Forgetting how to govern

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Why do parties have so much trouble learning from past successes and failures, asks Anne Tiernan

The adaptor: John Howard during an Anzac Day dawn service in Brisbane in 2007. Dave Hunt/AAP Image

Election postmortems are a ritual of grieving – a necessary safety valve to contain the damage and internal recrimination that might otherwise break out after a devastating and unexpected election loss. After ceding power to Labor’s Daniel Andrews in late 2014, the Victorian Liberal Party commissioned former party elder Dr David Kemp to “investigate and report on the reasons for the election loss, to advise on how government can be regained in 2018, and how the next period of Liberal (and presumably National Coalition) government can avoid the mistakes, and build on the achievements, of the last.” The final report, delivered in July 2015, echoes a similar, though truncated, review process conducted by the Liberal National Party in Queensland after its January 2015 election loss.

The Kemp review highlights dysfunction at the heart of the Liberal–National government: an inability to manage the business of government and a failure to develop and communicate a persuasive narrative – a failure that fed perceptions that it was a “do nothing” government.

The report argues that these problems were entrenched from the beginning. They can be attributed to the lack of “a satisfactory transition to government plan” and to a defensive and cautious premier’s office that distrusted the capacity of ministers and sought to limit their autonomy by imposing centralised control and approval processes. Inevitably, this led to delays in decision-making as the leader’s office struggled to cope with the volume of work its own processes generated, and to disenchantment as ministers bridled at being “managed” by senior ministerial staffers who, though unelected, seemed to enjoy higher status.

The report details problems with the operations of cabinet as a forum for deliberation and debate, with the result that the bureaucracy was “completely in charge” of Ted Baillieu’s cabinet of 2010–13. It cites a lack of leadership, the tendency of the leader’s office to “shut down debate,” and a more general isolation and lack of engagement. But the most striking conclusion of the Kemp review relates to the question of philosophy: what a Liberal Party government stands for, its public-interest framework and the values it brings to the task of governing. This, of course, is well-worn ground for Kemp, a former academic and federal minister who has long emphasised philosophy and purpose, invoking party founder Sir Robert Menzies. But that he thought it necessary to reprise this in his final report is revealing – perhaps of the tribal and careerist nature of the contemporary party and those coming through its ranks seeking preselection.

Aside from being an antidote to the paranoid tendency of Australia’s political parties to prevent the detailed findings of internal reviews from becoming public, the Kemp review warrants close examination for two reasons. It comprehensively explains the failure of the government of Baillieu and his successor Denis Napthine, and identifies the work needed for the Victorian Liberal Party to be competitive at the 2018 election. The second reason, more compelling for my purposes because its diagnosis is so eerily familiar, is that its findings could be applied almost verbatim to the experience of Queensland under Campbell Newman, and in Canberra under Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and, most recently, Tony Abbott.
Kemp himself raises the question that has confounded me this past year: why, if the Coalition knew how to run a successful government federally for nine years under John Howard, was that knowledge and expertise not available to colleagues in Victoria? The same question applies to the Liberal National Party, which won a landslide victory in Queensland in March 2012, and also to Tony Abbott, who knew from as early as the 2010 election that he would likely win the September 2013 federal election. Why couldn’t relevant lessons be learned and applied to the preparation for government? What are the barriers and impediments to learning among Australia’s political professionals?

Learning demands the capacity to interpret and reflect on experience. For the political scientist Daniel Ponder, who has applied concepts of organisational learning to the American presidency, learning implies the ability to use insight to make changes to the way an organisation (in his case, the institution of the presidency) approaches its work. Learning becomes evident if new ways of thinking are absorbed into an organisation’s “procedures, rules, routines, informal communities of practice, the collective memory and the agency culture.” In the presidential context, learning can be thought of as lessons adapted for different tasks at different times.

Ponder cites Julianne Mahler’s three elements of learning: problem perception; reflection, analysis and action to address perceived deficiencies, and evidence of a change of mind. Learning can only be said to have occurred if the change is institutionalised – that is, incorporated into the routines and practices of the organisation.

Each of these elements was apparent in the way John Howard adapted his leadership style during his second incarnation as Liberal leader. By contrast, there is little evidence that Campbell Newman or Tony Abbott exhibited any of them. Neither man seemed to perceive there were problems with his leadership or management of his government. Even if they reflected on and analysed their situations – as both were forced to do, after Newman’s resounding by-election defeats, and in Abbott’s case when he retained the prime ministership after the February 2015 leadership ballot – there was no evidence that they (or their courts) changed either their minds or their modus operandi. Nor did those events, party-room murmurings, leaks, or consistently poor opinion polls prompt fundamental changes to the structure and operations of their private offices, or their approach to cabinet government.

It seems to me that the barriers and impediments to partisan learning – the ability and willingness of political leaders and their parties to learn from experience – exist at two levels. The first is in the pathway to attaining government. This encompasses the career backgrounds and experiences of political leaders and their (now many more numerous) fellow travellers, the experience of opposition, and how transitions of government are managed. The second impediment is embedded in the hybrid advisory model that has evolved to support political leaders. It deprives them of institutional memory and the capacity to learn. At the same time it allows a leader like Abbott, Newman or Rudd to develop relatively insular and self-reinforcing networks of advice and support until, inevitably, the party room revolts.

It is the performance of political leaders, not of officials, that has fostered the elite consensus that Australia’s political culture is broken – that the nation’s leaders are incapable of governing, let alone of delivering genuine reform. This lament began in the Rudd years, rising to a crescendo under Gillard and Abbott. It was graphically illustrated in August 2015 when leaders of business, unions and community groups joined together to debate the options for long-term reform at the National Reform Summit – a process organised by the Australian Financial Review and the Australian that specifically excluded politicians. The post-summit analysis confirmed the central premise. Fairfax journalist Peter Hartcher described the summit as “a heartfelt cry for national leadership,” a “spontaneous rebuke to the political parties,” and as an attempt by the nation’s elites “to goad Australia’s political leaders into doing their jobs.”

The nature of opposition can also impede learning along the pathway to government. An election loss (particularly one that is expected) often triggers the departure of longstanding ministers and MPs and the staff who support them. It deprives the parliamentary party of knowledge and understanding of the business of governing, and of access to public service experience and expertise. This gap only grows during its time on the opposition benches, as does the tendency to rely on political staffers for policy advice. Prime ministers determine the allocation of staff resources – by convention, an opposition receives around 21 per cent of the staff available to the incumbents. These factors foster close relationships between opposition staff and shadow ministers, and account for at least some of the difficulty in accommodating the wider group of advisers that
accompanies the transition to government; the volume of work shared across a fairly lean operation participating in the “permanent campaign” leaves little time for learning or reflection.

Recently, because parties have been unable to reconcile internal tensions, or find an experienced candidate capable of “cutting through” with the public, they have resorted to candidates from outside the leadership mainstream. For Labor, Mark Latham and Kevin Rudd fall into this category. For the Coalition, Tony Abbott’s one-vote ascendency emerged from the vacuum that followed John Howard’s defeat, the instability that followed Peter Costello’s refusal to take up the mantle, and Brendan Nelson and Malcolm Turnbull’s inability to unite the disparate interests that comprise the Liberal Party’s “broad church.” The same was true of Campbell Newman in Queensland, who was drafted in as Liberal National Party leader to campaign to become premier from outside the parliament. This resort to outsiders presents a problem for partisan learning. Frequent turnover of leaders (occurring often in opposition but, until recently, relatively rare in government) further inhibits learning, since such changes disrupt the composition of the leader’s staff and the knowledge and expertise available to the new boss.

One consequence of recent political volatility may be that political parties spend too short a period in opposition. Peter van Onselen noted this rather presciently in 2011, when he argued that Labor’s failures meant Tony Abbott may win power too soon. “The current Liberal Party hasn’t had the chance in the short time it has been out of office to move from acting like a de facto government to an alternative government,” he argued. “De facto governments act as if they have a right to rule; alternative governments develop a set of reasons why they should.”

In the United States, the transition to government spans a three-month period – from the day after the presidential election on the first Tuesday of November to thirty days after the inauguration. Public funding allows both candidates to form transition teams during the election campaign to develop comprehensive plans for taking over the reins of power. The situation could not be more different in Westminster-style systems, where people exhausted from an election campaign move overnight from opposition to being in charge. As Paul Corrigan, a special adviser to the Blair government, notes, “You do the most difficult thing in politics – which is to win an election – and then, without even time for a good night’s sleep, you start to do the second most difficult thing in politics, which is to run a country.”

Barriers to learning in government compound the deficits accrued in opposition. These obstacles are both embedded in, and a consequence of, successive waves of public sector “reform” and change over the past four decades. Ministers, and especially prime ministers, have driven many of these changes. Taken together, their actions and decisions have had the effect of undermining the quality of the advice they receive and the routines and processes that provide new ideas and options. Another consequence has been a reduction in opportunities to debate and contest such choices. Indeed, as recent experience shows, and the Kemp review carefully documents, centralisation and executive overreach, and their associated lack of transparency, have been a constant problem. Symptoms include a lack of coordination and coherence across the ministry; the tendency to unilateral decision-making (which has entered the lexicon as “captain’s picks”); poor communication and sequencing of decisions; and policy reversals in the face of apparently unexpected resistance and blowback.

Overcoming these problems would require politicians and their parties to adopt arrangements and frameworks that support rather than systematically undermine their capacity to focus on key priorities, to control the political and policy agenda, and to negotiate the many relationships and dependencies that characterise life at the centre of modern government. Importantly, political leaders and their parties would need to become more organisationally focused – more conscious of the governance arrangements needed to achieve desired outcomes. They would also need a level of self-awareness and a capacity for self-reflection to which career politics seems inherently hostile.

In their book Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much, Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir argue that “scarcity,” whether of time or money, tends to focus the mind on immediate challenges. The authors describe a “scarcity trap” where people experiencing any form of poverty (of food, of love and company, of time or material resources) become intently focused on their urgent needs. They show that scarcity “captures the mind.” The mind’s focus on one thing steals cognitive and attentional “bandwidth,” impairing its capacity to perform other
tasks, including the ability to make well-reasoned judgements and to assess the long-term consequences of current decisions. Just like the poor people in Mullainathan and Shafir’s study, chronically busy people, suffering from a scarcity of time, demonstrate similarly impaired abilities and make self-defeating choices.

The relentless focus on coping and survival among political-administrative elites is suggestive of a “scarcity trap.” It is perhaps no coincidence that these difficulties have been experienced by leaders bedevilled by the time compression and exponential demands of the twenty-four-hour news cycle and an increasingly globalised and interdependent leadership context. But the recurrence of the same types of difficulties suggests a structural cause that, I argue, is rooted in the dynamics of the hybrid advisory system that has developed to support Australian political leaders.

The loss of institutional memory in the public service and, by extension, the prime ministership has been one of the most damaging of the unintended consequences of what have become known as the “political management” reforms. Institutional memory is essential to any organisation’s identity and its ability to learn from past experience. In A Government of Strangers, Hugh Heclo describes government agencies as “bundles of memory and practices that are inherited from a particular past and carried forward.” Institutional memory resides in the stories people hear and tell one another. Stories that are told and retold “form an important part of the way that institutions remember their past and use that remembering to create identities for both the institution and its members.”

The decisions of Australian prime ministers to shift their main source of advice and support from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to the Prime Minister’s Office, and to staff the PMO with personal loyalists often from outside the public service, have had marked effects on the centre’s institutional memory. Partisan organisations like the PMO are inherently, indeed deliberately, temporary. They exist to serve a particular prime minister and are staffed mostly by people the prime minister has selected. PMO staffers’ backgrounds and preparation for the job differ from the traditional career pathway. As we have seen in recent leadership spills, their tenure is bound to that of the prime minister who chooses them.

Partisan organisations like the PMO lack the storage locations for institutional memory available to those that are more stable and continuing. Unlike public service departments, they do not inherit the beliefs and practices of a long-established organisation, which provide some certainty and an element of continuity. At the change of government, each new PMO starts afresh, perhaps not even conscious that “institutional amnesia” is built into their design. The likelihood of pathologies associated with “organisational forgetting” has increased because the flow of departmental officers to ministerial offices has declined. From the mid 1990s public servants began to fear that working in the PMO could limit their future public service careers. There may be more continuity in the PMO after a leadership succession, but even then only a few former staff are likely to remain to serve a new prime minister.

If turnover is a problem for institutional memory in the public sector, it is especially a feature of partisan organisations. Their culture of intense pressure, long hours and, in Australian federal politics, long periods away from home travelling to and from Canberra leads to “burn out” and people moving on. Partisan organisations live in a world where time is compressed. The haste and busyness of pressured work environments lead people to attempt to cope with impossible work demands by taking shortcuts. So, in Ida Sabelis’s words, they “leave things aside or out.” They are selective, focusing only on “headlines,” with bad results for memory. In such workplaces, remembering may be seen as “a time-consuming activity and not appreciated, or maybe not functional.”

The lack of institutional memory available to Australian prime ministers is comparatively recent; and it is a problem of their own making. Their reasons for relying on their private offices are clear enough: the pressures to cope and survive are intense and public servants cannot do many of the things that personal staff can. But the lack of institutional memory and the associated failure to learn from experience is a problem that recurs. The dilemma is illustrated by the experience of prime ministers Rudd, Gillard and Abbott and by premiers Baillieu, Napthine and Newman.

Malcolm Turnbull’s rhetoric since becoming prime minister and some of his early actions suggest that he and those around him – most significantly, Arthur Sinodinos – understand the problem and are taking steps to
address it. Interestingly, the Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, has made a similar commitment to reject the centralised and secretive style of his Conservative predecessor, Stephen Harper. Whether these two newly minted leaders can maintain a more collegial and consultative style remains to be seen.

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