

Towards Presidentialism in Australia?

Written by Habiba Fadel

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In recent years, Australian politics has undergone a wide range of changes. Such changes have impacted on the traditional role and image of Australian politics as it began moving towards a form of presidentialised politics. This essay aims to explore the ways in which Australian political system has shifted towards a form of presidentialised politics through giving a brief overview of the Australian and presidential political systems. It also examines the factors that play a role in this shift and draws to the conclusion that there are many elements such as the increase in the focus on leaders, changes in the role of political parties and the media as well as the internationalisation of politics which have led to this presidentialisation.

The Australian political system is a constitutional monarchy that draws its practices from the British political system. In such a system, the executive emerges from the legislature while the head of the government, the prime minister, is chosen by members of the party with the majority in the House of Representatives (Economou 2012, p.133). The role of the prime minister is not written in the Constitution but rather there are various checks and balances as well as other regulations imposed on the prime minister including collective executive responsibility, strict party discipline and accountability. The role of the prime minister is less central than the role of the president.

In contrast, a presidential political system has various features that distinguish it from the Australian political system. It is the system where the head of government is popularly elected and the executive is not accountable to the parliament but rather is directly answerable to the people (Hatzold 2008, p.3). The president has a wide range of powers such as the ability to govern without outside interference. Thus, in a presidential system, there is more focus on the president than other institutions or elements of governance.

In recent years, Australian politics has arguably moved towards a form of presidentialised politics. One of the key reasons is due to the increase in the centralisation of the prime minister's power, as attention is drawn towards the leader rather than the party (Kemp 2008, p.203). The focus on the leader, particularly as reflected by the media, has led many analysts such as Pakulski and Higley (2008, p.45) to argue that such trends have "moved the concrete physiognomy of liberal democracies to 'leader democracies'." This system of leader democracy means that the focus of the public becomes mostly based on the characteristics, personal traits, intellectual capacities, likeability and image of the leader rather than concentrating on the political agendas of political parties (Young 2011, p.3). This is particularly evident when comparing the role and power of the leader in the past and present where the leader in practice used to focus on delivering party programs, agendas and reflecting on public concerns. In contrast, nowadays the leader focuses on achieving popularity and likeability through concentrating on particular issues that concern voters at the time of elections (Isotalus & Almonkari 2011, p.1). This has led to a shift in the role of the party who have become 'leader parties' as they are being used as a tool by the leader to lead and gain support. As a result, many questions are being raised about the role of parties, since nowadays they are found to "subordinate themselves to popular leaders and give them free hand in reforming party programs and election strategies" (Pakulski and Higley 2008, p.49). This shift occurred due to the growing complexity of political issues, which pressures parties to grant greater powers to the leader with the aim of achieving party victory in elections. Thus, the roles of leaders and parties have altered, moving closer to the characteristics of a presidential system.

In addition, the growing emphasis on leadership appeals and the increase in the media's coverage of politics further indicate that there is a move towards presidentialisation of politics and electoral process. For example, the

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widespread coverage that occurred during and after Rudd's removal from the prime ministerial position clearly illustrates the fact that the Australian political system is shifting towards a presidentialised form of politics (King 2010). Until now, the media polling of the public's perception of the preferred prime minister not only between the parties but also within them is still occurring on a weekly basis which further proves the extent to which people's perception of Australian politics has changed. For instance, in the 2001 elections, 46 articles that mentioned news poll were published in Australian newspapers whereas in 2004 there were 52 articles but during Rudd's prime ministership there were 161 articles (Megalogenis 2011, p.29). This implies that the prime minister is treated by the media and the public as a semi-president whose likeability and existence in the role depends on the public perception rather than on the party (Robinson & Lowe 2012).

Furthermore, the new phenomenon of internationalisation of politics where governments from different countries cooperate together to solve common problems as well as develop their economy and society has played a role in the presidentialisation of Australian politics (Cook 2012, p.41). In such cases, the leader acts in ways that he or she sees best for the nation and takes decisions without direct reference to the party which gives the prime minister greater credibility. The only role that the parliament plays in these instances is to ratify decisions that were already made in the international arena (Poguntke & Webb 2005, p.13). This increase in the role of the leader internationally strengthens his electoral appeal and authority and therefore has assisted in the presidentialisation of Australian politics.

Although it can be evident that there are many factors which illustrate that Australian politics has moved towards a form of presidentialised politics, others believe that this is not true. This is due to the arguments that even though there is an image that the role of the prime minister seems presidential, structurally the prime minister's role has not changed and does not match the presidential system. This can be illustrated by the ousting of Rudd by Gillard where despite the public's support of Rudd to remain as a prime minister, it was the party not the leader who decided to position Gillard into the prime ministerial role (Dunlop 2012). In addition, it is claimed that a shift towards a form of presidentialised politics has not occurred as there is less support for a republic system or a form of presidential system to be implemented in Australia (Solomon 2000, p.1). However despite such arguments, the reality indicates that Australian politics has moved towards a form of presidentialised politics as evident through the political party, public and the media's portrayal of the prime minister as a president. In fact, it has been observed nowadays that "elections are becoming increasingly presidential in nature" (ABC News 2011).

In conclusion, it has been evident that Australian politics has moved towards a form of presidentialised politics. This is due to various reasons such as the increase in the centralisation of the prime minister's powers which led to greater focus on the leader rather than on the party, the changing role of political parties, the influence of the media and the internationalisation of politics. These factors have impacted on the role and image of the prime minister, as well as the party which as a result changed people's perception of Australian politics. Although there are arguments that structurally Australian politics does not match the presidential system, the reality indicates that Australian politics has altered and in practice has shifted towards a form of presidentialised politics.

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Towards Presidentialism in Australia?

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