Who should be in parliament?

Geoffrey Bolton

Throughout nearly a hundred years of the Australian Commonwealth the cry has constantly gone up that our politicians are not as good as they used to be. Students in my political history class at Edith Cowan University have been heard to lament that we no longer produce giants of the stature of Whitlam and Fraser. In my recollection the era of Whitlam and Fraser gave rise to a lot of nostalgia for the great days of Curtin, Chifley and Menzies. Reaching further back into the recesses of memory, I find that Curtin and Menzies were often compared unfavourably with the likes of Alfred Deakin and Andrew Fisher. The only good politician is a dead one, or at least one so advanced into senior citizenship that the scars of controversy have faded.

Parallel with the attitude of mind goes a popular fallacy that the wrong people get into parliament, that the culture of parliamentary government is ineluctably corrupt, whether structured around the Australian model of tight adversarial party discipline or the looser American party allegiances with their scope for deals and logrolling. This line of thinking feeds into the simplistic populist notion that if ordinary people could somehow be picked up from the farms and the factories and the fish-and-chip shops and swept into parliament that somehow the political process would become more efficient, more straightforward, more satisfying. This notion flourishes especially during times of economic crisis. During the depression of the 1930s many were heard to advocate that parliament should be shut up and the running of the country entrusted to a committee of businessmen, or the RSL, or the benevolent dictatorship of General Sir John Monash — who was far too principled a democrat to give the slightest encouragement.
Now the plain fact is that throughout the twentieth century the membership of Commonwealth and State parliaments has been drawn largely from the ranks of ordinary Australians. In fact a criticism with which I shall deal later is the difficulty of providing for exceptional ability in parliament. However, during recent decades three circumstances have arisen to challenge the perception of parliament as truly representative. These are:

- the increase in middle-class Australia at the expense of the working class component;
- the coming of television, and
- a growing prejudice against politicians of mature years.

To my mind the most substantial of these issues is class, and this is especially true for the Australian Labor Party. In the first half of this century, Labor leaders were known as emerging from working-class origins: Watson was a printer, Fisher a miner, Chifley an engine driver. In recent years front-bench talent originates in the white collar profession: the public service (Calwell, Keating), secondary or tertiary teaching (The Beazleys, Geoff Gallop), law (Whitlam, Goss), the media (Carr). This has not been such a problem for the Liberals and their predecessors, because most of their leaders of working class origin have been either Labor renegades (Cook, Lyons, Hughes) or have emerged from the working class before entering politics. But working class Australians can no longer feel confident that individuals experienced in their background will reach high political office, and this sense of exclusion may breed resentment.

Television has created a spurious intimacy with our political leaders, in that we may invite them into our sitting rooms almost any night of the week and switch them off when they displease us, but it has removed much of the real intimacy of contact. The generation of politicians who fought the campaign for Federation a hundred years ago regularly confronted the people in large numbers — sometimes in town halls, often speaking from pub balconies or in the open air — targets for interjections and such missiles as tomatoes and rotten eggs. Often they had to hold the attention of their restive audiences for half an hour or an hour. The last major practitioners of this art were Menzies and Whitlam, but today's politicians perform in the sanitised environment of the television studio or the invitation breakfast. Of course, as we have been all too well reminded in recent weeks, we may still watch the gladiatorial slanging matches between government and opposition in Canberra, and we may wonder afresh whether the cavernous spaces of the new Parliament House have not removed some of the decent human intimacy of political argument. But pressure increases on politicians to prefer image above substance. As most of us live in a world where substance is more important than image, this makes for some alienation between voters and politicians. It may also be distorting the criteria by which candidates are pre-selected.

It is tempting — though I advance this thought with diffidence — to connect the desire for a youthful image with a growing tendency for politicians to quit just when
their experience might be sufficient for statesmanship. When John Howard became prime minister last year he was in his mid-fifties, much the same age as that other resurrected leader Robert Menzies when he began his record-breaking term of office in the 1950s and early 1960s, and yet nobody seriously expects that Howard will still be in the job when he turns seventy. Contrast the career of Chifley — an engine driver until 43, and already sixty when he became leader of his party and prime minister — with Keating, elected to parliament at 25, a cabinet minister briefly at 31, and in retirement in his early 50s. (We no longer believe that a defeated prime minister, despite years of accumulated skill in leadership, should stay around to guide his or her party through opposition to stage a comeback. Billy Hughes, Ben Chifley, Robert Menzies would have been astonished at this lack of commitment). This emphasis on the ineligibility of older people for political leadership is fairly new: in 1971 McMahon, at 63 was the oldest person to become federal prime minister for the first time, and in Western Australia, in 1974 the 62-year-old Sir Charles Court successfully challenged the 72-year-old John Tonkin for the premiership. But I wonder whether we should not be more insistent that a parliamentary candidate should possess experience of the working world — and by this I emphatically include the working world of the full-time housewife — before venturing to represent the rest of us in parliament; and I wonder also whether our current emphasis on youthful appearance may not be robbing Australian politics of a good deal of mature sagacity.

One further qualification should be required of parliamentary candidates. We live in an era when emphasis on best practice and quality control dominate managerial thinking. In the universities, the profession with which I am most familiar, Commonwealth policy demands a constant series of returns designed to ensure accountability in research performance, in compliance with the goals of mission statements, in adherence to approved standards of teaching practice. We grumble, but we comply because we know that our paymasters demand value for money. Many businesses and professions do the same. But politicians themselves are not subject to quality control. Anyone with political ambitions may gain pre-selection for a safe seat without the slightest training in constitutional law and history, in the ethics of parliamentary practice and ministerial responsibility, even in the stewardship of public money. In a year when several otherwise passably competent cabinet ministers have lost office because of perceived conflict of financial interest, we may ask whether any of them ever had an hour’s tuition in the code against which they are now found to have offended. If our politicians are not instructed about the long and difficult process by which the public servant developed traditions of impartiality, how can we be surprised if they now try to manipulate the civil service by weakening tenure and appointing sycophants as special advisers? Nobody should be allowed to stand for parliament until they have first passed at a satisfactory standard an examination on the basic essentials of the Australian variant of the Westminster system.

It is often complained that the necessity of fighting elections, of fashioning an acceptable media image, of obeying tight party discipline discourages many well
qualified citizens from entering the public arena. The remedy for this might be to provide that in addition to the members elected to the lower house of parliament — either state or federal — provision should be made for the nomination of a number of members equal to not more than ten percent of the whole: fourteen of fifteen in the federal House of Representatives, five or six in the Western Australian Legislative Assembly, for instance. Such members should hold office for the life of one parliament, though eligible for re-nomination, and should be able to speak and vote on all matters except motions of confidence. In this way, if it seemed desirable to appoint somebody with a special competency to the ministry — a successful business executive, for instance, or a respected authority on women’s issues — this person could be given the post but still be subject to responsibility within the parliamentary system. The British have the House of Lords to accommodate such cases, and the United States President is not confined to members of Congress in appointing his cabinet, but in Australia, a government has no way of recruiting the services of highly qualified individuals except through the mechanism of parliamentary election. Nominees could also include members of special interest groups, such as Aborigines or youth, who were not sufficiently represented through the normal electoral procedures. Such nominees need not all be pledged government supporters; the Howard government’s choice of nominees for the Constitutional convention on an Australian republic suggests a precedent. This would be one way of ensuring that groups now under-represented in our present political culture might be included. No doubt other machinery is nothing if not adaptable. In order to secure better and more equitable representation it may need adaptation. But there is no case at all for losing confidence in it or in consigning it to the scrapheap.