hence, Joanna Gash, Member for Gilmore, widely regarded as one of the Government's most effective campaigners, recently had as the lead item on her Website:

Havenlee School in Nowra has received \$34,000 under the Australian Government's *Investing In Our Schools* program for a Liberty Swing.

Her constituents may well be a little confused when, elsewhere on the Website, Gash lists 'Schools & Education' as a State Government responsibility.

Unlike State schools, roads are a policy area where all three tiers of government have traditionally had a role. However, once again the Howard Government has clearly shifted the emphasis of the Commonwealth's involvement. The Whitlam Government accepted full Commonwealth responsibility for the national highway system in 1974 and subsequent governments have also adopted other road funding programmes.

While the Howard Government has significantly increased overall road funding, it has done so not by increasing funds to the national highway, but by funding other priorities. It has funded 'Roads of National Importance', re-introduced a black spot programme and most significantly introduced 'Roads to Recovery', a programme that provides

funds for local roads in addition to the identified local road grants paid under the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act*. The result is that the majority of Government MPs, particularly those in outer urban or regional locations, have ample opportunity to associate themselves with road projects in their electorates.

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In turn, the Commonwealth's growing role in the funding of road projects has produced demands from the rail lobby that the Federal Government take a similar approach to the nation's railways. Commonwealth involvement in rail is not new, beginning with the Commonwealth Railways establishment in 1912 and expanded by the Whitlam Government in 1975. As in roads, historically the Commonwealth has mainly focused on interstate rail.

However, the funding of urban roads projects has raised questions about why the Federal Government is not funding urban public transport. A House of Representatives Committee considered this issue and supported Commonwealth involvement. The Committee recommended a holistic approach (a Sustainability Commission to reward State Governments for reaching sustainability benchmarks such as moving commuters from cars to public transport) as opposed to funding specific pieces of infrastructure. Federal MPs would no doubt rather see their

names associated with particular pieces of mass transit infrastructure. To avoid either scenario, it would surely be better for the Federal Government not to become involved at all.

The perceived need to localise public policy areas is well illustrated by another current hot topic, water. The big Federal dollars have been put into large scale programmes, such as rehabilitating the Murray-Darling Basin. This programme does cross State boundaries and thus seems a reasonable area for Commonwealth action. However, there is also a programme of Community Water Grants that is designed to provide a total of \$200 million over five years (out of a total water budget of \$2 billion), to help communities play a 'positive role in tackling Australia's water challenge' and deliver 'practical on-the-ground projects'. This programme is clearly designed to be put to good use by Coalition MPs.

Like Joanna Gash, Dana Vale has a reputation as an outstanding local campaigner. She recently publicised the water grants programme, urging community organisations in the Sutherland Shire to apply for grants in the second round and listing five examples of grants from the first round of the programme, all between \$15,000 to \$50,000, and spread throughout the local community.

More than just federalism: other dangers from centralist campaigning strategies

As well as the obvious blurring of lines of accountability and the potential significant waste of taxpayers' money, there are other problems that flow from this ever-increasing involvement of the Commonwealth in what were previously solely State areas.

First, it makes incumbency more important. At recent elections, there has been a trend towards fewer seats changing hands, and the ever-increasing ability of MPs (Government and Opposition) to use local funding pro-

grammes and communications budgets has played a significant part in this. Entrenched representation is always a danger in a democracy.

Second, representatives at other tiers of government try to match the spending on both communications and funding programmes of their Federal counterparts. A few years ago, I heard a woman describe how her Federal MP was definitely hard-working, whereas his State counterpart was rarely seen. Her evidence for the former was that he regularly produced a newsletter showing that he was busily spending public money around his electorate while, without a newsletter, she concluded the latter was either too lazy to produce one, or too lazy to have done anything for the electorate. No wonder that, in most jurisdictions, State MPs' communications budgets are also being increased. This also relates to another factor that has contributed to the problem. In recent times, many citizens have been represented by different parties at State and Federal level, often leading the parties to try to 'out grant' each other in what are usually marginal seats at both levels.

The other problem with this fetish for funding local projects, and producing reams of accompanying material, is that it accentuates the growing trend towards local 'enclavism' and 'nimbyism'. This phenomenon was accurately described by Paddy McGuinness, in a *Quadrant* editorial, as 'the triumph of localism and parish pump politics over the wider concerns of federal or state politics'. As he described events in the aftermath of the Pittwater (NSW) by-election, electors have expectations that a 'local representative should be seen to be placing himself or herself at the direct service of their electorate and locality, placing its interests and concerns above those of the wider polity and community'.

At least State politicians do have a legitimate role in looking at issues such as maintenance backlogs at local schools, graffiti at the local railway

station. etc.. However, other than in political terms, it is hard to see how the intrusion of Federal MPs in recent years has served any genuine public policy purpose. Yet no doubt for citizens it is easier to judge their local MP by the grants he or she achieves for local schools or roads, rather than in assessing his or her role in delivering tax reform or influencing foreign policy, even assuming that citizens were as interested in those topics.

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Clearly the issues considered in this article are really only a concern if one is a supporter of limited and smaller government. Thus, it raises more issues for members of the Liberal Party than the more traditionally collectivist parties such as the ALP, Greens or National Party.

No-one should be under any illusions that finding a way to stop the trend towards ever-increasing Federal involvement in traditional areas of State responsibility will be easy to do. There are many individuals in the Liberal Party who don't share a philosophical commitment to smaller government. Even some of those who do will still succumb to the pressure to conform with accepted and seemingly successful methods of campaigning. Those who believe that smaller government is good government should be on the look-out for any MP who can show that campaigning in the twenty-first century does not involve churning out endless taxpayer-funded material promoting endless taxpayer-funded local projects.

One consolation is the fact that the dollar quantum of much of this provision of local funding does not appear to affect the political impact greatly. A ten thousand dollar grant to the local

school can sometimes have the same political effect as a million dollar grant. It is also possible to be active locally without spending money. An MP can do many useful things in a local community, such as helping clean the local park, without spending taxpayer dollars. If a Federal MP feels that he or she must take an interest in State issues, it can be done via a survey on local concerns on crime or transport, without taking on direct responsibility for fix-

ing the matters raised.

There will, however, be no pressure on Federal MPs at a local level to stick to traditional areas of Commonwealth responsibility unless, at a ministerial level, the Howard Government accepts that it is not its responsibility to deal with the shortcomings of State governments. In our federal system that responsibility should rest with the voters of those States.

More importantly, the Federal Government needs to give more thought to how posterity may view it. It needs to consider how the precedents it has set will be viewed when a future Federal Government decides to be more profligate with public funds. Such a government will find its task easier than the Whitlam Government did when it embarked on its rapid expansion of Federal responsibilities and spending.

Similarly, while providing ever-increasing communications budgets seems like a great idea when in government, or when seeking to reinforce the benefits of incumbency, those same budgets may not seem like such a bright idea when in Opposition in the future.

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