
UNIT 7 POLITICAL PARTIES AND PRESSURE GROUPS IN AUSTRALIA

Structure

- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Objectives
- 7.3 Antecedents of the Australian Party System
- 7.4 Compulsory Voting and Party System
 - 7.4.1 Preferential Voting System and Political Parties
 - 7.4.2 Proportional Representation System and Political Parties
- 7.5 The Liberal Party
- 7.6 The Australian Labour Party
- 7.7 The National Party or the Nationals
- 7.8 The Minor Parties
 - 7.8.1 The Australian Democrats
 - 7.8.2 The Greens
 - 7.8.3 The Independents
 - 7.8.4 One Nation
- 7.9 Electoral System and the Changing Dynamics of the Australian Party System
- 7.10 Pressure Groups
- 7.11 Summary
- 7.12 Exercises

Suggested Readings

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Political parties are almost an unavoidable feature of democracies, whatever may be the reasons. In fact, one could cite many reasons; but may be it is because political parties enable ordinary citizens to exercise some kind of influence—even if it be only during election times—over the political elite that parties are an inescapable reality of democracies. This is notwithstanding the fact that political parties are in themselves quite imperfect an institution in a democracy, and politicians are generally held in low esteem by the citizens. This here is the paradox of contemporary party-based democracies—both old and new. Citizens do not have any particular liking for parties and politicians; but once it is election time, the same citizens vote for them.

7.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the antecedents of the Australian party system;

- delineate the voting system in Australia;
- identify the major and minor parties in Australia;
- understand the changing dynamics of the Australian party system; and
- define the role of pressure groups in Australian politics.

7.3 ANTECEDENTS OF THE AUSTRALIAN PARTY SYSTEM

Australian party system is highly stable. Since 1910, the main party division can be described simply as Labour vs. non-Labour; and party politics has continued to revolve around this axis.

Certain phases in the evolution of Australian party system can be broadly identified.

- 1) The period of 1880-1910 can be described as the period of gestation for the contemporary political party formations. There had first emerged in 1890s a number of Labour parties drawing support and sustenance from the labour unions and movements in the colonies. In this sense, Labour parties were an early model of 'mass' parties, compared to, what in Australia were called, the 'cadre' parties which were often no more than informal and unstable electoral arrangements between ambitious and rich politicians. Because of their mass character, Labour was also able to develop party organisations and direct their member's activities in the parliament. The electoral successes of these Labour parties-Queensland had the first labour government in the world in 1899-forced the rivals to also pattern their political outfits along the lines of mass parties. The anti-Labour, Country (now National) Party was formed between 1913 and 1920 and moulded itself as a mass party. The Liberal Party, formed in 1944, however could not do so and still retains a weak organisational structure.
- 2) Australia had moved early towards a two-party system. The functioning of the federation helped make the parties grow around labour and non-Labour or anti-Labour axis. It also encouraged various labour-based parties and groups-and subsequently non-Labour too-move towards creating some kind of a uniformity in organisation and principles. Perhaps, it is the British inheritance that Australians see bi-polarity as a constitutional virtue; and Australians continue to believe in the cricketing metaphor of Alfred Deakin about the impossibility of playing cricket with three elevens on the field.
- 3) The electoral system greatly shaped the party formation and their fortunes in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the first elections held in 1901, both voting and enrolment both were voluntary. The principle of simple majority, i.e., candidate with the most votes (even if not a majority of all votes cast) was declared winner.

A number of changes were subsequently made. In 1911, it became obligatory for eligible voters to register. In 1924, voting was made compulsory; and earlier in 1918, the principle of simple majority was replaced with preferential method.

7.4 COMPULSORY VOTING AND PARTY SYSTEM

The aforementioned two points need some elaboration.

- i) Australia had introduced broad-based electorate very early. For instance, in the first

Commonwealth elections held in 1902, women had the right to vote; and by 1907, it was universal franchise in the elections of the lower house of federal and state legislatures. But why compel voters to enrol and vote? One prominent result of this practice is the unusually high turn-out of registered voters; which could be in the percentile of the 90s. As a result, political parties do not have to make an effort to bring out voters on the polling day; and voters do not have the choice to express their dissent or lack of faith in the political system through absenteeism. It also means that both the Labour and National-Liberal coalition try to appeal to the widest number of segments and groups; but they also know that voters have eventually to choose between the two.

7.4.1 Preferential Voting System and Political Parties

Preferential voting was introduced in 1918 so as to essentially prevent the split in the anti-Labour vote. Under this system, voters are required to rank all candidates in order of preference. In order to be elected, a candidate must secure more than 50 per cent of the valid votes cast. If no candidate secures absolute majority after the count of first preference, then the candidate with the least number of votes is eliminated and his second preference votes are counted for the remaining candidates. This process of elimination of candidates and counting of preference continues until a candidate is able to gain an absolute majority of votes. Under the preferential voting system, all votes polled are thus counted, and no votes are, so to say, wasted. However, the compulsory voting system requires that a voter must still express his second, third and subsequent preferences, though he may actually have wanted to vote for his first preference candidate only. In reality, it has been observed that election for the House of Representatives generally does not require counting of second and third preferences. And wherever it is required, it is generally the candidate leading on the first preference vote count, who eventually wins. For example, only seven first preference candidates were defeated in the second and third preference counting in the elections for House of Representatives in 1996 and 1998. Still however, the preferential system has its own ways to translate votes into seats and favour the major parties. In the 1998 legislative elections in Queensland, Pauline Hanson's One Nation party won 22.7 per cent of the primary vote and 11 of the 89 seats in the state legislature; yet at the federal election, One Nation did not win any seat for House of Representatives despite polling over 9 hundred thousand votes. It was so because the Coalition parties had told their voters to exercise their second preference for One Nation candidates in the state elections; while in the federal election, the same Coalition parties had told their voters not to give second preference votes to the One Nation.

7.4.2 Proportional Representation System and Political Parties

As has been noted in Unit 6, since 1948, election to the Senate is on the basis of proportional representation principle. The PR system reflects better the votes garnered and the seats gained by a party. The Senate election is based on the single transferable vote method, commonly known as the 'quota preferential.' Each state is taken as a multi-member constituency. A quota is calculated by dividing total number of valid votes by one more than the number of senators to be elected and adding one vote. In simple terms today it means that if, say, six senators are to be elected from a state, a candidate needs to poll 14.3 per cent of the valid votes all over the state; and if all the 12 senators are to be elected then the quota is as low as 7.7 per cent of the valid votes. Such a system allows minor parties and independents a greater chance of winning few seats in the Senate. Since 1981, no major party has controlled the Senate; and this has often elicited demand for 'reform' of the Senate.

7.5 THE LIBERAL PARTY

The anti-Labour political forces and tendencies have, since 1901, tried to coalesce together to present an alternative to the Labour Party. In that sense, the Liberal Party though was formed in 1944, the tendency has been present in Australian politics since the founding of the Commonwealth. The Country Party, representing the small rural farmers, was formed in 1920s, and since then anti-Labour forces have often come together to form federal and provincial governments.

It is important to know the ideological and organisational evolution of the anti-Labour forces. In 1890s, trade was the singular issue that had divided the non-Labour interests and groups. The main division was between the supporters and opponents of free trade. Mostly primary product producers of wool and coal etc. in New South Wales and other colonies had argued for free trade; while manufacturing interests in Victoria and other colonies sought protection against cheap imports. Many of these manufacturing interests seeking protection had aligned with Labour; and succeeded in getting protectionist laws passed. The labour support for government-owned enterprises and government regulation of working conditions had brought various employers' groups together and their political representatives in the parliament. A short-lived Fusion Party was the first attempt that brought together the supporters of free enterprise and many powerful politicians. It was followed by the formation of Liberal Party in 1910, which splintered and got dissolved by 1917.

The early Liberals had exhibited two distinct ideological strands: those who supported the idea of individual rights, free trade and a limited government; and those who admitted a role for the state in promoting and undertaking welfare-based measures and, if needed, even minimally regulate the economic activities. The first Liberal Party had comprised both the strands drawn essentially from liberalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. These, so-to-say, free marketers and social liberals have continued to coexist uneasily all through the formations and dissolutions of various liberal parties. The free marketers or supporters of laissez faire are generally called conservatives in Australia. On the other hand, the social liberals in many respects were close to the programmes of the Labour Party, for the Labour Party had also advocated that the power of the state should be used to reform the society and make it just. Both Labour and Alfred Deakin's Liberals had cooperated in introducing legislation concerning old-age pension and tariff protection for manufacturing. What however distinguished them and made them rivals, was, more importantly, their different value system and their different political organisations. One major value of note was the way the Labour Party had set up an elaborate organisation and the way Labour MPs pledged to work according to the party directives in the parliament. The Liberals, in contrast, believed parliament to be really sovereign where debate and deliberations had to be free of all partisan goals. They believed parliament to be the real representatives of the people and disfavoured partisan voting; and as a result did not develop an institutionalised party set-up.

There were many other points of differences with the Labour Party. In 1917, the Labour Party had split on the question of conscription to fight in the First World War. Many Labour Party members and leaders, especially those of Catholic Irish descent, were opposed to conscription. For them, Britain was not the mother of Empire, but an oppressor of Ireland. With this, Labour came to be identified more with the idea of Australian national independence; and non-Labour with loyalty to Britain. The splinter Labour group and the Liberals, who together had formed the National Party government in 1917, became identified with Protestant faith, while Labour was considered as, by and large, a Catholic party. In fact, until the 1970s and 1980s, there were not many Catholic MPs in the Liberal ranks of parliamentarians either at the federal or state levels.

Gradually, the National Party came to be identified with conservatism. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia made opponents associate the Labour Party with communism. Besides, the Irish independence movement had hardened many Protestants' attitudes towards the Labour and strengthened their suspicions about the loyalty of Irish Australians to Australian nation. In the initial decades of the federation, the Liberals had the support of the many employers' organisations, which liberally funded the party activities. Many other middle class anti-Labour organisations also swelled its ranks and support.

In 1894, South Australia had granted the right to vote to women; and the first Commonwealth parliament had resolved to extend the franchise to women. In the 1920s, there were many women's organisations that had been formed around the issue of right to vote for women; and both liberals and Labour had tried to woo and mobilise women around their party causes. While many of these women's organisations remained suspicious of all politics, the middle class background women activists gravitated towards the liberal cause. Many farmers' organisations and some militant Protestant outfits also lent considerable support to the National party. After the First World War, there were many ex-soldiers who were commonly referred to as 'diggers'. The Returned Servicemen's League, though expressed scepticism for all kinds of politics, was anti-Labour for Labour's opposition to conscription and became a source of support for the early Liberals. Ideologically, the early Liberals condemned Labour's socialism as being alien to Australian ethos and culture, though on crucial issues, Liberals in power did not reduce or eliminate state intervention.

A second major development in the non-Labour circles took place in 1931. The Labour Party had won the 1929 elections. Policy differences over how to tackle the consequences of the 1929 world-wide depression once more split the Labour when the federal finance minister Joseph Lyons left the Labour government. Joseph Lyons with support from the non-Labour groups and politicians came to head a new party, the United Australia Party (UAP), which won the 1932 election and remained in power until 1941. UAP was an unstable alliance of different politicians and parties. There were incessant conflicts and frictions among various coalition parties including with the Country Party. The resounding victory of the Labour Party in the 1943 elections marked a low point in the non-Labour politics; and set the stage for yet another effort to bring together the non-Labour forces under one political banner. This is how the Liberal Party was formed in December 1944 and formally launched in February 1945.

- i) Going by its own past experiences, the foremost task for the newly-formed Liberal Party was to create an institutional hierarchy so as to lend it a national and a permanent character. Various non-Labour organisations, barring the Country Party, merged into the new organisational set-up. Besides, the party also worked out institutional mechanisms to manage financing, membership and internal party election of office-bearers at various levels. The party somehow retained a strong federal character with provincial units remaining quite strong and somewhat autonomous. After the 1993 elections, some changes were introduced enhancing the control and supervision of the national level leadership over the party legislators, other office bearers and provincial and local units, but the Party overall retains its loose federal character. It is also to be noted that the parliamentary wing of various Liberal parties had traditionally been more active and dominant, as compared to the non-parliamentary wing. The trend continues, as the most powerful and most resourceful of the Liberals are often in the parliament or state legislatures. Only when the Liberals are out of power, they talk of strengthening the party organisation and giving primacy to the views of the rank-and-file.

- ii) Yet another feature of the Liberals is the domination of the parliamentary party leader. In or out of power, it is the leader of the parliamentary wing who sets most of the policy initiatives and choices and the tone and trend of party's stand on day-today issues. As a result, one sees little or no debate or consultation on important policy issues within the party. Liberals thus have developed a tradition of a strong leadership. The Party normally does well when it has a powerful leader with a national stature who is able to contrive an electorally-winning platform, and often gets on the course of self-destructive splits and clashes of egos in the absence of such a strong leader. One may mention here names of Robert Menzies, Malcolm Fraser and John Howard who have been able to keep a tight control over the party and take it in the direction of their own political and ideological choices. Often, these so-called powerful leaders themselves are, ironically, the cause of weak party organisation, and provoke challenge to their arbitrary ways of doing things.
- iii) In 1944, the Liberals had chosen the social liberal over laissez faire agenda. This is what Robert Menzies had desired; the new Liberal Party should be progressive and not reactionary. Such an ideological slant was in tune with the world-wide trend in capitalist countries seeking a greater role of the state in economic and social spheres. The British economist John Maynard Keynes had suggested that state could manage the demand to prevent depression and inflation. Accordingly, the Liberal Party accepted the importance of state planning in managing the national economy; the partnership between state and private sector in the development of resource sector; and role of the state in instituting employment and welfare schemes. In a sense, it narrowed the distance between the Liberal and the Labour as they both tended to agree on the role of the state in managing the economy and the welfare; the important difference was that Liberals still subscribed to the leading role of the private sector and the primacy of the individual enterprise in the economic development process.

The imprint of Menzies' strong leadership was evident. Given the national moods and expectations after the War, he harped on the importance of the family and home which, in particular, appealed to the women. Here it should be mentioned that Australian Women's National League had been an active force in non-Labour politics since 1903; and Liberal Party, in order to consolidate its support among women, had created a women's section and vowed to give women representation in various party bodies. Menzies had also appealed to the middle class and an inclusive Australian nationalism, and attacked Labour for its class-based divisive politics. The onset of the Cold War further helped the Liberal cause and its propaganda associating Labour Party with communist planning and totalitarian politics. The post-War economic boom further added to the so-called 'doctrinal victory' of the Liberals.

With broad ideological contours in place, the Liberals had come to power in the elections of 1949. Menzies provided a strong leadership, conveniently jettisoning the ideology whenever needed. Liberals in powers were pragmatic, if it made electoral sense. By the time Menzies retired in 1966, Liberal Party has become associated with a strong leadership, effective governance, and social and political conservatism. His retirement unleashed another round for powerful politicians and tendencies jockeying for power and domination within the party.

By 1970s, the Liberals had also to deal with new changes and challenges. Society had changed a great deal; there were many new social groups including immigrant groups demanding a political space for themselves. New immigrants, mostly from of Southern European origin, were challenging the prevalent notion about integration and assimilation. As Asian immigrants were also becoming sizeable, there were new ideas underscoring the need for a multicultural Australia. Women's groups were asserting for some genuine empowerment. Aboriginals were mobilising themselves

for civil rights and respect for their traditional land-use and other rights. There were popular protests against Australia's participation in Vietnam War; and these protests had triggered the formation of many civil rights groups. Besides, the boom period was over; and the resource-export economy had to make some hard adjustments in the context of global decline in the demand and prices of primary products. Admittedly, the Liberal Party had no answer to the changes and challenges of the new era. In contrast, the Labour under the strong leadership of Gough Whitlam was better placed and had taken the lead in shaping the national debate over these issues. It was difficult for Liberals to sit in opposition after the 1972 Labour triumph. It was the constitutional crisis of 1975, compounded no less by Liberal's penchant for power, which paved their return to power under the leadership of Malcolm Fraser. Somehow, the Liberals had come to regard themselves as the natural party of governance but had little idea on how to meet the new social and economic challenges. The party had to undergo some wrenching experiences and develop new positions and parameters in the 1970s.

The Liberals took a cue from the economic policies of US administration of President Ronald Reagan and the conservative British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. It was argued that an expanded and over-sized state is consuming most of the productive resources and is therefore the main cause of economic malaise in the developed countries. Private business has been emaciated by state policies; and welfare schemes have produced a dole-dependent and unproductive population. The solution lay in the drastic reduction in governments' size and role; and a near-free run to the market forces in the production and distribution of goods and services. Reduction in the size of public sector, privatisation, and deregulation will enhance investments, efficiency in production, and higher productivity.

Once wealth-creation and profit-earning become the guiding principles, savings will go up and people could be spending their own money for their own education, health-care etc.

In essence, it was the revival of the laissez faire ideas; and, in their modified form, were given the respectable title of 'economic rationalism' in Australia. Social liberalism of Menzies' era was at a discount; worst, the national consensus built in 1901 on matters like protection of manufacturing industry, state arbitration in labour-capital dispute, and subsidies to rural industries were gradually diluted. The Fraser government still found it difficult to abandon the social liberalism, but many in his Liberal government, including the then Treasurer John Howard, attacked his policies after the electoral reverses of 1983. All through the decade of the 1980s, the ideological struggle between the free marketers and the social liberals continued with the latter gradually losing their position in the party. As the Labour government of Bob Hawke launched an adjustment programme, the Liberals turned even more towards the Right. The Liberal Party also found it difficult to address itself to the changing dynamics of the Australian society. In the early 1990s, its choice of free enterprise and individual initiative were arousing social and moral indignation as economic inequalities and uncertainties about employment and social welfare affected a large number of Australians. John Howard and others responded by harping on conservative family values, Christian moral ethos, small government, conservative nationalist slogan of 'One Australia', and, discreetly, on Australia's Anglo-Celtic antecedents. It only conveyed Liberal's difficulty in adjusting to the ethnic and racial diversities of Australia by 1990s. The Party took an opposing stand on the question of Asian immigration and criticised the very concept of multiculturalism as entrenching differences. The Liberals and the Conservatives also came out strongly against the Aboriginals' demand for self-rule and greater autonomy and suggested, not so discreetly, their joining the mainstream. While Aboriginals must be given equality of opportunity, they have no right to claim special treatment as it violates the idea of equality. When the Labour government of Paul Keating initiated the process to declare Australia a republic and also sought to give the country an 'Asian

identity', many in the Liberal ranks, including John Howard, came out in favour of monarchy and a European identity for the country.

John Howard led the Liberals to one of their most impressive electoral victory in 1996; and followed it up with victories in the elections held in 1998, 2001 and 2004. Electoral calculations had forced the Liberals to tone down their free market rhetoric and take a pragmatic approach. It packaged its open market ideas along with social conservative rhetoric. From the Menzies' era, it took the idea of national well-being and an inclusive nationalism; spoke of 'mainstream' attacking the growing ethnic and racial diversity of society and relations with the Asian nations, the 'separatism' of the Aboriginals. One does not know how long the social conservatism would enable Howard to pursue his free-market policies. The changes in the health-care and higher education system, where the 'users' pay' principle has been introduced, have hurt many supporters of 'economic rationalism'. As John Howard once again led the Liberals to victory in 2004 elections, the party had scored the mark of 40 years in power in the 60 years of its existence until then.

7.6 THE AUSTRALIAN LABOUR PARTY

The Australian Labour Party (ALP) is the oldest party in Australia and in fact, one of the oldest in the world. Neither its name, nor its organisational and ideological bases, nor for that matter its social support base among the unionised labour has changed much since its formation in 1891. Compared to its antecedents and stature, it has had surprisingly less number of years in power at the national level; although its successes at the state level have been more notable particularly in New South Wales.

ALP had emerged out of a congeries of labour unions and movements of 1880s; and remains one of the foremost labour parties in liberal democracies. Subscribing to the broad social democratic goals, ALP has been a member of the Socialist International. Historically, the Party has contained several trends ranging from the revolutionary to the reformist, from religious to secular, from Catholic to Protestant, and from trade union-based to urban middle class social constituents. Ideologically, it has been bounded on the left by the communist party and on the right by the Liberal and the National parties; and at the centre has to contend with the Australian Democrats, the Greens and others advocating the 'new politics'.

Interestingly, since the ALP was formed out of varied labour unions and parties in the colonies, it has retained its regional flavours especially in New South Wales where it can be described as the dominant party. It was the birth of the ALP that in fact had catalysed the formation of the opposition Liberal and the Country parties, and all their early incarnations as well their organisational set-up. In a nutshell, its early formation as a party and the example it set, set the trend, pace and stability of the Australian party system.

Due to its late emergence on the political scene, the Party had practically no influence on the making of the 1901 Constitution, which was the handiwork of conservative politicians and economic interests. The spread of trade unionism and strong wage regulations in the period prior to the First World War had helped expand the Labour. Its vote increased from 18.7 per cent in 1902 to 50 per cent in 1910, with support coming not only from blue collar workers but also from white collar government employees too. However, from the very inception, it remained committed to uphold and implement a programme of socialisation of the economy. Labour had been a strong proponent of a strong state, which anyway colonial states were. Its goal of socialism remained somewhat populist and eclectic in nature. Many disparate forces and groups had joined

the party and tried to take in their desired political direction. The Irish Catholic labour, a major social constituent of the party, were always more centrist and opposed both socialism and capitalism. During the period of First World War, the Party had split on the question of conscription which many Irish Catholic partisans had opposed, and this had led the prime minister Billy Hughes and other non-Catholics to walk out of the Labour Party. The Party was charged of being disloyal to the British Empire and the monarch. The first major split thus had left the ALP as essentially a Catholic supported party for several decades.

The Party was in power again in 1929 during the difficult years of world-wide depression. Internal party differences on economic management of the fall-out of the depression had emerged, and in 1932 the party split again. In both the instances, the break-way leadership switched over to the forces coalescing around the Liberal and Conservative pole. Nonetheless, the ALP continued to fare much better at the level of states, forming government in several states.

Notwithstanding its limited electoral successes at the national level and two major splits, by 1930s the ALP could be considered as the grand old party of Australia. It was not a party of government; more importantly, it came to be better known as the party of initiatives and change. The Labour governments of John Curtin and Ben Chifley (1941-49) saw Australia through the Second War and the post-War efforts at reconstruction. It was the Labour that in the post-Second War made the major shift from Britain to security alignment with US, and the first-ever foreign policy activism in international affairs. Ben Chifley also laid grounds for a Keynesian interventionist state, and brought into effect the nationalisation of banks and health-services etc. The party remained out of power for as many as 23 years, until the victory of Gough Whitlam in December 1972.

Though, Labour registered electoral victories at the state level, losing consecutively as many as eight national elections had proved quite debilitating. The party suffered its third major split in 1954, and caused the fall of Labour governments in Victoria and Queensland. This time, the splinter group, instead of merging with the Liberal-National stream, formed the Democratic Labour Party (DLP)-a predominantly Catholic grouping. The introduction of proportional representation system for senatorial elections allowed DLP to play a balancing act in the Senate and enter a tacit understanding of transferring its second-preference votes for the House of Representatives to the Liberal-National coalition.

Many organisational and ideological changes were effected under Gough Whitlam in the late 1960s. The hold of party leadership over the Labour parliamentary group was loosened, and Whitlam himself symbolised the new middle class professional leadership of the Labour Party. Though Whitlam government was dismissed by the Governor-General in 1975, triggering one of the most severe constitutional and political crises in the history of the Commonwealth, Whitlam government consolidated the image of the Labour as a party of new ideas and initiatives. Whitlam government initiated major policy changes in areas such as health policy, women's rights, national identity, urban and regional development, tax reforms and the land rights of the natives. He brought back planning and sought to change the federal financial relations in favour of the federal government and direct funding of local governments. Many of these reform measures remained incomplete or unfilled, partly on account of the constitutional and political crisis and partly on account of internal party bickering. International economic crisis including fall in commodity exports contributed no less to frustrating the reform agenda. Bob Hawke, who had in the 1970s led the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), brought Labour back into office in 1983 heralding the longest 13-year national rule by the Party. His nine years as prime minister and four years under Paul Keating (1991-96) saw also Labour for much of the period in power in New South

Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania. As a result of successive electoral successes at federal and state levels, many had by early 1990s started describing Labour as the natural party of government. Labour lost the national elections of 1996 paving way for the return of Liberal-National coalition under John Howard; at the state level, it however got a mixed fare.

There are two ways to look at the Hawke-Keating period of 1983-1996. Some consider it as a continuum from the Whitlam period. Others point out the fundamental compromises Labour made to accede to power in the 1980s. The Party had got over its reformist goals, and was appealing to urban middle classes with promises that were a betrayal of its labour constituents. The reason was that the party leadership no more laid programmes and controlled the parliamentary wing; now it was the other way round. Professional politicians in the parliamentary wing of the party, many with professional middle class background, had become dominant over the party-based leaders. Hawke-Keating leadership also broke from many labour traditions and values and pushed forward economic policies of deregulation, privatisation, and tariff reduction; and support for the land rights of the indigenous communities. Admittedly, ideology had given way to electoral expediency; and many labour leaders and traditional supporters switched over loyalty to either the Democrats, or the Labour independents and the Greens.

There was an element of necessity, perhaps even inevitability, in the way Labour has transformed itself under Hawke-Keating leadership. Many do not consider these changes as truly transformative and indicate continuation of Whitlam's reformist programme into the 1980s and the 1990s. The Party made many internal changes along the principles of democratic functioning and created mechanisms for better coordination with the labour unions. The Party, in a sense, was responding more creatively to the changing social dynamics and economic imperatives of the 1990s. Whitlam had made a major initiative on the subject of Aboriginal land rights; Hawke-Keating governments were responding to the changing social profile-the expanding urban middle class, and the emergence of issues including gender, environment, immigration and multiculturalism-of Australia.

Part of the reason for changing social character of the ALP is the decline in its union-based membership. As working class proportion of the national workforce is declining, working class membership of the Party is also on the decline-hovering about 25 per cent. Middle class members have brought to the party new issues and agendas like environment and women's rights; and these issues clearly go far beyond the 'bread-and-butter' demands of the working class.

It is also noteworthy that some 60 per cent of the parliamentary seats are considered as safe seats by both the ALP and the Liberal-National coalition. ALP's safe seats are found mostly in blue-collar working class-dominated constituencies, in the inner city and in the western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne and other major cities along with few rural working class-dominated constituencies. The Whitlam and the Hawke-Keating leadership had also sought to expand the party support, especially in the marginal middle class seats by appealing to the middle class voters through appropriate promises and by fielding prominent persons as candidates. In other words, the party is seeking to become a 'catch-all' party, and in the process has diluted its ideology, discipline and support of the working class. As it lost the working class support to some extent, it could also not retain support in the marginal seats; and it is said that this has led to the consecutive electoral reverses since 1996.

In the 1980s, the issues of internal party democracy and the ability of rank-and-file to influence the policy policies also became important. ALP has been known for its practice whereby the party has exercised control over its parliamentary wing. Increasingly however, it is the parliamentary wing that has been exercising greater control over party hierarchy. Hawke and Keating

governments had adopted economic policies of deregulation, privatisation, and uranium mining and its sale to France which were against the ALP policy agenda. This has particularly disturbed the more left-oriented groups championing various causes such as anti-globalisation, environment, and human rights. ALP is also known for maintaining discipline among its legislators. ALP members of parliament take a pledge to support the decisions taken in the party caucus i.e., parliamentary wing of the ALP. Failure to comply leads to suspension from the caucus or even expulsion from the party. It is the party caucus which also plays a decisive role in the formation of the cabinet when the ALP is in power. In practice it has meant that various factions represented in the parliamentary wing of the party jockey for ministerial positions; and election or selection for ministerial portfolios by the caucus becomes a foregone conclusion.

It was because of its origin in the labour movement and unions that the Labour Party had developed early two of its distinctive mechanisms: the caucus, the decisions of which were binding on the members constituting it; and secondly, the pledge, which enforced this discipline. Hawke and Keating could shape and even manipulate the caucus for their own needs; the pledge, however, has remained a strong source of parliamentary party unity.

Apart from strong party organisation and discipline which has been the source of strength and, often, also rigidity, ALP is a party of talent. It attracts talent-competent campaigners, speech-writers, and election experts. The Liberals have so often imitated and emulated the Labour practices and policies. It has been a party with a vision and competence; and its leaders are known for their modest lifestyles and speech, addressing each other as 'comrades'. Many of these things changed in the 1990s, as Labour leadership came to befriend the capitalists, attracted middle class into its fold, and initiated market-oriented economic policies. Labour leadership and rank-and-file have not yet come over the challenges involved in this transition; and this partly explains the Labour's lackadaisical political performance since the mid-1990s. In the 'new vision for Australia', advocated by Paul Keating in 1993, an attempt was made to mould the party as a progressive, multiculturalist, democratic, and pro-Labour Party. The attempt was to wean the party away from it being 'socialist' and even 'social-democratic'. Many attacked the ALP for betraying its Labour and 'socialist' antecedents; others see it as an attempt to calibrate the social-democracy to the changing dynamics of Australian politics and challenges of globalisation. The party remains committed to 'civilise' capitalism in the era of globalisation. The party remains committed to social justice including pro-poor policies and full employment, public enterprises including state regulation of the economy; and very importantly, an independent and distinctive national identity-indigenising the institutions such as the Governor-General and symbols such as anthems and honours.

Whitlam had introduced a new national anthem, a new system of national honours, and abolition of appeals to the Privy Council in Britain. Keating in the 1990s took strong steps in the direction of declaring Australia a republic. ALP is the only major party that is formally committed to a republican constitution. Since the times of Whitlam, the party set the pace and incorporated new issues concerning land rights of the Aborigines, environment, gender equality, and a multicultural Australia. Liberals and Nationals were forced to, in return, articulate their position on these matters. Though in power, ALP has found it difficult to meet these 'new' needs and demands, many of the 'new' social movements look at ALP as their natural ally. The Hawke and Keating governments came to power at a time of great economic difficulties; and it was left to them to restructure the economy along market lines without causing much social pain. Still however, it had to take responsibility for higher income inequalities and unemployment problems which inevitably result from economic deregulation and privatisation. ALP remains a party with labour

tradition which is trying to come to terms with the challenges of economic liberalisation and globalisation.

7.7 THE NATIONAL PARTY OR THE NATIONALS

It is customary to describe Australia effectively as a two-party system, and overlook the claims of the National Party which is the second oldest party and which has been a permanent partner in non-Labour ruling coalitions with its leader occupying the post of deputy prime minister. However, it would be wrong to consider the National Party as an appendage of the Liberal Party.

The party is shrinking, with both demographic and economic changes causing its decline. As the rural farm sector shrinks in terms of agriculture's contribution to the GDP and the total workforce it employs, National Party is gradually on the decline. The adverse effects of neo-liberal economic policies on farm sector have further eroded the rationale of rural interest-based party. The party nevertheless is still strong enough and winning enough parliamentary seats so as to remain a sought-after-partner by the Liberal Party.

The farmers' interests had made an early impact on Australian electoral politics; and in the elections of 1919, as many as 15 candidates-who had been endorsed by national farmers federation-had registered victories for the House of Representatives. In 1920, they came together to form the Country Party to promote and protect the rural and farmers' interests. Besides, the Country Party was and remains a kind of rural protest against the urban-bias of national politics and the 'parasitical' urban life. In the 1920s, the party had successfully pressurised its coalition partner in the government to maintain wheat market boards as a bulwark against falling wheat prices, support and subsidies for farmers and graziers and government-subsidised services including education and hospitals for rural areas. Its successes in drawing concessions for the rural population enabled the party to develop strong support bases, particularly in the eastern states. The party has believed that the great contribution the rural Australia makes is not duly recognised and rewarded. Moreover, it is rural Australia that forms the character and backbone of being Australian. Such an outlook makes it the party of decentralisation. The party has vehemently opposed Labour's socialism; but seeks governmental assistance for its own rural agenda.

However the declining international prices of agricultural products and shrinking contribution of agriculture to GDP are contributing to party's decline. Besides, the rural-urban migration and immigration patterns have caused the decline in the size of rural population and a corresponding decline in the political importance of the rural farm sector. Periodic redrawing of the seats is also causing a loss of 'safe' seats of the party. Aware of the economic, demographic, and electoral changes having an adverse effect on the electoral fortunes of the party, the Country party had- in the 1960s- sought to broaden its base by aligning with the manufacturing industry on a protectionist platform, and repeated it in the 1970s by aligning with mining interests.

In 1974, the Country party changed its name to National Country Party; and in October 1982 to the National Party. The imperative was not to just change the name of the party but to broaden its horizon beyond the traditional rural interests. The National Party had its initial successes in this at least at the level of states, when it expanded at the cost of the Liberal party in Queensland in the 1980s. Such a transformation, however, was difficult to achieve at the national level. The party had to concentrate on its core support constituency; and the parliamentary strength of the party has hovered between 14 and 18 seats and its vote share from 8.4 to 5.3 per cent since the 1990 election. Besides, the National party also realises that it is unable to expand beyond eastern

states of New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria. A coalition partner in John Howard government since 1996, the party is facing heightened rural criticism against the government policies of privatisation, removal of governmental support and subsidies, introduction of competition, and introduction of a Goods and Services Tax. It has been an original supporter of government support and subsidies for farmers and rural industries and rural marketing boards, low-interest rural credit schemes, and subsidised utilities. It has worked to get education, hospitals, banks, transportation etc. for the rural sector comparable to what the urban centres get. 'Economic rationalism' since the 1980s has undercut its social support bases. In the late 1990s, the National Party had also to contend with the challenge posed by Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party which played upon the rural unrest against the 'economic rationalism' of Howard government in the 1998 and subsequent elections.

For long, the National Party has been in coalition with the Liberals and its predecessor parties. This relationship has not been free of tensions, but the party remains acutely dependent on Liberals for enjoying the fruits of power. For most of the times, Liberals have needed National support to form a government; and the party has benefited by getting the office of deputy prime ministership and key portfolios of interest to it. Even when it has not been necessary, the two have formed a coalition government; and as well sat together in opposition. Its gradual decline since the 1980s has made it more dependent on the Liberals. Still, however, it is different from other minor parties in the sense that it is able to retain a number of core seats and a rural agenda that Liberals need in order to form a government. National Party is essentially a conservative party. It has had historical antipathy towards the unionised labour; it remains strongly pro-monarchy, the flag, the national anthem, strong family values, and a strong national defence policy, and strong support for farm and rural sectors. It remains a strong opponent of gender equality, affirmative programmes for women, multiculturalism and immigration policies, Aboriginal land rights and gun control measures.

7.8 THE MINOR PARTIES

For the last one hundred years or so, the Australian party and electoral system is effectively built around the two major groupings: the ALP and the Liberal-National coalition. But there are, and have been, many more minor parties, some of which proved transient while others have endured the electoral-political changes. Besides, some of these minor parties are better described as political tendencies—some old and others as new. It is also argued that with voters' growing disenchantment with the two mainstream parties and declining party identification among electorates, the smaller parties and independents have improved prospects of entering the federal and state legislatures, play the balancing act, and even get their specific demands and interests incorporated in governmental policies and programmes. Let us examine the Australian Democrats, the Greens, the Independents, and the One Nation.

7.8.1 The Australian Democrats

Don Chipp, MP from Victoria, and several other dissident Liberals formed the Australian Democratic Party in mid-1977. In forming the Democratic Party, Chipp was offering the Australian electorate a third choice—different from the power-seeking, vote-chasing Liberals and the Labours. He projected the Democrats as a middle-of-the-road party which would pursue the goal of clean politics. Given the electoral system, the Democrats have been able to gain few seats in the Senate which are enough to play a balancing act; however, the method of voting for the House of Representatives means that the near-monopoly of the Liberals and the Labour cannot easily be broken. The proportional representation system, requiring a quota of only 14.3 per cent to win a seat (when elections are normal for half of the Senate) and just 7.7 per cent (under 'double

dissolution' for the entire Senate), means that Australian Democrats are able to gain few Senate seats through preference transfers of other minor parties or from the surplus to the major parties' quotas. The core vote of the Australian Democrats has come down from around 9 to 5 per cent; and this means that they can gain few senatorial seats with the help of preference transfers of others but their candidates are generally eliminated in the first round counting of the votes for the House of Representatives.

Minor parties are not able to play any role in the government formation, as they are not represented in the House of Representatives. Australian Democrats and other minor parties are not sufficiently large and organised so as to challenge the two main formations in the election for the lower house. It is this which has led to the 'renewal' of the Senate where minor parties are able to play a balancing act.

Australian Democrats are mostly disenchanted Liberals but who are at the same time antipathetic to the Labour. All through the 1970s, there have been many occasions when the Liberal and Labour dissidents walked out of their parties and floated their own political outfits, which only disappeared after the national elections. However, some such transient parties could make an impact at the state levels. Many of these ex-Liberals got attracted to the Australian Democrats, and either joined the party or reached some kind of an electoral understanding. Australian Democrats have performed well in the well-to-do suburbs of state capitals and the ACT. Its support comes mainly from the middle class, educated and younger Anglo voters, with no particular attachment to the two main parties or to race, ethnicity and religion. The party was formed when feminist movements were strongly inserted in national political agendas. Democrats were the first ones to shake off patriarchy and hierarchy and take an approach of inclusion and grass-roots level participation, and this attracted a number of feminist activists to the party fold. Unlike other parties, where women are few and remain mostly in the background, Democrats is the platform for women and men who genuinely believe and strive for gender equality. Understandably, most leaders of the Democrats are and have been women (earning it the nickname of 'women's party'); and in fact it is Democrats' women senators who provide a semblance of effective gender representation in the Senate.

Democrats' core support, however, lasts so long as the moderate electorate perceive both the ruling and the opposition parties as ineffective and incompetent, and want the government to remain 'honest'. Issues such as environment, social justice, civil liberties and family have concerned the Democrats. Democrats have in particular been identified with environment and their anti-nuclear stand. They are opposed to the dumping of radioactive waste in the outback; to uranium mining and export; and to US military bases and Australia's participation in overseas military missions. Their concern for environment is serious and fundamental to any economic policy. On social and personal issues, the Democrats are liberal and forward-looking. They favour reform of laws of prostitution, abortion and voluntary euthanasia, gay rights, and recreational and therapeutic drug use. They express concerns over issues of state intruding the privacy of individuals. They support right to information so as to make the governments accountable and less arbitrary; they value education as a right and as a tool for personal and community development and therefore demand access to education for all. They advocate freedom of speech and freedom of media including from bureaucratic control or its ownership by big business. As stated above, Democrats are leading the charge for gender equality; they also support the goal of social justice to expand to recent immigrants, refugees, Aborigines, the disabled and the destitute. Less identified with any church, they nevertheless are more in understanding with the radical church groupings. It is their commitment and their ability that has led to some significant legislations on the question

of Aboriginal land rights; and in 1998, Democrats were successful in sending a native Australian to the federal Senate—the second-ever native who became a federal parliamentarian.

The Democrats had begun as the middle-of-the-road party but now stand to the left of the Labour Party on most social and economic issues. It is partly due to Labour's own implementation of economic adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 1990s and partly on account of a more articulate position, Democrats generally take on issues. Democrats seriously question the economic and ethical rationale of economic liberalisation and globalisation that has marginalised and impoverished lots of Australians. The manner in which global investors and multinationals are consuming natural resources and damaging environment calls for re-regulation of capitalism. Globalisation is simply predatory and its promises are hollow for the vast multitude of Australians. Democrats were initially opposed to the power of the big labour unions; but now see labour struggle as just. Democrats have also been distrustful of big business and their promises of big development and prosperity. They have championed small-business including the family farm. They support decentralised, low energy, socially-useful enterprises which generate employment and remain environmentally sustainable. They are not against technology. Their agenda is post-materialist, and their perspective post-modernist. For them 'quality of life' is more important than the 'standard of living' measured in per capita income etc. They are not against competition, but the belief that market-based competition shall deliver efficiency and productivity is bogus. Growth without jobs, rising inequalities and declining quality of life is unacceptable. While they support fairer distribution of resources, conservation of environmental resources, they want less dependence on international financial agencies and investors. Democrats are opposed to the idea of 'big government' but want the state to intervene to build and maintain a just and humane community life. For this reasons, they have attacked both the Labour and coalition for reducing the size of the public sector, as it has meant depriving the low income and rural families of many of social services. Democrats have often joined hands with the 'new' unions, church and community groups over these domestic issues. In international arena, they are opposed to the austerity programmes of IMF and the external debt obligations of the developing countries. They have called for the reform of international financial institutions including World Trade Organisation for a just and humane order. Many of the party publications are extremely well-written and documented works on sustainable development, growth with jobs and community life, and a just international order.

The party stands for new political ethos and a genuine participatory culture; and, to begin with, practices democracy in the inner party functioning including allowing its senators 'conscience' vote. The party's membership is small, its organisation weak, and leadership well-educated and resourceful, and it has its own distinct way of conducting politics along democratic lines. Increasingly, it is the Democrats who are becoming the party of ideas and policy innovations. Many consider their programmes and blueprints for social and economic reforms as utopian; but a glance reveals that these are well-researched practical policy alternatives, and only require necessary political will on the part of government. Their presence in the Senate and some state legislatures has enabled the Democrats to mount a critique of economic and social policies—first of the Hawke-Keating Labour government and, since 1996, of Liberal-National coalition of John Howard. In their powerful critique of the mainstream politics, Democrats reveal the inadequacies and the less-than-honest commitment of the mainstream parties towards building a just and democratic Australia. Democrats do not ever hope of coming to power; perhaps, this realisation has made them take politically honest and well-informed position of issues like privatisation, rising cost of higher education and health-care, and degrading environmental assets. In a highly urbanised and educated society, their ideas and programme proposals have high rates of receptivity. Many vote for Democrats' senatorial candidates simply for their ability to critique

the governments. Since the 1980s, ruling parties have to carefully work out their senatorial strategy for getting bills passed. This is what precisely the Democrats have done through the Senate, and have successfully used their number to make significant changes, for instance in getting basic foods exempted from the GST or through senatorial committees keeping a watch on government's expenditures. Democrats' watchdog role in the Senate often exasperates the two main parties, who then talk of 'Senate reform'. In a significant manner, Democrats have also made a departure from the conventional party behaviour of working out compromises and bargains among politicians especially in regard to transfer of preferences during elections. In short, Democrats have checked the no-holds-barred negative side of Australian party politics; and more importantly, injected significantly new issues in national political debate and improved the quality of legislation to the extent their number and role in Senate permits. They have worked responsibly in the Senate never blocking a money bill and bringing the government down. It has often been seen that many of their proposals are rejected first as impractical but subsequently find a place in government's legislative proposals.

There remains the perennial hope that in case popular disenchantment with the mainstream parties and their policies reach the threshold of democratic belief and tolerance, it could catapult Democrats into playing a more significant role-either as opposition or part of some ruling combination. Be that as it may, many see the Democrats as part of the two and a half party system of Australia; or some times as the 'third force'.

7.8.2 The Greens

Between 1993 and 1998, the two Green parties, along with the Democrats, held the balance of power in the Senate. As is their wont, Greens are local and grass-roots activists, and have found it hard to become a national-level party. They stand for community education, direct grass-roots action and campaigns and lobbying for local and state-level issues. As a result, they have proved more effective at local and state levels in places like Tasmania and Western Australia.

It were the West Australian Greens-WA-Greens-who first succeeded in entering the federal Senate. WA-Green had originated in the popular protest that environmentalist were able to mount against the visit of the US nuclear-powered warships in the early 1980s; and its leader Joe Valentine became a federal senator in 1984 on the ticket of Nuclear Disarmament Party. In March 1990, the WAGs became a party comprising of various anti-nuclear groups, peace activists and environmentalists; and could get at least one, and some time even two, candidates elected to the federal senate. From Tasmania, it is Bob Brown, the veteran of many environmentalist battles, who had also entered Senate in 1996 and claims to be representing all the 'Australian Greens' minus the WAGs. Greens tend to work out arrangements with both the Liberals and the Labour in case the mainstream parties make specific commitment on environmental issues. Strange though it may seem, Greens have shunned the Democrats, and have been involved in electoral contest with them. Somewhat anarchistic in their broader perceptions, Greens are rigid and focussed on one issue only; and Democrats find them opportunists who are willing to barter their votes for environment. In reality, Green senators however were seen to be also actively engaged on other issues too.

7.8.3 The Independents

Neither the electoral system nor the nature of party system allows much scope for independents in the parliament. Most independents are thus found at the state level-individuals with sufficient personal following. Some times, independents are those who have successfully contested the election after being denied ticket by either of the two main parties. In the past, genuine independents

have been far and few. However, in the 1990s, there is a discernible growth in their numbers both at the state and federal legislature level. Many elected members feel dissatisfied and betrayed by their parties' parliamentary machinations and political manipulation, and leave the party to sit as independents. At other times, the electorate themselves chose an independent so as to teach the parties a lesson in responsible public behaviour.

Especially since neither Labour nor Liberal-National coalition are able to register landslide victories, legislatures are finely balanced allowing independents to play a decisive roles. Many party legislators also leave the party to sit as independents realising the thin majorities of the ruling parties. In recent years, all the states have seen minority governments kept in office with the support of the Independents of various descriptions and denominations. The presence of independents may be a cause of potential instability but it could as well be the reason for greater accountability on the part of such a government. Both Liberal-National coalition and the Labour therefore have worked, as if in tandem, to weed out the possibility of independents through tighter selection process and party discipline. A good example of an independent as a federal senator is that of Brian Harradine of Tasmania who was elected consecutively since 1975.

7.8.4 One Nation

Pauline Hanson's One Nation erupted on the political scene in March 1996 federal elections. Pauline Hanson, disowned by the Liberals for her racist remarks, swept the polls in 1996 winning the Oxley seat with the support of the non-Labour voters who endorsed her strong views on race and immigration. Her rise symbolised the backlash of those who saw themselves as victims of the social policies of Hawke-Keating era and the economic policies of adjustment pursued by both the mainstream political parties. Emboldened by the response she received, Pauline Hanson floated the One Nation in April 1997. The initial reluctance of Howard government to take on her rhetoric further emboldened her; in fact, some suspected the Liberal-National coalition government having some kind of a soft corner for her diatribe against the Asian immigration, multiculturalism and the welfare of the Aboriginals. Be that as it may, her fiery speeches with distorted facts and concocted figures worked to create tension and fissures in both the Liberal and the National parties. The Liberal-National consensus on issues of immigration, multiculturalism and Aboriginal rights stood broken. It was only when her utterances on Asian immigration had started hurting trade, tourism and inflow of Asian students for higher education that the National party took note of the One Nation. Her condemnation of economic globalisation, touching on issues of job losses, tariff reduction and national sovereignty, found strong sympathy even among some blue-collar workers, who have been traditional supporters of the Labour Party. It was a case of a conservative populist reaction against globalisation. One Nation garnered 23 per cent of the votes and 11 seats in state elections for Queensland in 1998; and exposed the fragile support base of the Liberals and the Nationals. The Nationals, already shrinking and declining, were particularly alarmed with the rise of One Nation, which shared some of the conservative ideas of the Nationals. The two parties worked to corner the One Nation during the 1998 election. Pauline Hanson herself, though secured the largest number of first preference votes, lost the seat for House of Representatives as both the Liberals and the Labour advised their voters not to exercise their second preference in her favour. Nonetheless, the party secured around 8 per cent of the votes nation-wide but could win only one seat for the federal Senate. After 1998, One Nation got embroiled in financial irregularities and public brawling. The party had declined but still wins a number of seats in state elections in Queensland and elsewhere. To an extent, the Howard government's conservative approach to Asian immigration, multiculturalism and indigenous rights has appeased the One Nation though, at the same time, taken the militant wind out of its sails.

7.9 ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF THE AUSTRALIAN PARTY SYSTEM

There are certain notable trends in the Australian party system which are making the electoral arena and system contentious. (i) The mainstream political parties, it seems, are changing from 'mass parties' to 'catch-all' parties or even 'electoral-professional parties'. In other words, political parties are moving away from the earlier norm of large party-membership including members' inclinations and desires to working out electorally-rewarding strategies and policies. As parties become 'catch-all' outfits, citizens' allegiance to parties is declining; and so is voting percentage in the elections for the two mainstream political parties.

One is not sure whether the trends are going to be lasting ones, but they nevertheless indicate the way the present electoral system works and is helpful to the two maintain party groupings. In electoral democracies of the kind that obtain in Australia, or for that matter in India, parties are primarily concerned with the number of seats they get in the lower house of the parliament or state legislatures. Since that is so, the point is how the electoral system is helpful to the two leading party formations in Australia.

(ii) As you know, Australia is considered a 'two-party dominant' system, though in reality it has around forty plus political parties which are registered. The Labour and the Coalition still gain most of the votes and most of the seats, but as voters' identification with the two dominant parties is on the wane, there is greater incidence of multi-partism. This is particularly more evident in the distribution of votes and seats in the federal Senate where minor parties and independents have been able to make their presence felt. Still the two major parties are able to secure more senatorial seats than their votes warrant. Besides, the majoritarian, single-member system of the House of Representatives still allows the two parties secure seats highly disproportionate to the votes polled by them. Some 60 per cent of the constituencies of House of Representatives are generally regarded as 'safe' for one or the other party. Nevertheless, it is also true that electorate are giving less and less number of votes to the two main parties, and preferring more the minor parties.

It is the electoral system that has consolidated the two or two-and-a-half party system in Australia. The rise of the Country party in the 1920s had the liberals (then called nationalists) fear the division of anti-labour vote. It was to prevent the split in the anti-Labour vote that the preferential voting system was introduced in 1923; and this set the pace for the coalition between the liberals and country party. The second important electoral development was the introduction of compulsory voting in 1924. In the 1920s and 1930, there were many, organisations speaking on behalf of women and ex-soldiers, that had expressed suspicion of all politics and the unethical and corrupt behaviour of politicians. There were others, like the King and Empire Alliance, who, enamoured with fascist ideas, stood against democracy itself. It was to check the large-scale antipathy of voters that politicians of all hues had quietly introduced the compulsory voting.

7.10 PRESSURE GROUPS

All modern societies, irrespective of their forms of government, have pressure groups. The reason is simple: as the role of state has expanded over practically every sphere, varieties of groups do try to influence the public policy making. When people who share some common interest or objective or concern and organise themselves formally so as to influence the public policy, it becomes a pressure group. An employers' association or a trade union could be an example of a pressure group. The terms pressure group and interest groups are some times used to denote the

same thing; however, an interest group could be a formal or an informal group of individuals with some common interest, attitude or concern; for instance, a rural interest group. In simple terms, the modes of working and organisation and focus of activity separate a pressure from an interest group.

Pressure groups also differ from political parties. Political parties are broad and all-encompassing, and make a direct attempt to capture political power. A pressure group has a narrow programme, its members or adherents are small in number, and it seeks to influence policy making on a narrow range of issues. Sometimes however, such a distinction does get blurred, and a pressure group may itself seek to become a political party, albeit one which is narrowly focussed. There once was the short-lived single-issue Nuclear Disarmament Party in Australia, which crossed the threshold and became a party. Green parties can also be bracketed as environmental pressure groups who became political parties. Some pressure groups, like trade unions, not only put pressure on the government of the day but may also be an important constituent of some political party. Major trade unions and their apex associations are the industrial wing of the Australian Labour Party. Leading farmers' associations have long been the backbone of the National Party.

The democratic federal character of Australian polity and the growing multicultural character of its society means that Australia has a variety of interests and groups-formal and informal, organised and informal, large and small, and some permanent while many others are temporary. Some groups work at all the three levels of governments; others may be confined to working at local or state levels. Groups proliferate more in a competitive electoral democracy: as one group is formed, its opponents may also organise themselves into a counter-group. Most groups have their own specific economic and professional interests, which they champion, such as association of manufacturers. Others could be simply recreational or altruistic, for instance, a foot-ball club or animal lovers' clubs. Some groups are sectional, devoted to promoting and protecting their specific interests, for instance a business group which would be open to only businessmen. Others are broad with universal appeal, for instance a human rights group who attract all kinds of individuals to their fold.

Groups, both pressure and interest, are considered as essential to the functioning of democracy. They are key component of institutions. Such an argument creates the illusion as if all groups are equal in a democracy. It is not so. Groups remain unequal in their ability to influence policy making process, in terms of governmental attitudes towards groups-some are favoured, others could be marginalised or even crushed.

Since varieties of groups seek to influence policy making, their modes of operation also vary. Since Australia is a parliamentary form of government, pressure and other groups generally do not work to influence the parliamentarians. The reason is that MPs are generally bound by their party discipline; moreover, policy- and law-making has shifted a good deal from parliament to ministries and the cabinet. Therefore, groups work more on ministers, the entire cabinet, and on the upper echelons of bureaucracy for favourable decisions. Budget-making is a good example. Every year, government itself asks major national pressure groups to present their briefs and inputs to the cabinet. The occasion is also publicised in national media. Such groups otherwise continue to work behind the scenes all-round the year for their demands. Some such activities have been institutionalised and bring pressure groups and bureaucracy in direct contact with each other. Groups not only pressurise the bureaucracy but also become a source of useful information and advice. Government departments regularly consult chambers of commerce, industry, associations of medical practitioners, etc. for making and implementing policies. There are many statutory corporations too, where representatives of various pressure and interest

groups are involved-sometimes as advisors, at others as direct participants. These include, for example, the Australian Wheat Board, and Australian Wool Corporation. Representatives of pressure groups are included not only in policy-making but also in policy administration too. One pressure group, the Returned Services League, is even more influential. It has its own department, the Veterans' Affairs, and its own minister in cabinet.

Some pressure groups in Australia are very closely identified with some particular political party. In fact, some of the political parties have grown out of specific pressure and interest groups' organisations and movements. Whenever that particular political party get into power, it is meant that its constituent groups' goals will be better served. Labour Party was formed out of many trade unions and labour movements in 1890s and unions remain its backbone. Farmers and Producers Political Unions had formed and funded the Country Party; and urban business groups, particularly manufacturers, had founded and funded the Liberal Party. These parties still draw bulk of their supporters and finances from their constituent groups; though over the decade, all parties have shown the trend to grow beyond their narrow social confines. Some groups may be politically neutral, but find themselves closer to some specific party. Organisations such as the Returned Services League have always been closer to the non-Labour. There is a new trend now seen in Australia: many newly formed pressure groups are trying to get rid of any party tag. Farming and pastoral interests have historically been associated with the National party. However, the new-style Cattlemen's Union maintains an independent attitude to party politics. Similarly, the National Farmers Federation, the most powerful rural industry group, has formally distanced itself from the National party.

Groups work adopting different means and strategies to get their specific demands and interests fulfilled. They lobby, cooperate and are even included in advisory and participatory roles. Groups also turn to public action, mostly when everything else has failed. Groups which are generally associated with direct action are trade unions which resort to public petitions, agitations and strikes. Through direct action, such groups try to mobilise public opinion in their favour. In regard to labour, Australia has long tradition of establishment of arbitration boards which resolve the disputes between the labour and capital under the aegis of the government. Many promotional groups, such as anti-abortionists, now-a-day also resort to direct action such as marches, demonstrations and vigils so as to influence the larger society and get favourable policies made. Anti-war groups, opposing Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1970s and Iraq war since 2003, have even sought to influence the entire electoral process and thus cause change of governments through direct action programmes. These constitute attempts at influencing the electorate in terms of their opinions and voting behaviour.

Apart from various modes of working and focus of their activities, it is also possible that some of powerful politicians, parliamentarians and civil servants may themselves be members of specific pressure groups; and on their own promote group interests in the corridors of powers.

In short, pressure groups have diverse demands and goals, different levels and types of organisational set-up, varied resources-financial and political, various ways of campaigning and professional skills. In simple words, all groups are not the same; therefore, the opportunities they get and the prospects of success they may have are not uniform. Groups which represent economically powerful interests and classes are obviously more influential and closer to the governments. Manufacturers, wheat and wool farmers and other rural industries have for decades benefited from the economic protectionist policies of the government. 'Economic rationalism' and adherence to market oriented economic policies under WTO commitments are now creating new strains and tensions between government and these powerful groups. Economic restructuring

is also creating new patterns of relationship between governments and the pressure groups. Since the 1980s, governments have used their power to work out labour-capital agreement, wage control agreement, production quotas, etc.

Generally lobbying, i.e., pressure group acting directly on a legislature or an individual legislator to achieve its aims, is associated with the US political system, where the two houses of Congress formulate policies independent of executive influence and control. Lobbying is not normally common in parliamentary form of governments. However, specific pressure groups now hire professional lobbyists to influence the law-making process through public campaigns as well as secretly in the corridors of power. Major business interests hire professional lobbyists for their expertise in working in a sustained manner nearly at every level of government, and at times, even upon citizens. They use enormous financial resources and every trick in the advertising trade to get their interests served.

7.11 SUMMARY

The Australian party system has been very stable revolving around the Labour and the non-Labour issues. However the Australian voting system is based on preferential voting which also explains why a political party even without a majority could come to power. The election to the senate is based on proportional representation system which allows minor parties and independents a greater chance of winning seats in the senate. This unit focuses on the major and minor political parties in Australia and examines the changing dynamics of the Australian party system. There are three major political parties: The Liberal Party, the Australian Labour Party and the National Party. The Liberal Party and other parties have always had a tendency to coalesce together to represent an alternative to the Labour Party. While Labour MPs pledged themselves to work according to party directives in the parliament, the Liberals, in contrast, believed parliament to be really sovereign where debate and deliberations had to be free of all partisan goals and did not develop an institutionalized party set-up. The Australian Labour Party, the oldest party of Australia was formed in 1891 but has had less number of years in power at the national level.

Of the other major parties, the National Party or the Nationals is losing ground and is shrinking even though it is still sought after by the Liberal Party as a partner. Earlier known as the Country Party, it changed its name to the National Party in 1982. The Party has been facing rural criticism against government policies of privatization and removal of government support and subsidies as it is a coalition party for the Liberal Party.

Apart from the main parties, there are minor parties in Australia better described as political tendencies. These are the Australian Democrats, the Greens, the Independents, and the One Nation. These parties play a 'watchdog' role by giving a critique of mainstream politics, revealing its shortcomings.

There are certain notable trends in the Australian party system which are making the electoral arena and system contentious as political parties are moving away from the earlier norm of large party-membership including members' inclinations and desires to working out electorally-rewarding strategies and policies. Also, as voters' identification with the two dominant parties is on the wane, there is greater tendency towards a multi-party support.

The democratic federal character of Australian polity and the growing multicultural character of its society means that Australia has a variety of interests and groups-formal and informal, organised and informal, large and small, and some permanent while many others temporary. Since Australia is a parliamentary form of government, pressure and other groups generally do not work to

influence the parliamentarians. The groups work more on ministers, the entire cabinet, and on the upper echelons of bureaucracy for favourable decisions. For example, Anti-war groups, opposing Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1970s and Iraq war since 2003, have even sought to influence the entire electoral process and thus cause a change of government through direct action programmes. These constitute attempts at influencing the electorate in terms of their opinions and voting behaviour.

7.12 EXERCISES

- 1) Trace the evolution of the Liberal Party. How was it different from the Labour Party in Australia?
- 2) What are the main tenets of the Labour Party in Australia? Why has it been called the "party of initiatives and change"?
- 3) Describe the transformation of the Labour Party under the Hawke-Keating leadership.
- 4) What kind of electorate has been traditionally supporting the National Party? What are the main characteristics of the National Party?
- 5) Give a brief account of the role played in politics by any one of the minor political parties.
- 6) What are the recent trends in the Australian party system?
- 7) What do you understand by pressure groups? Examine their role in Australian politics.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Andrew Norton, "Liberalism and the Liberal Party of Australia"; Tim Battin, "Labourism and the Australian Labour Party"; Gregory Mellewsh, "Populism and Conservatism in Australian Political Thought" in Paul Boreham, Geoffrey Stokes and Richard Hall, eds., *The Politics of Australian Society: Political Issues for the New Century* (NSW: Pearson Education Australia, 2000), Pp. 22-37; 38-50; 51-64.

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