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**PARTY PROFESSIONALISATION: ELECTORAL REGULATION AND NATIONAL
PARTY OFFICIALS**

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Reviewing the 2013 federal election campaign in a recent speech at the National Press Club, Liberal Party federal director Brian Loughnane called for a parliamentary review and reform of rules governing voting procedures for the Senate.¹ There were too many Senate candidates, he said, with confusing names – such as the unexpectedly successfully Liberal Democratic Party - which engage in commercial ‘micro-deals’ leading to electoral results that did not reflect the will of the people. Loughnane’s call was only the latest demonstration of the truth of the dictum laid down by Colin Hughes more than two decades ago: ‘The rules of the game do matter.’² For party officials such as Loughnane and his ALP counterpart George Wright, who serve as their party’s national campaign director, electoral rules broadly understood do most certainly matter. At the most basic level, the federal structure of the Australian constitution exercised a profound influence on the emergence of national party officials, and continues to shape many of their campaign strategies and practices. Legislative and regulatory arrangements dealing with, inter alia, electoral boundaries, voter participation and campaign finances likewise shape the formulation and execution of party campaign strategies.

This paper deals with the intersection between party officials and electoral regulation in the context of the professionalisation of parties and of election campaigns. The perspective is that of the campaign manager, and is based on a recent series of interviews with national party officials of the Liberal and Labor parties undertaken for doctoral research. It is therefore not an overview of electoral regulation but a practical assessment of a broadly defined regulatory impact on campaign management by the major parties. The paper first outlines the research project and briefly presents some relevant findings. It then considers four related aspects of this regulatory impact: the inherent and unresolved tension between the campaign logic of centralisation and the federal logic of decentralisation; the campaign manager’s strategic imperative to find, within a regulation-shaped electoral landscape, a path to victory; the transformative impact of campaign finance regulation; and the role of party officials in

¹ Lenore Taylor, “Liberal party director flags reform of senate voting after rise of micro parties,” *The Guardian (online)*, 23 October 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/23/liberal-party-director-flags-reform-of-senate>

² Colin Hughes, “The Rules of the Game,” in *The Greening of Australian Politics: the 1990 Federal Election*, ed. Clive Bean et al. (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1990).

rulemaking. The paper concludes with comment on how this might help us understand the broader process of campaign professionalisation.

Party officials as campaign professionals

Brian Loughnane is only the eighth individual employed by the Liberal Party as federal director over nearly seventy years from 1945 (Table 1). Fourteen individuals occupied the post of ALP federal secretary or national secretary over nearly a century from 1915 to 2010 (Table 2). Of these twenty-two national party officials, more than half were by good fortune alive in 2010-11. These thirteen individuals – eight from the ALP and five Liberals, asterisked below – were interviewed as part of doctoral research at the University of Sydney.³ This was the first time these influential but reticent party actors have been studied as a group, across time and across parties. In the century since Michels⁴, research into party oligarchies or elites has tended to blur the distinction between party officials in Head Office and other elements of party leadership inside and outside the legislature.

Table 1: Federal Directors of the Liberal Party of Australia

Liberal	Life dates	Term in office
Don Cleland	1901-1975	1945-51
Robert Willoughby	1908-1993	1951-69
Bede Hartcher	1918-1977	1969-74
*Tim Pascoe	1939-	1974
*Tony Eggleton	1932-	1974-91
*Andrew Robb	1951-	1991-97
*Lynton Crosby	1956-	1997-2003
*Brian Loughnane	1957-	2003-

³ Stephen Mills, "Campaign Professionals: Party Officials and the Professionalisation of Australian Political Parties" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2013).

⁴ Robert Michels, *Political Parties: a Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, (New York, Free Press), 1911, translated 1966.

Table 2: Federal/National Secretaries of the Australian Labor Party⁵

ALP	Life dates	Term in office
Arch Stewart	1867-1925	1915-25
Daniel McNamara	1876-1947	1925-46
Patrick Kennelly	1900-1981	1946-54
Jack Schmella	1908-1960	1954-60
F E Chamberlain	1900-1984	1961-63
* Cyril Wyndham	1930-2012	1963-69
Mick Young	1936-1996	1969-72
*David Combe	1943-	1973-81
*Bob McMullan	1947-	1981-88
*Bob Hogg	1937-	1988-93
*Gary Gray	1958-	1993-2000
*Geoff Walsh	1953-	2000-03
*Tim Gartrell	1971-	2003-08
*Karl Bitar	1971-	2008-11

This study was designed to focus on the national Head Office so as to understand its character, trace its interactions with the other party ‘faces’ in parliament and on the ground, and in particular to interrogate its role in the process of campaign change or campaign professionalisation.

A principal finding of the research has been to reaffirm the quite distinctive character of party officials. Party officials are party members, but their status as employees of the party sets them apart, both from the amateurs and enthusiastic volunteers in the ‘rank and file’ membership and from the taxpayer-paid members of parliament. While party members and MPs have essentially public, expressive roles, party officials tend to operate out of the spotlight, operating in a Head Office not readily accessible by the rest of the party, and equipped with financial and informational resources that likewise are held at arm’s length from them. Indeed, while party officials occupy prominent positions within the party’s leadership, they share little of the obligations of representation and accountability borne by the parliamentary wing to the public and the electorate. Likewise, officials may act on behalf of the members and parliamentarians, but directly answer to neither. Questions of ideology and policy that are core to their party’s identity and aspirations may be incidental to the work of the party official, which consists of specialised executive and administrative functions

⁵ Cyril Wyndham died in July 2012. George Wright was appointed ALP National Secretary in April 2011 and was not interviewed for this research.

focused on electoral success. This focus on electoral success is a core characteristic of the party officials of the major national parties, regardless of their partisan affiliation, and is a key differentiator between them and minor parties which are not seeking to form government. The research interviews yield many examples of this focus:

We're not running a debating society. ... We're running a political party that aspires to govern the country. ... (The party's) job, its only real job, is to win the election (Labor official).

By what standard can these individuals be considered professionals, and what was their role in the professionalisation process? The research clarified what has been a very messy debate about the meaning and content, in the campaign context, of the terms professional, professionalism and professionalisation, by providing both a definition of the terms and an explanatory account of the professionalisation process. Professionalisation is a process of institutional change, which at one level, occurs where part-time volunteers are replaced by salaried employees with specialist skills. Beyond this, professionalisation is a cultural transformation, in which those personnel adopt and instil a professional mode of behaviour. Most interviewed officials readily accepted the description of themselves as professionals:

I do regard myself as a professional. A professional does their job to the best of their abilities given the resources they've got. That's how I view it (Labor official).

I think experience does matter. I see myself as a campaign professional. I don't aspire at all to go into parliament (Liberal official).

Professional politics in my book is ... acting professionally in an objective and impartial way to provide considered advice and support for the party to achieve its objectives of winning elections by running good campaigns. That's what I mean (Liberal official).

The research pins down a definition of professionalism among party officials along three axes. Campaign professionals have a distinctive *economic status*: they are paid for their work. They have a distinctive *technical competence*, which legitimises their salary: highly skilled and experienced campaign experts, they perform distinctive functions to a high level of competence. Third, they share an *ideology of professionalism*: operating as partisans within

party lines, they delivered a professional service by serving the interests of their client, the party. As noted above, they defined those interests as electoral success.

Of course in a collective organisation dedicated to political contest, the true interests of the party-client are likely to be contested, shifting and difficult to discern. Is the superordinate goal of electoral success identified by the campaign professionals in Head Office truly shared by party actors ‘on the ground’ and ‘in elected office’? Can indeed such a ‘client’ speak with one voice about its interests? More likely, there will be more than one authoritative voice about the interests of the party. Thus in seeking to impose their electoral priority on the party, the campaign professionals set the scene for tensions and conflicts with other party actors.

Electoral Regulation and Party Officials

How do party officials – these campaign professionals – perceive the regulatory landscape? By international standards Australian campaign managers are not dealing with a complex or adverse regulatory environment – with the important exception of campaign finances discussed below. In their global survey of campaign professionals, Plasser and Plasser describe Australia as having a ‘minimally regulated campaign environment’, along with the United States, New Zealand and Canada.⁶ Australian electoral law prescribes the behaviour of voters and electoral administrators but the campaign manager finds his essential stocks in trade – market research and campaign communications via print, television and internet – almost completely unregulated. Advertising content is effectively protected under the constitution’s implied freedom of political communication, and the three-day blackout is fast being circumvented by web-based broadcasting. Critical databases such as the electoral roll and census can be accessed and deployed without limit; parties are exempt from the Do Not Call Register; voter attendance at the ballot box is strongly encouraged by the state; and incumbent parties have wide freedom to choose the timing and duration of election campaigns. Yet party officials are very conscious of operating within a precise regulatory matrix, which shapes their overall operating environment and provides opportunities for organisational and partisan advancement.

At the foundational level of constitutional arrangements, Australia’s *federal system* profoundly affected the emergence of party officials and their contribution to the

⁶ Fritz Plasser and Gunda Plasser, *Global Political Campaigning: a Worldwide Analysis of Campaign Professionals and their Practices*, (Westport, CT: Praeger), 2002.

professionalisation process. The federal character of Australian parties introduces a layer of organisational complexity and internal tension absent from British and many European parties. Both the ALP and the Liberal Party are structured on federal lines in which the fundamental units of party organisation are the ‘branches’ (ALP) or ‘divisions’ (Liberal) based in the states and territories of the Australian Commonwealth. For the best part of seventy years from Federation, these state units had primary responsibility for the conduct of election campaigns, at both state and national levels, and campaigning was essentially conducted at electorate and state level. The state units also dominated the key decision making organs – the national executives and national conferences - of both parties. Almost all key sources of funding flowed in the first instance to the state level. Members paid their dues to local branches affiliated to the state branches/divisions and there was (and is) no concept of party membership at the national level. As one exasperated Labor official said of campaigning in this era: ‘The left hand never knew what the right hand was doing’. Reviewing the lead-up to 1972 federal election, Mick Young recalled:

The biggest hurdle the Party had to clear in order to run a successful campaign was the jealousy and suspicion that existed between the national office and the state branches. Previously everyone had run their own campaigns.⁷

In experiencing these centrifugal tendencies of federalism, political parties were no different from many other institutions of Australian political, commercial and social life. By the 1960s however a burgeoning national consciousness, fuelled by a media industry that was itself transcending state boundaries, began to allow political parties to mount nationally centralised, coordinated and consistent campaigns, particularly through national television broadcasting. The critical breakthrough was the 1972 appointment of Labor’s Mick Young to a new position: national campaign director, the Liberals followed suit in 1974 with the appointment of Tony Eggleton. As one Liberal official said:

We’d run elections on a state basis, managed by each state division. There’d been some national coordination and input, but [until the 1970s] there’d not been a truly national campaign.

⁷ Mick Young, “The Build-up to 1972,” in *The Whitlam Phenomenon* (Ringwood, Vic: McPhee Gribble/ Penguin Books), 1986.

The authority of the national office had been pretty firmly established [by the 1980s] as people who ran the campaign and with whom the states cooperated, rather than the other way around (Labor official).

Against the decentralised logic of federalism, the campaign logic of centralisation encouraged the parties' national Head Offices to seize responsibility for national campaign management. National campaign directors became responsible for developing national campaign strategies built on nationally consistent campaign communications. The national Head Office engaged marketing professionals on behalf of the entire party. State party branches were progressively disempowered or co-opted. Even so, this centralisation process was slow, frequently contested and periodically reversed. State branches, especially the larger ones, retained autonomy and prerogative in significant campaign functions – notably, candidate preselection and fundraising – and national campaign directors, who in many cases had managed state campaigns earlier in their careers, were regularly engaged in negotiations to secure the states' strategic compliance and resources.

Having centralised control of campaigning within their own parties, the national Head Office needed to rise to the challenge of formulating and executing the national campaign strategy. Here the regulatory environment exercises important constraints on campaign strategies. In particular, *rules covering electorate boundaries and voting procedures* both shape strategies and provide opportunities for partisan exploitation. The point was stated explicitly by Lynton Crosby in a Press Club speech after he steered the successful Liberal campaign in 1998:

Under our system, the party which governs is the party which secures a majority of seats in the House of Representatives. That is the requirement – to win the most lower house seats – and that is what our campaign was geared towards. If the requirement was something different, the campaign would have been quite different. That is the key point. If the requirement was a majority of the two-party preferred vote, or if it was a first-past-the-post race, then you would run a completely different campaign.”⁸

Campaign professionals are satisficers, not absolutists, and part of the professional armoury they bring to their role is an ability to deal with marginality: to assess (using market research and other intelligence) the potential for seats being won or lost, and using that judgement to

⁸ Lynton Crosby, Speech to the National Press Club, Canberra, 23 October 1998, Accessible at <http://australianpolitics.com/1998/10/23/lynton-crosby-1998-election-analysis.html>.

assemble a path to a majority. Effective campaign strategies disregard the Senate, do not seek to win every seat in the House, and don't mind if they win on minor party preferences. Strategies thus take into account the location and boundaries of House seats, the requirement for compulsory enrolment and the rules covering preferential voting. Within this regulatory framework, campaign strategies are structured so as to achieve maximum efficiency within targeted marginal seats. From the 1980s, both major parties have refined their capacity to determine – as one party official put it –

Who is going to decide the outcome of this election? Where are they? What matters to them? ... (What are the) seats, and (who are the) voters within those seats? (Liberal official)

Responsibility for marginal seat campaigning has accordingly become increasingly concentrated in the national Head Offices, where dedicated units identify priority areas and deploy priority resources to targeted campaigns.

Thus the emergence of the professional campaign model required, first, the centralisation of campaign responsibility in the hands of the national campaign director and, then, that director's assumption of responsibility for formulating and executing the campaign strategy. It is no coincidence that the shift to centre stage by the national party officials coincided with reforms in *campaign funding*, as the national campaign director required a cash flow sufficient to fund the operations of a capital intensive campaign model.

I was surprised in conducting this research by the willingness of party officials to discuss money matters. I had not thought to include funding questions in my initial questionnaire as I assumed their reticence on such matters, but financing the party machine – raising political money, spending it and accounting for it – is a major preoccupation for national party officials. One Labor official said he 'spent most of my time fundraising' to clear the ALP's debt; his opposite number believed one of his 'key jobs' is 'allocation of scarce resources'.

It was not always thus. In both major parties, primary responsibility for handling funds originally lay with the states and with party actors other than the party officials – another manifestation of the decentralised logic of federalism. It was the ALP national secretaries in the early 1970s who took control of party funding from the states, placed it on more rational and secure footings, and set about the task of raising new funds. One recalled:

The federal entities were the poor relations dictated to by the States. In accordance with the principle of, ‘He who pays the piper calls the tune’, you’re at the mercy of the big states.

In the case of party finances, we see genuine and lasting differences between the two parties. Graeme Orr has noted that the ALP ‘continues to show a greater interest in regulating political finance than the more libertarian Liberal Party’⁹. Labor’s record confirms this, though practical factors loom as large as ideological ones. Curtin and Chifley’s secretive Leader’s Fund, the long-standing reliance through the 1950s and ‘60s on a deeply-conflicted relationship with an advertising-cum-fundraising consultant, the scandalously unfair audit of federal secretary Cyril Wyndham in 1969, the disastrous quest for Iraqi loans in 1975, the repeated investment in income-producing property portfolios and the repeated liquidation of same for short-term campaign needs - all suggest a party struggling for funds, and struggling to manage its funds. The Labor-inspired introduction of party funding in 1984 must be seen as another example of necessity being the mother of invention. The introduction of public funding, its generous bipartisan reformulation in 1995, and the inflation-adjusted increases which in the 2010 election lifted the aggregate payment to political parties to \$53 million, have provided both major parties with a predictable flow of campaign funding – though disclosure provisions may well have chilled some traditional corporate donors.

The public funding regime dramatically increased the role and influence of the party officials. Party officials are responsible for all reporting and compliance activities. Moreover, while public funding is allocated on the basis of votes received by candidates, it is not the candidates but the party officials who receive the payments. But there is a twist. Campaigns may have been increasingly managed on a centralised national basis, but the electoral process remains decentralised, organised around electorates within each state. So although this was Commonwealth legislation providing national funds in relation to national election campaigns, the legislation required the appointment of party ‘agents’ who were state not national party officials. This reassertion of the federal problem presented an unacceptable challenge to the national Head Offices, raising questions about who really controlled the party’s public funds. Would the state branches remit public funding receipts to the national office? Would they accurately report their campaign costs? How could the national office

⁹ Graeme Orr, *The Law of Politics*, (Sydney, The Federation Press), 2010.

recoup its growing proportion of campaign spending taken up by national television advertising? The ALP proved faster to resolve these questions in favour of the national office, while the Liberal Party officials recall ‘tortuous’ negotiations between states and a ‘mendicant’ Federal office. Meanwhile, an ambitious plan by the Liberals’ national office in the 1990s to harness the states’ data bases for coordinated fundraising drives also foundered on these same rocks of federalism: the states refused to cooperate.

At one level, campaign managers are pragmatic opportunists, accepting the regulatory context and seeking to exploit whatever advantage they can from it in the immediate context of an election campaign. At another level however they are ambitious reformers with a longer time horizon, seeking to improve both their own campaign performance and the regulatory environment in which they are conducted. In both cases of course their partisan goal of electoral success remains the same. They understand that electoral rules are not entirely inflexible, and that *electoral rulemaking* is a product of political activity – and thus are concerned where possible to influence rulemaking in ways that benefit their partisan cause or, as in the case of Loughnane’s current proposals, hamper their opponents large and small. Active shaping by major parties of the system of state support for them and for the party system is a defining characteristic of the cartel model of party structures.¹⁰ Examples of this practice include the intensive effort by party Head Offices to improve electoral boundaries through making detailed submissions to redistribution committees and the resort by the Liberal Party, unable to resolve its internal dispute over control of public funding receipts in 2001, to the expedient of legislative amendment to require its public funding entitlements to be paid to its Federal Secretariat rather than its state divisions.

Norm Kelly has pointed out the political nature of recommendations made by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM), noting the way in which committee members are appointed to ‘look after their own party’s interests’.¹¹ The party officials should not be excluded from this analysis. Campaign directors provide written submissions and give evidence in person at public hearings. Some of the issues they raise are of a routine procedural nature while others are explicitly partisan. After the 2001 federal election, for example, the Liberal Party’s submission by Lynton Crosby dealt with the powers of booth

¹⁰ Richard Katz and Peter Mair, “Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party” *Party Politics* 1 (1995) 5-28.

¹¹ Norm Kelly, “Australian Electoral Administration and Electoral Integrity,” in *Electoral Democracy: Australian Prospects*, ed. Joo-Cheong Tham et al. (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2011), 99-119.

officials to prevent distribution of ‘misleading’ how to vote cards, while also canvassing ‘push polling’ and ‘false’ radio advertising by the ALP; the ALP’s submission by Geoff Walsh called for tighter disclosure of party donations and of ‘inappropriate’ Government advertising. As noted at the outset, Brian Loughnane has proposed a new agenda of potential reforms for JSCEM’s consideration and while these were couched in language of public interest, partisan interests also intrude. Further research could be conducted in this field to identify relationships – cooperation, or perhaps dissent - between the parties’ national officials and JSCEM members.

Conclusion

For many scholars, campaign change is explained as a by-product of technological change: as new technologies emerge, parties are ‘forced to respond’ (Norris 2000) by adopting these new channels to communicate with voters. The star witness for this argument is the television, which saved voters the trouble of venturing out at night to draughty street corners and crowded town halls, allowing them to stay at home where they could watch politicians on the evening news, or in the ad breaks. Campaigning thus became more capital intensive, with salaried party campaign managers and their external marketing consultants focused on attracting TV news coverage with press conferences, sound-bites and candidate debates, and on designing and buying campaign ads. In this explanation, campaigns around the world have all changed in essentially the same manner, as the waves of technological change wash over them. Australian election campaigns provide many documented examples of this phenomenon.¹² An alternative explanation for campaign professionalisation may lie with party characteristics. According to Gibson and Römmele (2001: 36), the political circumstances of a party and its ideological character may promote professionalisation; in their findings, campaign change was most likely to occur in ‘a well-funded, mainstream, right-wing party with significant resources and a centralised internal power structure that has recently suffered a heavy electoral defeat and/or a loss of governing status.’¹³ Their study did not refer to Australia, but their observation nevertheless applies closely to the Liberal Party

¹² Neal Blewett, “Labor 1968-72: Planning for Victory”, in *Labor to Power: Australia's 1972 Election*, ed. Henry Mayer (Sydney: Angus and Robertson 1973), Stephen Mills, *The New Machine Men: Polls and Persuasion in Australian Politics* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin Books 1986), Sally Young, *The Persuaders: Inside the Hidden Machine of Political Advertising*, North Melbourne, Pluto Press Australia 2004.

¹³ Rachel Gibson and Andrea Römmele, “A Party-Centred Theory of Professionalized Campaigning” in *Press/Politics*, 6 (2001) 31-43.

forces in the wake of 1943 and 1972. It is not, however, valid in relation to the ALP which took the largest strides towards the contemporary campaign model in the late 1960s.

While explanations centred on technological determinism and party characteristics make important contributions to understanding the professionalisation process, they fail to address the critical role of human agency. Parties are not, in Gibson and Römmele's phrase 'victims of professionalisation' but, to the contrary, are active promoters of the professionalisation process in the interest of their partisan advantage. In exploring how party officials view the constitutional, legislative and regulatory structures within which they operate, we gather not just a more acute appreciation of the role of these previously unregarded political actors. We also gain a more sophisticated understanding of the professionalisation process which, while certainly occurring on a global scale, in fact only proceeds with significant local variations driven by adaptive responses to the regulatory environment.

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