Politics and the media in Australia and the United Kingdom: parallels and contrasts

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Political Media in Australia and the United Kingdom – Parallels and Contrasts

Ivor Gaber and Rodney Tiffen

In almost all international groupings of countries Australia and the United Kingdom are rightly put together. Both are affluent economies with among the highest life expectancies in the world, and close to universal literacy. Both are stable parliamentary democracies, included among the few countries where governments have changed only through elections and constitutional processes since the beginning of the twentieth century, with no interruptions for dictatorial or foreign rule.

Even among the much narrower range of works comparing economically advanced, stable democracies, the major works group Britain and Australia together. The influential theorizing by Arend Lijphart (1999) distinguishes between ‘majoritarian’ and ‘consensual’ democracies. Analytically, Lijphart’s distinction is between governments which, once elected and enjoying a legislative majority, have few obstacles to their exercising untrammelled executive power. In contrast, in consensual systems governments need to keep negotiating, because no single party has a clear majority, or because there are more institutional checks and balances that restrict the governing coalition’s exercise of power. Majoritarian democracies tend to have an electoral system with single member (rather than multi-member) constituencies, and where governments are formed by a single party, or a stable coalition, although as we shall see politics in both these democracies is in considerable flux.

In Gosta Esping-Andersen’s influential study of social security systems, he made two crucial distinctions which together form his three worlds. The first is what he calls de-commodification – ‘when a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market’ (1990 p.22). The second is the degree to which social welfare is based upon a social insurance model. Together these produce three types of welfare regimes. Australia and Britain are both liberal welfare states, where there are universal but means-tested and modest transfers of wealth, where welfare often plays a residual role, attuned to ameliorating the worst suffering and poverty, restricted to those unable to obtain a decent living through the

market. Liberal welfare systems are more vulnerable to government cutbacks than Esping-Andersen's other two types – the social democratic and the conservative corporatist.

The social democratic regimes, characteristic of the Nordic countries, are founded on universal principles of de-commodification with much greater emphasis on equality and with governments committed to the right of all citizens to a decent standard of living, resulting in high levels of social expenditure. A third group characteristic of mainland western Europe he labels 'conservative corporatist', which is more extensive than the liberal regimes, but less redistributive than both the other systems, with benefits often tied to social insurance and status considerations.

A third typology of advanced democracies concentrates on the media itself. Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) also divide the developed democracies into three groups, and again place both Britain and Australia in the liberal category. In this liberal model, the state is seen as the major threat to freedom. In the English-speaking countries, liberal ideologies accompanied the rise of democracy, and there was the development of a commercial, mass circulation press, catering to these countries' literate populations. So from early on, there were few formal links between political parties and the news media, although most newspapers did display discernible political leanings. To varying degrees these countries also developed relatively strong traditions of journalistic professionalism. The state played varying roles in the development of broadcasting, but most commonly these countries had a mixed model of public and private channels.

A second group they call the Mediterranean or polarised pluralist model. Here a mass circulation press did not develop as strongly, and the journalism was of a more pronounced opinionated kind, less oriented to reporting. When the state played a role in media development, there was less political autonomy. Finally, in these countries, journalism did not develop such strong traditions of professionalism as in the other two models. Finally, the democratic corporatist systems, the countries from north-western Europe such as Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands, all had high literacy rates relatively early, and also a strong press, independent of government. However, in these countries the development of the press was tied more closely to

political parties and social groups. Nevertheless, at the same time, strong traditions of journalistic professionalism developed, and there was more formal recognition of journalistic autonomy than in the commercial liberal countries.

So, when comparing countries, Australia and Britain have much in common, but there are also, as we explore below, significant differences. This article concentrates on the political role of the legacy news media¹, emphasizing both the range of commonalities and some important contrasts. The differences between the two countries stem from their very different geographies and demographics, and from contrasting sources of economic growth, as well as from some differing patterns of institutional development.

When Australia federated in 1901, the system of government its founders adopted has been dubbed ‘the Washminster mutation’ (Thompson 1980). Australia followed the ‘mother country’, Britain, in its major institutions as well as a shared cultural heritage. Like Britain, Australia adopted a parliamentary system, with cabinet government, and with ministers responsible to parliament.² Its legal system drew initially on Britain’s common law tradition, with a high degree of judicial independence and integrity. It emulated the British ideal of an impartial public service. However, it also adopted the American federal system, with the existing self-governing colonies becoming states, retaining some constitutionally defined prerogatives. It also adopted an upper house, a Senate, modelled on the US, with both strong legislative powers, and equal representation of states irrespective of population.

Media Differences

1. The BBC is a much stronger institution than the ABC, and plays a more important role in British politics and culture than does the ABC in Australia.

The ABC and BBC have many aspects in common. This is not surprising, as when the ABC was founded in 1932, the Postmaster-General told Parliament the government had decided ‘to follow the British system as closely as Australian conditions would permit’ (Inglis 1983, p.19).

According to a review of public service broadcasters in the developed world by the McKinsey

company, both the ABC and BBC continued to have distinctive programming, different from the more commercial broadcasters, and to rely principally on public funding. Neither's major domestic service carries advertising. Both organisations are the most trusted among the country's media, and enjoy continuing strong public support. For example, in a 2010 survey, Tiffen et al (2017 p.230) found the ABC rated highest when respondents were asked to say how warmly they felt towards ten different groups. It rated 6.7 on a ten-point scale, with commercial television coming next on 6.0, and News Corp newspapers considerably lower on 4.8. Such differences are broadly stable. For example, in research by Essential Media in December 2011, 72 per cent of respondents had a lot or some trust in ABC news and current affairs, compared with 43 per cent for commercial TV news and current affairs and 46 per cent for daily newspapers (Finkelstein 2012, appendix).

Research in the UK indicates the extent to which the BBC is, overwhelmingly, the most used and most trusted national news source, both off and online. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's annual report for 2016 reported that the BBC was, by a factor of five, the most used source of online news -with 35% of respondents quoting it as their first source, compared with 7% quoting the Daily Mail online and 5% Sky News (Reuters Institute 2017, p. 27) Offline, whilst the BBC is also rated the highest and most trusted news source, the other public service broadcasters are rated almost as highly, unlike the UK newspapers which rate far lower in terms of trust and reliability (Ofcom 2017, p. 68)

There were also differences. National transmission was not technologically possible in Australia so broadcasting like newspapers for a long time had different arrangements in different regions. Members of the Country Party (since renamed the National Party) were especially strong supporters of the need for an ABC because they did not think market forces would ever cater adequately for rural areas. When television was introduced in Australia in 1956, in Sydney and Melbourne, there were two competing commercial stations. In no capital city did the ABC have a monopoly. In contrast in Britain, the BBC enjoyed a monopoly in TV until 1955, whilst with the establishment of BBC2 in 1964 it was given a 2:1 ratio over the commercial sector. Moreover ITV, and its successor terrestrial channels - Channels 4 and 5 - were, and remain, regulated within a public service broadcaster framework, albeit less restrictive than that

governing the BBC and all are now regulated under the government-appointed Office of Communications (OfCom).

Around the turn of this century, the BBC was – measured by revenue – nine times as large as the ABC. The British population was then roughly three times as large as the Australian, but funding per person was about three times that of the ABC's (Tiffen and Gittins 2009, p.186). The ABC's funding has not only been less than the BBC's, but more vulnerable. In 1973 the Whitlam Labor Government abolished the licence fee, on the grounds that as the population all but universally had radios and televisions this was an inefficient way to gather the tax. Instead, it funded the ABC directly through taxation. At the time, the move received little opposition as the government also substantially increased the ABC's funding. However, the abolition of the licence fee, and including the ABC's funding as simply as part of general government spending, has made it more susceptible to cuts by future governments, which have occurred several times, especially under Coalition governments.

However, since the turn of the current century the BBC's predominant position has also come under threat for three principal reasons. First, its centrality has been reduced because of growing media fragmentation as more and more alternative sources of entertainment became available; streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime have been cutting into both the BBC's (and ITV's) audiences as has Rupert Murdoch's Sky TV network which now has a greater programme spend than does the BBC. Second, since 2010 the BBC has faced a government which has been ideologically pre-disposed to favour commercial broadcasters, and one particular way that this has manifest itself is continued downward pressure on the BBC's licence fee income. And third, as a result of this hostility, the Government has changed the BBC's regulatory structure so that it is now no longer responsible for regulating itself via an arms-length body, the BBC Trust, but is now regulated by Ofcom (the Office of Communications Regulation) which is essentially a market regulator, but nonetheless has demonstrated a robust approach to maintaining high editorial standards as well.

Both the ABC and the BBC suffered, and continue to suffer, implacable hostility from the Murdoch press. In Australia, this started early when in the 1930s, Sir Keith Murdoch insisted on

delaying when the ABC could broadcast the news, in order, he argued, to protect the sales of afternoon newspapers (Roberts 2015 p.210f). Murdoch was usefully able to point to the UK as his precedent, for in the first five years of the BBC's life, the news agencies succeeded in restricting its news output to times when it would not represent any sort of commercial threat. Similarly, today, the Murdoch flagship, the *Australian*, is always looking for opportunities to attack the public broadcaster (e.g. Dodd and Ricketson 2015). In Britain, the Murdoch press, most notably the *Sun*, along with the Lord Rothermere-owned *Daily Mail* mount a constant campaign of vilification against the BBC. James Murdoch, son of Rupert who at the time was running the Sky channels in the UK, used the prestigious Edinburgh TV Festival lecture in 2009 to launch a full-scale assault on the BBC, describing its size and ambitions as "chilling" and accusing it of mounting a "land grab" at a time when the UK media market was facing an economic downturn following the global financial crisis (Robinson 2009). This scrutiny by the commercial press often means that controversies involving the public broadcasters – both deserved and undeserved – receive more extensive and intense press coverage than many other media controversies and that different, more astringent, standards are applied to the public broadcasters compared with their commercial rivals.

2. Commercial television in the UK is much more highly regulated and has higher journalistic standards than Australian commercial television.

When commercial TV licenses were issued in Australia, they were granted overwhelmingly to newspaper companies. Their operation was surrounded by regulations (e.g. around children's TV and Australian content), but there was always pressure from the proprietors to treat their stations like any other property right, to dilute their obligations as licensees when these conflicted with profitability.

In Britain, ITV had a very different ownership structure; it was originally a holding company consisting of initially six and then 14 regional broadcasting companies, all privately owned but licensed by government, it is now a single privately-owned network. Channel Four, which was launched in 1982 is a publicly owned company but dependent on advertising for its revenue, as opposed to the BBC; and Channel 5 was established in 1997 and is now, after a number of

changes, owned by the US media giant Viacom. But ITN, now a wholly owned independent company, supplies the news to all three commercial PSBs.

Technology and geography abetted the differences in journalistic quality. Australian television, especially commercial television, news had a very strong emphasis on localism, with crime and sport featuring prominently. It was only in the mid-1960s that the coaxial cable allowed stories to be transmitted instantly between Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. It was only in the 1970s that the commercial telecasters established a permanent presence in Canberra; only in 1976 that international satellite transmission from London (via Visnews)³ that close to same day coverage of international news was possible.

While the commercial broadcasters broadly kept to their obligation of impartiality between the major parties, and their audiences tended to be split down the middle in party terms, their TV news varied from that of the BBC's. ITV's news tended to follow a news agenda close to the BBC's but with a stronger focus on entertainment, sports and human interest; Channel Four was charged with pursuing an 'alternative' news agenda whilst Channel 5 tends to target a younger audience (Barnett et al 2012). Nonetheless, the nature of the public service requirements laid on the three commercial PSB networks – ITV, Channels Four and 5 – has been progressively lightened in recent years, significantly reducing their commitments with regards to local programming, religious affairs and children's television. In addition, the government continues to actively consider the full privatization of Channel Four.

3. Britain has a dominant national press featuring five quality nationals and five rumbustious and opinionated tabloids, while Australia's newspapers have traditionally had a city-state structure.

There is a considerable media difference between countries where the political capital is also the largest city, and the commercial and cultural centre. In countries such as Britain, France, Japan, Sweden etc., the most important newspapers are nationally circulating, especially when they have high population density and cover relatively small areas. Where this occurs, there tends to

be greater competition between newspapers, and they tend to be larger organisations than when the dominant newspapers circulate only in specific cities.

In countries without such a politically and commercially dominant city the press structure is very different. In large countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States, the newspaper markets are centered more around individual cities. Originally this was for reasons of the logistics of production and of advertising markets, but once established the pattern tended to be self-sustaining.

In Australia, morning newspapers enjoyed a local monopoly for most of the last half century in all the cities outside Sydney and Melbourne. Afternoon newspapers died out in the early 1990s. In several cities, the morning monopolies were what might be called mid-market, but have gone increasingly tabloid in recent decades. The monopoly papers in the smaller state capitals almost invariably supported the conservative side of politics, but did not display the more overt bias that has become common in recent times. Employment levels are falling in both countries, but the UK newspapers have typically employed a larger number of journalists than their Australian counterparts, and had larger circulations and whilst this has been falling in recent years two British newspapers – the *Guardian* and *Daily Mail* – feature in the world's top ten most read news sites.

On the other hand, it is notable that 'quality newspapers' comprise only 23 per cent of the paid for print market in the UK, whilst in Sydney and Melbourne, the quality papers, the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, may not as consistently hit the professional heights of their UK counterparts, but they do comprise around 40 per cent of their metropolitan markets.

Newspapers have always been more overtly partisan in the UK, and their readerships to a considerable extent reflect this. In Australia, there was little partisan division in newspaper readership. However, there have been times when Australian newspapers have displayed very considerable partisan bias, especially among the Murdoch papers.

While ‘excessive’ competition among the tabloids has been blamed for some of the ethical short cuts and invasions of privacy by British newspapers, culminating in the phone hacking scandals involving the Murdoch-owned *News of the World* (Davies 2014) and later other papers, as well as a series of other dubious stories, monopoly arrogance has been more the issue for Australian newspapers.

4. The concentration of ownership is greater in Australia, and media barons have had more influence on media policy, although in Britain, their power is far from zero.

Australia has among the most concentrated newspaper ownership in the democratic world. While News Corp has the biggest market share in both countries, in the UK it is 32.5 per cent, while in Australia it is 57.5 per cent, compared with, for example, the US publisher with the greatest market share, Gannett, which has just 9.6 per cent. Among the 29 countries, studied by Eli Noam, Australia’s concentration in newspaper ownership was exceeded only by China and Egypt (Noam 2016, p.1055-6).

Oligopoly has long been a feature of the Australian media. When television began in the 1950s, TV ownership of commercial licences was limited to two. This rule took no account of the population reach of different areas, so owning two channels in Sydney and Melbourne (comprising 43 per cent of the national market) counted the same as two stations in remote Cairns and Townsville. From the mid-1980s, there were several factors pressing for change. The Labor Party had always been critical of cross-media ownership, while several players resented the Sydney-Melbourne dominance. In 1987, Treasurer Paul Keating decisively moved to ban cross-media ownership of newspapers and TV channels, and at the same time abolished the two-station rule, allowing one company to own channels reaching up to 75 per cent of the national market.

This government move produced the biggest ever shake-up in Australian media ownership. In less than a year, 12 of the then 19 metropolitan daily newspapers changed hands, three of them twice, while one closed. Eleven of the 17 metropolitan TV stations changed owners, two of them twice. None of the four companies which had dominated Australian television in

November 1986 were still involved a year later. The TV stations changed hands for what were, previously, considered inconceivable sums, as it was widely believed that this could be the last chance to buy into the medium. The sums were indeed inconceivably high. The three new owners – Lowy, Bond and Skase – all exited the industry within a few years because of their unsustainable debt levels, the departure of Bond giving the previous owner of Channel Nine, Kerry Packer, his return to television and a position of great financial strength.

At the same time, Rupert Murdoch, who had recently become an American citizen, and so no longer eligible to hold an Australian TV licence, sold out his TV interests very profitably, and took over the previously largest newspaper group, the Herald and Weekly Times, eventually giving his company's newspapers around 60 per cent of the daily market (Tiffen 1994).

The power of media companies is also apparent in the UK. During the course of the Leveson Inquiry (2012) into the British Press it was revealed that in the first 15 months of his Government, David Cameron met with Rupert Murdoch, or his senior executives, no fewer than 26 times and the editor of the *Daily Mail*, Paul Dacre, is frequently referred to as one of the most influential men in Britain.⁴ Nonetheless public scrutiny of press influence on politicians is ensuring that whilst media moguls still have considerable clout, there are limits. After the phone hacking scandal in 2011, Rupert Murdoch was forced to retreat from his bid to take over that part of Sky TV he did not own. That did not stop him mounting a more recent attempt which at the time of writing is being reviewed by the UK's competition authority.

The introduction of subscription television in both countries illustrated the power of media proprietors. In Australia, the process was protracted and messy, and the veto, or at least delaying, power of media proprietors was evident. First mooted in the early 1980s, it came to fruition around the mid-1990s, and then mainly as a by-product of competition between the incumbent telephone operator, Telstra, and the new operator, Optus. Although the Communications Department proclaimed its technological neutrality, this was suddenly reversed in 1993 when it was apparent that a relative newcomer had secured microwave licences in several cities. The Keating Government suddenly changed course. Eventually, after many crises

and conflicts, a monopoly service, Foxtel, resulted, based on a partnership between Telstra and Murdoch, eventually also including Packer.

In Britain, the process of introducing subscription television was more incremental. The first satellite television channels were launched in the early 1980s. They were licensed by a variety of European countries but could be viewed in the UK. Murdoch saw this as a gateway into British television and in 1984 acquired an interest (which was to become controlling) in one of these channels, which five years later he re-launched as Sky TV in the UK. The Astra satellite he used was actually licensed in Luxembourg. but his programming was, and is, regulated by Ofcom, but with a lighter touch than that which applies to the PSB channels in the UK.

Both countries have press councils which provide only weak redress to those aggrieved by news coverage, and in both countries the press has been sufficiently powerful to veto proposed reforms. In the UK, Lord Justice Leveson, in his report into press standards, proposed an elegant solution to the conundrum of finding a middle way between voluntary regulation, which had clearly failed, and statutory regulation which was anathema to newspapers and many press freedom campaigners. He suggested a new body that would be based on a Royal Charter, granted by Parliament, but would have its subsequent independence virtually guaranteed by means of requiring an almost unattainable series of legislative loopholes to be cleared for its modus operandi to be altered. But this was rejected by the majority of the British press who set up their own regulatory body – the Independent Press Standards Organisation which was almost indistinguishable from its failed predecessor, the Press Complaints Commission which in turn was almost identical to its failed predecessor the Press Council.

The Finkelstein Inquiry in Australia, held around the same time, did not have the apparent political momentum which the phone hacking scandal had produced. It recommended avenues of redress with statutory powers, including the publication of adjudications and right of reply but with no further sanctions. Its procedures were designed to minimize the costs and risks for both sides. Nevertheless, it was pictured as an attack on freedom of the press, and as an assault by Labor on the media, and gained no political traction (Finkelstein 2011, Finkelstein and Tiffen 201x).

5. While in both countries, newspapers are in a sharp decline, the British papers seem to have retained greater political clout than have the Australian press.

Newspaper circulations, and newspaper revenues, are declining across the Western world. In both countries, this decline has been sharp and although some of this decline has been partially offset by some newspapers (in the UK notably *The Times* and the *Financial Times*) placing their product behind a paywall, the collapse in advertising revenue in the print newspaper market has not been compensated by any concomitant rise in online revenues. The long-term prospects for paid-for print newspapers are dire, although in the UK – and particularly in the big cities – there has been a significant growth in the penetration and revenues of free newspapers. The Monday-to-Friday Metro (owned by the *Daily Mail* group) now has a distribution/circulation of almost 1.5 million (making it the second highest circulation print newspaper in the UK) whilst its evening counterpart in London (owned by the *Independent*), the *Evening Standard* has circulation approaching 900,000.

Nevertheless, in the 2015 national election, where press support was strongly pro-Conservative, many analysts thought the press impact was substantial. Then in the Brexit referendum of 2016, several of the highest circulation papers were robustly in favour of Britain leaving, and again that result was achieved. According to research by the Reuters Institute only three of the UK's 11 national newspapers had a majority of items favouring the Remain campaign (Levy et al 2016); and research from Loughborough University demonstrated that, when weighted by circulation, the ration between pro Leave and Pro Remain articles in the national press was 80/20 (Deacon et al 2016). The press was in the mood for self-congratulation. On the night of the referendum, the editor of the *Sun*, Tony Gallagher texted to a *Guardian* journalist: 'So much for the waning power of the print media' (Bennhold 2017).

However, because of declining readership and influence as audiences find alternative news outlet online, press influence is in retreat. And the results of the 2017 General Election seemed to emphasise this point when the Labour Party, with a more left-wing leader and programme than at any time since the Second World War, succeeded in taking seats off the Conservatives, despite

the press giving the Tories overwhelming support. Much of the credit for this success was attributed to Labour's use of social media and partisan news blogs which proved highly adept at both neutralizing press attacks on the party and its leader and also succeeding in turning them back against Theresa May and the Conservatives.

Even before the 2017 election British newspapers' influence was being undermined, partly because public trust in the press stood at an all-time low following revelations about the behaviour of journalists revealed in the phone hacking scandal, partly because of media fragmentation and most importantly because of the remorseless falls in circulation and revenue that make any predictions about the long-time survival of British newspapers highly speculative.

In Australia, similar factors are at work, and it seems that the decline of press influence has been even sharper. The Murdoch press has been consistently and vigorously on the side of the Coalition federally since 2010 but with little evidence of any significant impact. However, the circulation of the tabloids has been in free fall, with not only a declining readership but one increasingly tied to an older demographic. Even among this declining proportion of the electorate, given the unrelenting tone of their coverage for most of the period since the mid 1990s, there are probably very few readers who if they haven't already changed are likely to from now on. Indeed, swings in recent elections do not suggest any evidence for the impact of these papers.

Politics

When looking at the two countries, whilst comparing the two media systems is in itself difficult, comparing the politics and political systems of the two countries is even more problematic. Political issues wax and wane with the changing constellations of conflicts, and party political fortunes often not moving in sync in the two countries. Indeed, since the 1960s, there have been only five years (1974-5 and 2007-10) when Labour/Labor was in power at the same time. So, the parties were undergoing change at different times, although in some ways learning from each other (O'Reilly 2007). Moreover, on some topics, we are inevitably forced to rest on subjective judgements..

1. The Australian political system is generally more receptive than the British to minor parties and new political groupings. The electoral systems of both favour the established major parties, but despite this both have experienced greater fragmentation in recent years.

There are two ways in which the Australian electoral system is friendlier to minority groups. The Senate is elected by proportional representation, and so independents and minor parties have a better chance of being elected. Indeed, only once since 1981 (2004-7) has the government of the day also enjoyed a majority in the Senate. This means that not only are minor parties represented, but their views often have political relevance, and the government must woo them in order to realise its legislative agenda.

The second is that although the House is based on single-member constituencies, it involves preferential voting. In the British first-past-the-post plurality system, the candidate with the most votes wins, whatever their total is. This means that once there are more than two substantial candidates in an electorate, the outcome can be a lottery, and voters must make two decisions – which candidate they prefer, and whether voting for that candidate will be a wasted vote because they have no hope of winning. In Australia, the preferences of the candidates with the least support are distributed until one candidate has secured 50 per cent of the votes. This means that Australian voters can express their support for a candidate they know has little chance of winning, but still potentially affect who wins the seat. In one increasing trend, it is possible for environmentally-minded voters to give their first preference to the Greens and their second preference to Labor.

The one type of minor party that a single member system helps is a geographically concentrated one. So the National Party has been a constant feature of Australian politics since the 1920s, even though its share of the national vote has often been about the same as the Greens, who have never had more than one member in the House. The British party system has long had regional parties representing Northern Ireland, but in recent times the rise of the Scottish Nationalist Party

has been greatly aided by the first past the post system. In the 2015 election they won 50 per cent of the popular vote in Scotland but took 95 per cent of the seats in 2017 their popular vote slumped to 37 per cent but they still took 60 per cent of the seats. By contrast, UKIP – the right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party – with almost 4 million votes, 13 per cent of the poll, won just one seat in 2015 (and that was by an MP who had defected from the governing Conservative Party before the election)

Another major difference is that in Australia there is a system of compulsory voting whereby electors who fail to vote are fined, resulting in general election turnouts generally of 90% and more. By contrast in the UK turnouts, which used to be in the high 70s are now in the low 60s (although in 2017 turnout almost reached 70 per cent) which means that governments are being elected having won the support of around 25 per cent of the electorate, even in the relatively high turnout of 2017 the Conservative Government was narrowly returned on just 29 per cent of the electorate. This inevitably affects the perceived legitimacy of the government.

Although there seems little immediate prospect of the British electoral system itself changing UK politics are in great flux. The 2015 election saw the greatest fragmentation of the vote in a generation with one third of the electorate turning their backs on the Labour and Conservative parties; the Labour Party appeared to be in potentially permanent decline and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was waiting in the wings to inherit their working-class base. Yet just two years later the 2017 election saw nine out of 10 voters opting to vote either Labour or Conservative and Labour was resurgent increasing its share of the vote by the biggest margin since 1945. This political instability in the UK has twice, in the last three elections, led to Conservative governments that were only able to govern with the support of minor parties. All of which suggests that significant changes in the British political landscape might still occur, despite all the institutional biases that favour the status quo.

Similarly in Australia, the electorate has become more fragmented, more on a knife-edge and seemingly more volatile. After the 2010 election, the first minority government since the early 1940s took office; and after the 2016 election the Coalition was only a single seat away from being a similar situation. In that election, almost one quarter of voters (23 per cent) cast their

first preference vote for minority parties., the highest since before the Second World War. This proportion averaged around 10 per cent from 1950 to 1990, but in the last three elections has been around 20 per cent (Blumer 2016). Similarly, after the 2016 election, 21 of the 76 Senators were from minor parties or independents, the highest proportion on record.

2. Great Britain has taken the Westminster conventions more seriously than Australia, and conducts its parliament with greater decorum.

In both countries government practices have evolved to increase their political advantage and to push state institutions in the direction they want them to go. However, this was done more rapidly and with less resistance in Australia. The Prime Minister's Department (and at state levels, Premiers' Departments) have increasingly become tools for the leader to project their power over other departments and ministers.

In the 1980s, the Hawke Government formed what became known as Animals – Australian Media Liaison Service – which, although funded by the taxpayer, acted very much in the government's political interests. Subsequent governments have acted in similar ways. Even the rules regarding publicly-funded government advertising – meant to be informational – have often been abused in promoting government policies and views.

Similarly, the United Kingdom Parliament maintains more decorum, and the Speaker acts in a more impartial way, than is common in the Australian parliament. There has been, over decades, a self-sustaining trend for Australian parliamentary proceedings to include more personal abuse, and more cynical attacks. Although, as the number of women MPs in the UK Parliament has increased, there has been a rising tide of complaints about the boorish, and some argue chauvinistic, behaviour of some of the more traditional members of the House of Commons.

3. There has been much more leader instability in Australia's major parties, but in both countries, there has been considerable internal conflict with consequences for the news coverage they receive.

The more volatile competition between the parties has been paralleled by increasing conflicts within them. In Australia, one symptom of this has been greater leadership instability. At federal level, the major parties since 1970 have had 16 leadership coups, including five prime ministers being voted out of office by their own colleagues (Tiffen 2017). Britain has had some lasting and important conflicts between leadership rivals, but has never had anything to compare with that instability.

Perhaps it is the frequency of Australian elections, every three years compared with Britain's notional five, that accounts for the increased temperatures inside the party rooms. Although factional and ideological conflicts are often involved, by far the major factor seems to be a ruthless electoral pragmatism often conjoined with the leader's handling of internal relationships. It is also easier to mount such a challenge in Australia than in Britain, although the Conservative Party, unlike Labour, has been particularly adept at seeing off unpopular leaders who appeared to be leading them into political oblivion. Labour, on the other hand, has had four leaders in recent memory (Foot, Kinnock, Miliband and Corbyn) who have clung to office, despite leading their party to what appeared to be the electoral cliff edge (though in Corbyn's case that proved not to be the case).

Conclusion

Political communication in Britain and Australia shares many fundamental features, but the differences are not insignificant. To generalize, television has been a stronger force, and more strategic in improving democratic accountability, in Britain than Australia. The role of newspapers is more ambiguous, although the combined force of the British national press has undoubtedly had greater collective impact, for good and ill, and is a greater force for disclosure than in Australia.

Moreover, politics and media in both countries are in flux and for similar reasons. The digital revolution has wrought, and continues to wreak, great upheavals in previous media business models, public media consumption and the way that politics is communicated. In both countries,

it seems, the spin doctor mentality has become more central in government, and practised more ruthlessly and cynically, although in Britain in 2017 the appeal of Labour's Jeremy Corbyn was seen to be his authenticity, and his indifference to spin; whilst much of Theresa May's lamentable electoral performance was put down to her failure to 'master' the techniques of spin – soundbites photo ops etc. - and the public's growing ability to detect, and express its disillusion with, the whole gamut of media management tools. Arguably this has increased the distaste for politics in both countries. In both countries, the complexity and range of political conflicts seems to be increasing. For example, although support for particular parties fluctuates dramatically, right-wing populism has become more influential in recent years.

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¹ In both countries, whilst the specifically online and social media continue to grow as sources of ‘news’ – research demonstrates that the vast majority of the news ‘produced’ by these new media sources derive from the legacy media (Thurman 2016)

² Although in the UK members of the unelected House of Lords do sit in cabinet, although they very rarely hold senior positions

³ Visnews was jointly owned by Reuters, the BBC, the ABC, NZBC and CBC Canada. It had previously been known as the British Commonwealth International News Agency but it is now wholly owned by Reuters and hence trades as Reuters TV.

⁴ Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s spin doctor, recently wrote: “Dacre probably second only to Rupert Murdoch as British print journalism’s most influential figure.”

<http://www.alastaircampbell.org/blog/2016/11/07/an-essay-on-the-poison-to-our-national-life-that-is-paul-dacres-daily-mail/>