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CATHOLICS IN COALITION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

Catholics in Coalition for Justice and Peace
2013 Occasional Paper Series

2013 Election: Why Bother?

The contours of political disengagement: causes and possible solutions

**Edited Transcript of Address given Dr. Tim Battin on
17th February 2013.**

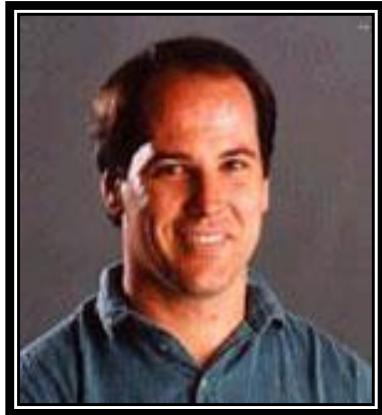


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About Dr. Tim Battin



Dr. Tim Battin is a political economist and senior lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the University of New England. He is the author of *Abandoning Keynes: Australia's Capital Mistake* and *Full Employment: Towards a Just Society*.

Introduction

Welcome back again, Tim, to CCJP. I was fortunate enough to be here when he came to us last time. He is another one of our wonderful speakers whom we seem to get every month. As you may know, Dr Tim Battin is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Arts & Sciences at the University of New England. His areas of teaching involved political economy, international political economy and patterns of state intervention, and comparative public policy.

He is very interested in researching economic thought and economic policy, and Australian politics in particular, particularly as these relate to issues of unemployment and achieving full employment. I remember some years back a couple of the books that Tim authored. One was called *Abandoning Keynes: Australia's Capital Mistake* and the other was called *Full Employment: Towards a Just Society*. That's a marvellous book.

He has also contributed to other books, about ten of them I have listed here, I won't go through them; and, of course, about 20 articles that he has contributed to or written himself over those years.

We're really grateful, Tim, that you were willing to come and speak to us on this very important topic in this very important year, an election year. Welcome, Tim, and thank you. Introduction given by Margaret Hinchey.



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Edited Transcript of Presentation by Dr. Tim Battin

Tim: Thanks very much, Marg, that's a very kind welcome and very generous of you. I always feel that when I come to the CCJP I'm among friends.

That's really what I do want to talk to you about today. I want to talk about *political disengagement* and I'll try not to make it sound as dry as that. It's a very important topic; at least I think it is. I think in a way I've always been interested in how the last 20 or 30 years have had an effect on the kind of politics that we have, the kind of economic policy direction of the last 20 or 30 years has had an effect on our polity.

We live in an era of anti-politics. You even get inadvertent admission of the problem from our political elite when they themselves, as I say, inadvertently, let the cat out of the bag, saying *the electorate has stopped listening*. It's a phrase they use which gives away what the problem actually is, even though I think they don't then draw the logical conclusion from that: *they've stopped listening because the message itself is faulty*.

If I were in a more hostile audience, I would probably offer another definition of politics. If I were Daniel in the lion's den, I might say, going for a neutral definition, *Politics is an argument about how society ought to be organised and about how power is going to be handled*. After all, it doesn't go for an openly idealistic view of politics, but nor is it a very negative one that we all seem to be exposed to at the moment.

That kind of definition suits my purpose well enough. It suits my purpose because it will help to underline a few points that I believe are important in naming the malaise affecting the present political situation.

So let us name the phenomenon. It's what is referred to increasingly by a group of political scientists who are interested in it as '*political disengagement*' or '*political disenchantment*'. The two are not quite the same thing. One can be disenchanted with the political process but not yet disengaged. Disengagement happens further along the path of disenchantment. However, unless I say otherwise, I'm going to use the two more or less interchangeably.

Why do I say that we live in an era of political disengagement or disenchantment? What evidence can one point to for this?

There's anecdotal evidence. Nothing wrong with that! We speak to one another; we swap notes with one another about this disenchantment and disengagement. But we want more than that, so more reliably there's evidence based on surveys. People respond to questions that are asked:

- “*People like me don't have any say about government*” and you get percentages agreeing or disagreeing.
- “*The government doesn't care what people like me think*” and again, percentages agreeing and disagreeing. (broke out into paragraphs)
- Trust in government, political efficacy. “*The political parties do not encourage political activism*” or “*Political parties do not give voters real policy choices*”.

Another type of survey instrument is to look at attitudes across the international scene. *Do politicians care* in France, the USA and in Sweden? The time series varies according to which country you're talking about but you can see a general downward trend through the countries concerned.

Then there's evidence on our actual political behaviour, observing how it is that we behave politically.

- *How many times have you signed a petition?* This is a typical question to ask. *How many times in the last year have you attended a public meeting?*
- *How many times have you donated money to a political organisation, taken part in a demonstration, boycotted products, written to a politician?*
- *Are you a member of a political party?*

These sorts of questions attempt to locate something about political behaviour.

Another very reliable way of gauging political behaviour is to study voter turnout in countries that have voluntary voting. This one looks at voter turnout levels in Western Europe from the 1950s through to the 1990s. There is a worrying trend where the voter turnout is declining.

In the US, UK, Denmark, and the OECD as an average, you see, especially where you've got the average, it is clearer, you see the decline.

If we take one particular country, which we sometimes compare ourselves with, Britain, you see the crash starting to occur in 1997, which brings Blair to office.

Unusual for a government changing in an election, to see a drop in the turnout rate.

Audience Question: Was this due to support for the invasion of Iraq?

No, it's too early for that. When you look at the work that political analysts do on this and they drill down further, of course, to see where the voter turnout is collapsing most, it seems to come from two sources. One is that Conservative voters in marginal seats didn't show out in anywhere near the same proportion because of the scandal that was then infecting the Conservative Party. You also see a drop in the weight of voter turnout in safe Labor seats. Then, of course, the vote collapses further in 2001.

Audience Question: It's a reaction to the Thatcher years, isn't it?

Well, I interpret it as disappointment. Especially in retrospect, you see the Blair Government has, rather than replacing the Thatcher years, became heir to Thatcher. There's no real reversal.

I'm going to see if I can paint a rosier picture. Thanks for the challenge. All of this, this data collection is occurring at the same time that political analysts are also collecting other data on whether citizens are disenchanted with democracy as a system. Interestingly, they're not disenchanted at all with democracy as a system. They're unhappy with various aspects within our political system.

In Australia, obviously, we have to look for other ways to determine the level of disengagement. One way of doing this is to look at the informal vote as a measure. If you look at 1990 through to 2004 and then you look at the margin for 2007, so we take this right through from the early 1990s, through to 2007, going into the 2007 election, not as a result of the 2007 election but going in, you see as a national average the informal vote is increasing. It starts out at 3.2% in 1990; it dips a little in 1993. It returns to its 1990 level in 1996 at 3.2% and then you see a steady increase at 3.8%, 4.8%, and 5.2% in 2004.

Audience Question: Informal is where doesn't mark the paper?

Yes. It can take one of two main forms. They get their ballot paper and they'll either leave it blank or they will make it in a way by which it can't be counted.

You can get away with writing obscene things as long as you do the numbering correctly. Not that I would encourage it.

Audience Question: Usually they don't?

Some of my colleagues like to explain the informal vote as a function of either being from a non-English speaking background or from being poorly educated about the way in which voting works. To me, this seems to be a wholly unsatisfactory way of explaining what's going on. After all, it doesn't explain why it's increasing. It could explain it as a snapshot one point in time, but why is it increasing, and then why in 2007 does it reduce? It reduces from 5.2% in 2004 to 3.9% in 2007 election, again a government changing election, so you see a partial re-engagement.

I'm just getting slightly ahead of the story. I'm not going to dwell on seats as individual entities. But there is an interesting correlation between the informal vote in 2004, coming out of the 2004 election, and then the margin, the two-party preferred margin going into 2007, where the informal vote in 2004 is greater than the margin for a number of seats.

Going into the 2007 election, Rudd needed the magic 16 seats to win, so where the informal vote in 2004 is greater than the margin for the same seat, there were no fewer than 19 seats. 19 seats where the informal vote exceeded the two-party preferred margin for the seat to change hands.

Audience Question: How many states have different voting systems for the State Parliament as opposed to the Federal Parliament? Is that considered to make any difference to the informal vote?

Tim: Some people believe so. It appears to be when it was first brought in. Where there's a difference and the difference is new, then there is an element to the informal vote, which you would have to ascribe to the difference between the two systems. But that difference then is eroded over time. So that once people are used to the difference, as we are in NSW - we have optional preferential voting at State level and at the Federal level, of course, all boxes need to be marked preferentially – then we cope with that. The NSW informal vote is no higher than other states.

Tim: Another way to study political behaviour is again to go through survey material and ask people about party identification. With which party do they strongly identify? Again, you see a steady trend, shifting from the 1950s, 60s and 70s where people in quite high proportions strongly identified with a political party, and in these more recent times people are less inclined to identify strongly with any political party.

Tim poses the question: *What are some explanations for disenchantment or disengagement?*

First, why does it matter?

I think that if we want to do something about changing society, we'd better know why more people have become disenchanted with the political process. For that reason alone, it matters. If we switch off and say that all politicians are liars or all politicians are out for themselves, we blunt the instrument, we let those who are telling lies or those who were always in it for themselves off the hook. If we disengage, we make politics less democratic. We hand over more power to the already powerful.

Some would say there's no malaise to worry about. The present voting generation just do things differently. But it's not just that the present voting generation do things differently. There is some evidence to show that when the present voting generation, particularly younger people, are given real choices they do things with those choices.

Some explanations, until recently, have emphasised the role of societal demand. The kind of politics we have is the kind of politics we demand; if they wanted something different they would behave differently. There's a changing balance in societal preferences in this way of thinking about politics, and changing public receptiveness to political appeals.

If you're like me, you'll find these explanations tend to be dangerously circular in their character. They tend not to explain; they tend to merely redescribe the phenomena to be explained in the first place, and they do so, for instance, by accounting for voter turnout by appeal to voter apathy. I remain convinced that we are not talking about the apathetic.

There's disenchantment and disengagement with the political process that goes beyond those who are merely apathetic. You'll always have a component of the apathetic in any society. but I think what we're seeing and what we have seen for the last 20 years is something quite different. Along with the apathetic there are those who, the evidence suggests, would be interested in the political process if only there was something to be interested in.

One way that politicians sometimes try to avoid responsibility for this, and not just politicians but political elites more generally, is to blame it on the media, so there's negative imaging in the television age, the age of sound bites, Lindsay Tanner's book in 2011, *Sideshow: The Dumbing Down of Democracy*, was an attempt to do just this.

Do you notice something about these explanations? They don't put any responsibility for political disenchantment to the elite, to those who hold power. In the post 1980 politics, increasingly, each voter is studied and appealed to as an individual. So you saw it expressed in the language that politicians used. No longer did politicians use the language of, say, 'public money'. They prefer the term 'taxpayers' money' because they're appealing to people as individual taxpayers rather than as a public.

When you look at something like policy choice, you find a very high percentage of Australian population say the parties don't offer policy choices, but there's a high percent who continue to trust government. There's a problem in what they might be thinking they're saying 'yes' to when they say they 'trust government'. It may be on the narrower field of corruption. Tim notes that from survey's Australians don't think that they are corrupt.

This policy convergence sets up an environment where ephemeral or brand issues receive greater emphasis. There is increased emphasis on marketing and on winning marginal electorates. Safe ALP seats and to a lesser extent safe Coalition seats are taken for granted. There's emphasis on technical competence and there's emphasis on mistrust, but not on the policy choices.

The greater the convergence on neo-liberal policy, the greater the negativity. It's been the professionalisation of politics, which is often used as a partial explanation for what we see before us, that political parties are increasingly made up of those who have come through the ranks of the party machine itself,

rather than from a broad cross-section of the community as they used to do. Political elites also increasingly internalise the view that the public sector is inferior. There is a supposed incapacity of politics to deliver public goods.

All of this, of course, is occurring in the era of globalisation and a perception that increased economic interdependence and complexity have reduced the ability of the state to deliver public goods or social services. However, if neo-liberalists would boast that one of their achievements is to reduce the size of the state, it failed. Over the last 30 years the state, in as much as you measure that sort of thing with the percentage of GDP that governments collect as tax and then lay out in terms of expenditures, the state has become larger.

When you talk about political disengagement, what better election is there to point to than the 2010 election? It's true that 2010 was a particularly facile campaign. The campaign was the natural consequence of a political party without a story to tell, and it's easy to over-attribute this lack of narrative to the deposing of Kevin Rudd. The competition is not the competition of ideas. It's no longer a contest of ideas. It's over technical competence. One academic writer in British politics is Colin Hay. Hay puts it like this; "*The electorate in recent years has not been invited to choose between competing programmatic mandates to be delivered in office, but to pass a judgement on the credibility and competence of the respective candidates for high office in an appropriate technical manner. Is it any wonder that the electorate has chosen in increasing proportion not to exercise any judgement at all at the ballot box?*"

In this setting, neo-liberalism is not defended as normatively superior to the other options but as the only option. Neo-liberalism depends very strongly on saying it's the only option in town; otherwise its way of trying to justify its existence would be very awkward indeed.

Imagine if you were an avowed neo-liberal and you had to defend it as a normative; that is, as something that should occur because it's better than other forms of other ideologies that are on offer. You'd have to say, yes, well we know that what we are offering will lead to greater inequality but this will be a good thing. Imagine how that would go over. Not very well.

Waleed Aly is an academic writer on the Australian situation and he put it like this, following the 2010 election:

“For much of the 20th century the main political parties have sat in sharp ideological contradistinction. The difference between Liberal and Labor was elemental, essential, philosophical. Voters were presented with competing views about the world and the role of the state. They were asked implicitly to decide if they believed in the prioritisation of capital or of labour; of the individual or the collective; of equality or liberty. They were asked whether they wanted an activist, progressive state or a smaller, more restrained, distant one.”¹

The clearest opportunity to break from the neo-liberal stranglehold came with the GFC, but it didn't occur. A social democratic party of the past could only dream of a crisis of the kind we saw. Why do I say this?

First, in Rudd's 2009 essay which was widely read and widely acclaimed the critique of neo-liberalism was quite confined. He was trapped by Labor's recent embrace of neo-liberalism under Hawke, Keating and the Labor Oppositions that faced Howard. Yet, the Government, at the technical level that Colin Hay speaks of, handled the GFC quite well. So why didn't it receive more accolades for doing so? I think because it was really at that technical level.

Three obvious sources of redistribution of public finances are 1) a tax on wealth and establishing consistency between the taxation of earned and unearned income, 2) increasing the marginal rates of tax to make it a much more progressive tax system, and 3) reducing the more inefficient and regressive of taxation expenditures.

A social democratic party looking to use Keynesian economics, but wanting Keynesian economics to be more thoroughly consistent with social democracy, would have used tax financing that spending to a much greater extent while still intellectually defending the deficit component. So in this setting, all of the monies made available through deficits could have been channelled into physical and social investments designed to address the years of neo-liberal neglect: public hospitals, public education, affordable housing, transport, renewable energy, and related concerns of social democrats and progressive people. Alongside this measure, taxation revenue would have been redistributed to recurrent forms of expenditure directed to low and middle

¹ <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/too-much-consensus-not-too-little-20100902-14riw.html> - ‘Too much consensus, not too little’ – Waleed Aly, Opinion, SMH September 3 2010.

income groups, or due to the delay in raising the revenue, used to replenish public finances after deficit financing performed its more immediate tasks.

The idea here would have been, once having restored demand to its level, the aim of the exercise is to establish a reordered mix of spending and taxing along social democratic lines.

Transcript of Audience Q&A

Audience Question: Tim, would you give us just a quick summary of the main things about neo-liberalism and the second thing is when you spoke about Lindsay Tanner and the 30-second grab, etc., I sensed that you were suggesting that's not necessarily true. Now if that's not true, the impact of those 30-second grab, where else will there be an opportunity to get ideas for ordinary people who are not engaged so much?

Tim: I don't know that I would want to be as dismissive as I may have sounded. My complaint about Lindsay Tanner's book is that nowhere is there any acknowledgement that the political elite themselves outside the media are responsible for the decline in the standard of public debate. It's all to do with media. I'm as frustrated as the next person about the glib trivialisation in the media but it's a bit of a cycle. As politicians engage in more and more policy and ideological convergence, there's little to compete over other than stunts.

By neo-liberalism, I mean a political belief system that steps further to the right from where we were after Malcolm Fraser. Liberals in the era would have believed in a healthy competition between the private and the public sectors. The Labor Party would emphasise the public sector; the Liberal Party the private sector and each of those two sectors keeping one another honest.

After that, the early 1980s are often dated as the beginning of the neo-liberal era. You see these full-scale privatisation attempts, lowering of taxation, flattening of the taxation scales, commercialisation of higher education, league tables in schools. Now politicians of a notionally Left political party believe in the league tables in schools, user pays, what many of the people in this room might have referred to as economic rationalism.

Audience Question: When they do surveys and ask people whether they would prefer to pay more tax and have more services, they say 'yes', but as soon as somebody suggests that they're going to raise taxes then there's a panic. The other thing is, even if you put up the marginal rates of tax, you have people like Packer can get around those things and pay about 15% where other people are paying higher. So if they're going to do anything about it they've got to close down concessions and deductions all over the place as well, if they're going to make things fairer and more equitable.

Tim: Yes, I agree with you. I think there are three areas that are ripe for a progressive political party to look at. One would be to raise marginal rates of tax on higher income earners, but you're quite right that unless they see that the system overall is fair, and unless a political party can tell a coherent story that the system is fair, you will get this backlash.

The other area that you've nominated is taxation concessions and deductions. It's in the order of tens of billions of dollars. There's quite a bit of money there, and you're quite right in pointing out that the tax take is down. This is the most extraordinary thing about the Rudd-Gillard-Swan troika, that they've allowed the tax take to be now 1.5 percentage points lower than where Howard had left it.

Now that might not sound like a lot of money but it is. The Australia Institute puts it at \$24 billion. That's \$24 billion a year, every year, while the financial conditions stay pretty much where they are, to fund public services.

I think the government just doesn't seem to be robust and want to take on certain interests in a fight. You take the mining tax as an example. What more popular tax could there be where few people are affected by it. It's big mining corporations which would pay it. Yet the Government ran away from it.

Audience Question: Becoming a republic, how does that affect the voting at times? When Margaret Thatcher declared war, her rise in popularity? With these big events, like the War in Iraq, how does the disenchantment of the voter show?

Tim: I'd have to look at figures that are much more closely aligned to those periods of time, but my sense is that people were very much disengaged by the war in Iraq, for example, where you had millions of people marching. My fear about that, from a disengagement point of view, of course there's the tragedy of the war itself but if you extract yourself from that and look at it from a political standpoint, about how people were disengaged and disenfranchised by what then took place, it was an enormous sense of powerlessness. There we were demonstrating and the Government took no notice.

On the other side of the coin there are marvellous examples where it does work. The community groundswell over Work Choices, for example.

Audience Question: Is part of the problem the advice the Government is getting? In the olden days we presumed the public service was competent, Is it that the Government is no longer getting advisors able to put a clear message across?

Tim: Yes, a very good question. You'd probably have to go back further than Howard. After 23 years of Coalition rule it wasn't Gough Whitlam's experience that the public service was fully independent and neutral, though he had very high regard for many senior public servants. So partly for that reason, the Hawke Government began the trend to a more politicised public service.

Are they poorly advised? Yes and no, I think, is the best I can offer. Yes, in some cases they are, such as on the asylum seekers issue but they were well advised, I think, in terms of the financial crisis, though I'm critical of it in an avowedly political way. It's not that I think the quality of the public service isn't a factor here; I think it is. But I think where I'm laying the stress is on the policy and ideological convergence. It ought not to be beyond the wit of a social democratic party to offer a generous program to its natural constituency and then those people would be generous in return towards, in this case, asylum seekers and refugees.

Summary

Audience Question: I don't want to stop your questions, but Tim did imply that he had more material. So Tim, what else did you really want to share with us?

Tim: A little bit more about this process of a disconnection. A different term to try to explain one of the causes of this disenchantment and disengagement is a disconnection between the elites and those whose votes they want. They want the votes at the ballot box, but after those votes are received it's 'thank you very much, put that in our pocket and away we go'.

It has to be said that the failure of the Rudd and Gillard Governments to gain electorally from their successful handling of that crisis, the greatest economic crisis in 80 years, is often attributed to the problem of the counter-factual. People say, well, we didn't really benefit from it because we never know what it would have really been like. Unemployment went up but not to anywhere near the levels that we saw in Europe and the United States.

There's truth to that attribution, and there's truth to the attribution that both the Rudd and the Gillard Governments are obsessed with spin. At a deeper level, I think the failure owes itself to neither Government having a clear purpose or a coherent story to tell. A lot of it has to do with this disconnection between the elites and those whose votes are sought after.

An example: in 2007 when a pending change of government was obvious, the ALP needlessly almost matched the Liberal-National Party Coalition on promised tax cuts. The ALP's promised tax cuts on that occasion, were worth \$34 billion and these were disproportionately directed to higher income earners. The ALP says, our policy is rather different, tries to exaggerate that difference, but the general thrust of the two policies is in the same direction, to reduce the capacity of the public sphere.

So it's really in that context that the rushed return to neo-liberal orthodoxy over 2011 and 2012, indicated by the Australian Treasurer having this surplus fetishism, doesn't really require detailed explanation. The ALP's trajectory, to reduce taxation and spending as a percentage of GDP, was already marked out when the Rudd Government came to power.

I guess, to sum up what I wanted to say today, I wanted to get away from explanations of political disengagement that go to mere apathy. I think it's much more serious than that, because it now involves people who yearn for a better politics; they are disengaged. I've emphasised the informal vote in the Australian setting; my guess is that it will be somewhere between the 5.2% - 5.6% in 2013, but perhaps it's too early to say.

I would have equally spent time telling you a pretty grim tale of how many people are not enrolled – those who are not on the electoral roll. In 2007 there were 1.1 million people not enrolled. In 2010 the number increased to 1.4 million. That's a near 10% of the voting age population. There is a bias in the system as people move from residence to residence. The quicker you take someone off the roll and the slower to put them back on the roll, if you've got any bias in your registration methods, then what you're doing is skewing things towards non-enrolment rather than enrolment. It's often not enforced; they don't have an address to send the fine.

Audience Question: What about the people who don't vote?

Tim: Thanks for that perfect cue. The people who don't vote is another component. It tends to be stable at around 6%. So we've got three main groups who are disengaged to the point where they don't vote:-

- those who aren't on the roll, 1.4 million it stood at 2010;
- you've got another component of people who don't show to the polling booth, they're on the rolls but they don't show;
- and then you've got the third component of people who turn up at the polling booth and vote informal.

Then there are all those of us who vote but through gritted teeth.

Audience Question: You've totally depressed me. I'm just wondering what's the counter to this neo-liberalism? How do the ordinary body politic challenge this sort of thinking?

Tim: I had a note at the end that said it wasn't meant to be despairing. You could look at it as neo-liberalism is running up against its own limits. On the one hand, government is actually growing. Howard grew the public sector. There was a cutback when he first came to in 1996. But in the bigger picture, you remember we said in countries that the state is growing, and it grows – people like me say – because our society has become more complex. Those citizenry demands have to be met, and that was Howard's experience. He can't come clean about that because it's contrary to his ideology. That's one limitation of neo-liberalism.

The other limitation you see in the form of right wing populism. You see it becoming more strident. They won't say it, but how else can you interpret the way in which the Right is so strident about denying climate change? It needs to deny climate change because to admit that climate change is real and to admit that it has to be dealt with, is to admit that the collective way of doing it is the only way of dealing with it.

So that speaks of cracks appearing in the edifice of neo-liberalism. If only a party calling itself 'social democratic' would be able to identify those weaknesses and propose an alternative way of doing it. So an alternative way of dealing with the GFC would have been using the crisis for a better mix of more tax on wealth, better consistency between wealth taxation and income taxation, a more progressive tax system, and reducing the wasteful and inefficient taxation expenditures- there's a program for you. That presents a very clear difference between what was on offer and what we appear to have.

Gillard needs two or three big items. It's not too late. She's got one - the National Disability Insurance Scheme. She needs two more; to clearly mark out a reason to vote not for the Coalition but for the Greens or for the Labor Party.

CCJP wishes to thank Dr. Tim Battin for an extremely informative and interesting presentation and discussion.

Please see our website www.ccjpoz.org for other Sunday Seminar summaries and reports.