

**Are Leaders Becoming More Powerful? Kevin Rudd and the Presidentialization Thesis
Re-Examined**

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Abstract

Are Prime Ministers becoming more like Presidents? Are contemporary Australian political leaders more powerful than their predecessors? These questions have been intensely debated in the literature over the last two decades and central to these debates has been the 'presidentialization thesis'. This paper will use one of the more systematic presidentialization frameworks as conceptualised by Poguntke and Webb (2005) and apply it to the Australian context by examining the case study of the Kevin Rudd leadership period of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). This paper will argue that the evidence for presidentialization in the Australian system is mixed. However the most compelling evidence in support of presidentialization is reflected in how leaders interact with their parties rather than in how they govern. This paper will also evaluate some of the strengths and weaknesses of the Poguntke and Webb (2005) presidentialization model when applied to the Australian context.

Introduction

Debates about whether Australian political leaders are becoming more powerful have been fiercely fought for over two decades. However, the parameters which have framed this debate have substantially changed in more recent times. Instead of discussing whether we have cabinet or prime ministerial government, academics have been debating the merits of the ‘presidentialization¹ thesis’. This paper proposes to do two things. First, it will examine presidentialization in the Australian context by looking at the case study of the Kevin Rudd leadership period of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). This will be done by using the presidentialization model conceptualised by Poguntke and Webb (2005). Second, this paper will assess the strengths and weaknesses of this framework in light of these findings.

Modern debate about political leaders dominating their governments in the Westminster system can be traced to the 1960s in Britain and to the Mackintosh and Crossman thesis which declared cabinet government was dead and prime ministerial government was now the orthodoxy (Mackintosh, 1968; Crossman, 1963: 51). Concerns about the increasing power of leaders gave rise to a number of works across Europe examining ‘presidential’ like leaders within parliamentary systems including Foley’s (2000) *The British Presidency*. Foley (2000: 25) argued that leaders were ultimately more detached from their governments and parties than previously and that leaders had become autonomous agents within the system. While Foley’s (2000) work was a systematic account of Britain, it was not until Poguntke and Webb (2005) adopted a comparative politics framework that the ‘presidentialization thesis’ advanced beyond debates about indigenous idiosyncrasies to a discussion about the causal effects driving changes across democratic systems.

By using the comparative approach and increasing the generalisability of the thesis, Poguntke and Webb (2005) achieved two things. They succeeded in broadening the debate and they also increased its clarity in definition and conceptualisation as the parameters were more explicitly defined than previously. This has allowed systematic comparative analysis to be conducted and it is this framework that will be used to examine presidentialization in the

¹ For this paper the key term ‘Presidentialization’ will be spelt in the American and British style (the way Poguntke and Webb (2005) spelt the term). While this is typographically inconsistent with Australian spelling, it will prevent inconsistencies between quotes and general discussion of the concept.

Australian context in this paper. Also, by providing a clear framework, Poguntke and Webb (2005) highlighted the difference between conditional dominance which is reversible, and has more to do with the individual in office, and structural changes, which emerge as a result of a variety of causal factors that alter the dynamic of parliamentary and semi-presidential systems into a 'de-facto presidentialization' arrangement (Webb, Poguntke and Kolodny, 2011: 3-5). This distinction of course is critical to an examination of presidentialization and separates it from the casual observation of a system becoming 'presidential' which one can find in much of the mainstream media and Poguntke and Webb (2005: 1) in *The Presidentialization of Politics*, argued that "it was hard to avoid the impression that perceptions of the personalization and even the 'presidentialization' of politics have become more widespread".

The conceptualisation of presidentialization Poguntke and Webb devised was based on what they perceived as the three distinct faces of presidentialization, the executive face, the party face and the electoral face and they noted each of these "revolves around the tension between political parties and individual leaders" (Poguntke and Webb, 2005: 7). The executive face of presidentialization while inter-related with the party face is specifically focussed on how leaders interact with their governments. As a result, any growth in the formal powers of leaders as well as evidence of autonomous decision making is central. In Poguntke and Webb's (2005: 9) terms: "While partified government means governing through parties' presidentialized government implies governing past parties". When examining the party face of presidentialization, Poguntke and Webb (2005: 9) were looking for a "shift in intra-party power to the benefit of the leader". This shift may be related to the third face of presidentialization, namely the electoral face, whereby the leader appeals over the party to the electorate for their support base. Usually this would be a result of structural changes to the party giving leaders more formal powers allowing them to bypass various power bases within the party and/or as a result of a concentration of power and resources in the office of the leader (Poguntke and Webb, 2005: 9). The electoral face has three central components, campaign style, media focus and voting behaviour. In short, campaign style is about examining whether there has been a growing emphasis on leadership appeals in election campaigns. Media focus is whether the media is focussing more on leaders than previously and voting behaviour is about examining if leaders are becoming more important in the choices of voters (Poguntke and Webb, 2005: 10).

The Case Study

Kevin Rudd became the Leader of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party at a time when Labor's fortunes were on the rise. In November 2006, Labor was ahead in the two-party preferred vote (51%-49%). However Kim Beazley was struggling in the preferred Prime Minister polling and as the preferred leader of the ALP, was behind both Rudd and Julia Gillard according to *Newspoll* (12 December 2006). When a leadership ballot did take place on 4 December, Rudd defeated Beazley 49 votes to 39 (Jackman, 2008: 74). Shortly following this, *Newspoll* (23 January 2007) reported that Labor's share of the two party preferred had increased and they were now in a commanding position (55%-45%).

Rudd's ascent to the leadership of the ALP was a sign of the times as he had become well-known from 2001 due to his appearances on the morning television show *Sunrise* (Jackman, 2008: 30-33 and Macklin, 2007: 5). However, this was not Rudd's only vehicle for self-promotion and he became a frequent contributor in the print media. In October 2006 he wrote the first of his essays for *The Monthly* magazine titled 'Faith in Politics'. He followed this up the following month with 'Howard's Brutopia'. The diversity of exposure led Dyrenfurth and Bongiorno (2011: 187) to observe that "Rudd seemed to have both the 'battlers' and the 'chattering classes' covered". Throughout 2007, Labor was always comfortably in front in the polls despite the governments attempts to wedge Labor on climate change and indigenous affairs. Their attempts to discredit the *Your Rights at Work* Campaign by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), developed to oppose the deeply unpopular *Work Choices* legislation, also failed and on 24 November 2007, Kevin Rudd became Australia's 26th Prime Minister. The result, with the Labor Party receiving a swing towards it of 5.45 per cent was its largest since 1969 (Jackman, 2008: 233; Megalogenis, 2008: 348-350).

Rudd and Presidentialization

The Rudd victory seems like a distant memory now and the autopsy and dissection of his leadership will continue on for some time to come. The bigger question however is what does the Rudd leadership period tell us about Australian politics? Has Australian politics become presidentialized? Is the increasingly frequent rise and fall of leaders symptomatic of some deep changes within the Australian political system? If we use the Poguntke and Webb

(2005) model to examine the Rudd leadership period, the findings are mixed, however it is clear that of the three faces of presidentialization Poguntke and Webb (2005) conceptualised, it is in the party face where the most compelling evidence lies and where the framework is at its strongest in the Australian context.

The Executive Face

In the executive face it is clear that Rudd had a clear idea of the way he wanted his government to run. This was with him at the centre of decision making involved in the minutia of policy making and controlling the agenda. The level of autonomy that he possessed has been widely criticised. For instance, it has been claimed that Rudd was the most powerful Prime Minister in Australian history (See Stewart, 2009: 14), and that he was bringing a new brand of governance to Australia (Kelly, 2009: 1; Ray in Uren and Taylor, 2010: 147; Stewart, 2009: 12). One of the more widely publicised examples of this micro-management according to David Marr, journalist and writer of a biographical account of Rudd, was in the way that Cabinet interacted with decisions of the Strategic Priorities and Budget Committee (SPBC). According to Marr (2010: 68), cabinet ministers were allowed to look at a folder which contained the decisions of the Committee, but the folder was not allowed to be taken out of the room. This was supplemented by reports that Rudd and the other members of the SPBC, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner and Treasurer Wayne Swan were marginalising Cabinet (Kelly, 2009: 1; Uren and Taylor 2010: 83); that Cabinet submissions were only being circulated the day before meetings; and that the Prime Minister's office was becoming the choke point for all decisions of the government (Marr 2010: 68; Stuart, 2010: 167-8; Stewart, 2009: 16).

In particular, it was the dominance of the SPBC and their centrality in creating the stimulus packages during the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) as well as in the decision to dump the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS)² which were most critical (Uren and Taylor, 2010: 41-83; Marr 2010: 80; Stuart, 2010: 68-70). The pre-eminence of a particular committee certainly

² While a few others were involved in the debate about whether the ETS should be dumped, namely the National Secretary, Karl Bitar and NSW Senator Mark Arbib, who were supportive of dumping the ETS and Senator Penny Wong (who opposed it), the decision was still made without consultation with Cabinet and Caucus colleagues. *The Age* noted that Environment Minister Peter Garrett revealed that most of the Caucus heard about the decision when the story broke in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Taylor, 05 April, 2011, 27 April, 2010 and Hartcher, 2010: 9).

wasn't new, especially when one considers the elevated position of the Expenditure Review Committee (ERC) during the Hawke years. However, it seems clear that Rudd was sidelining Cabinet more than even Hawke had done as Hawke had used the factional alliance between the Right and Centre-Left to ensure his policy agenda was implemented (Jaensch, 1989: 168). The SPBC and Rudd were deciding on government policy and Cabinet was becoming nothing more than a rubber-stamp (Stewart, 2009: 14; Grattan, 2010: 1; Taylor, 2010).

While Rudd must shoulder much of the blame for the centralisation during his time as Prime Minister, and he has admitted that he made mistakes since then, prime ministers are ultimately accountable to their parties and leaders cannot transcend existing institutions. The actors within some of these institutions, namely Caucus and Cabinet, failed to act when they were being marginalised (Oakes, 2010a: 50; Oakes, 2010b: 10). Instead of warning the prime minister early on in his tenure as happened to Hawke during the MX missile controversy,³ and Whitlam when he wanted to split the ministry into inner and outer groupings, the Caucus allowed Rudd to continue on, unchecked until it finally “issued an overdue reminder of its enormous potential power in June 2010” (Dyrenfurth and Bongiorno, 2011: 193). This is a critical point when one examines presidentialization in the Australian context. As much as Rudd may have wished to be an autonomous actor and unilaterally dominate his government, this can only occur when his colleagues allow him to behave in this way. No formal or structural changes to the role of prime minister or to the executive arm of government had occurred, hence Rudd's dominance in the executive face as conceptualised by Poguntke and Webb (2005) was purely conditional. However it is also true that due to an increasing concentration of resources around the Prime Minister, including advisers, that decision making is becoming further centralised (Stuart, 2010: 167-8; Tiernan, 2007; *Government Personal Positions as at 1 February 2008-1 May 2010* - Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration). Thus it is clear that while parties are the ultimate constraint on prime ministers in the executive face; this accountability function has been eroded by the decline in the intra-party institutions and a concentration of power in the hands of the elites within the party.

³ In early 1985 when Hawke and Beazley Jnr agreed to allow US aircraft to refuel in Australia as part of their monitoring of the MX missile tests, they did so without the authority of Caucus and Cabinet and suffered a major embarrassment when they required the US to rescind their request as Caucus asserted its traditional authority (Steketee, 2001: 144 and Australian Political Chronicle, December 1985: 494).

The Party Face

In a continuation of what had happened during previous leadership periods, it was obvious that the parliamentary leadership intended to bypass and/or dominate the internal institutions of the party. Central to this was the parliamentary leaderships' zeal for controlling outcomes and how events were perceived in the media. When Rudd took the leadership of the FPLP on 4 December 2006, he outlined immediately that he would not be tied down by a rule established in 1905 that said Caucus alone had the right to pick the front bench (Hartcher, 2009: 146; Jackman, 2008: 92-3). According to Jackman (2008: 92-3), "Kevin basically told the faction leaders, I know there is a rule in place, but I'll have who I like, thank you". The decision was reported as a major change in thinking for the party and when the ALP took office, Rudd selecting his own ministry was reported as a seismic shift for the party (The Australian, 07 Dec 2006: 11; Karvelas, 2007: 4; Stuart, 2007: 23; Franklin, 2007: 3; The Mercury, 2007: 2).

However, the reality was very different to that being portrayed in the mainstream media. In fact, it was clear that Rudd was still dealing with factional leaders despite what he said publicly (Hartcher, 2009: 145-6; Stuart, 2010: 69). When the initial plan for the ministry was drawn up the Right was under-represented dramatically and after consulting factional leaders the ministry was re-drawn to better reflect the make-up of the Caucus as Rudd was advised by John Faulkner from the Left and Robert Ray from the Right, that it was not a wise idea to simultaneously declare war on the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) (Hartcher, 2009: 146-7; Stewart, 2009: 17). As a result, the one area where many would assume evidence of greater leadership control, is in fact the one area where this was not the case. In fact, Tanner (Interview with the author 21 June 2010) Bob McMullan (Interview with the author 22 June 2010), Gary Gray (Interview with the Author 22 June 2010) and Chris Evans (Interview with the author 21 June 2010) all agreed that the change actually made very little difference to who was selected and the weighing up of various state and factional interests is something the leader will always have to confront. More substantial evidence of presidentialization in the Rudd leadership period can however be found in the control the leadership exerted over the national conference and over pre-selections.

In the period that Kevin Rudd was leader of the FPLP, two national conferences occurred. Both were criticised for being stage managed and ‘politically safe’ (Schubert and Murphy, 2007: 4). The most controversial aspect of the 2007 Conference was the decision to give Labor’s head office the power to intervene in pre-selection battles. It was reported by Farr (2007: 13) that some delegates viewed this as “another example of the party bosses abusing their power”. The conference resolution noted that as the election was only months away and to maximise the chance at success the Conference gives the National Executive “specific authority to pre-select candidates in the House of Representatives for the 2007 federal election” (ALP 2007 National Platform). The resolution also noted that this would only apply to 2007 federal pre-selections and that this process will be applied exclusively to New South Wales (NSW) or where “application is sought by the Administrative Committee of another State or Territory Branch, and only in those seats where the National Executive Committee has unanimously agreed upon a process to select a candidate”. However, this was not what occurred. The interjection of the National Executive meant that at least 10 seats in NSW alone had their candidates chosen by the National Executive (Coorey and Humphries, 2007). Furthermore, it was clear that in the lead up to the 2010 poll that this was not a ‘one-off’ as the resolution at the 2007 National Conference noted. In fact, the process continued for pre-selections for the 2010 poll and the National Executive was not using any motion passed at the 2007 National Conference, but was instead using the plenary powers under Section 7 (f) in the ALP Constitution. These powers, which had been used extremely rarely until 2007, were now being used extensively to decide candidates for pre-selection in NSW as well as QLD (Southern Highlands Branch Newsletter -no.159 – Holiday 2010; Crikey, 11 March, 2010; Maddison, 17 March, 2010). Rodney Cavalier (2010: 185; See also Faulkner 2011: 8), former NSW Labor Minister, argued that the leadership group has “presumed to determine pre-selections for any seat that Labor has a chance of winning wherever the local membership might select a candidate unacceptable to that group”. Cavalier also argued of Rudd that (Interview with the author 28 April, 2010) “No previous Labor Leader has so casually but consistently used the National Executive to impose his will in candidate selection”.

This increasingly elite driven domination of the party was also apparent at the 2009 National Conference which was described as the most “carefully stage managed ALP Conference ever” (Keane, 2009) and “pre-approved water torture” (Crook, 31 July 2009). At the heart of these criticisms was the way decisions were handled with very few formal votes actually

taking place. Central to this was a “Government appointed four-man troubleshooting team” whose role was to intervene when any of the 400 delegates strayed from the script and moved away from a program which had already been vetted by the Prime Minister’s office (Stewart, 2009: 16; Crabb, 2009; Cavalier, 2010: 184). Hence, the evidence of presidentialization in the party face is overwhelming. In the electoral face however, the evidence is more ambiguous.

The Electoral Face

When presidentialization is discussed in the media, it is usually considered in the context of elections. Frequently, scholars comment on how leaders have dominated campaigns and become more presidential (Weller and Young, 2000: 163), or how during elections prime ministers act presidential (Lloyd 1992: 132). Thus, when examining the electoral face of presidentialization, three factors need to be examined, campaign style, media focus and voting behaviour. The campaign style of the one election that Rudd contested as leader was deeply personalised and as has become the norm, extended well beyond the actual campaign as throughout 2007 both major parties engaged in what Williams (2008: 108) described as the “long *faux* campaign”. Labor focussed on marketing Rudd as soon as he became leader with the party releasing two television ads. The first, often referred to as the Eumundi ad, showed Rudd talking about the education of children, and the second, was an attempt by the ALP to brand Rudd as an ‘economic conservative’ before the government vandalised Rudd’s image (Hartcher, 2009: 175; Stuart, 2010: 34). In August of 2007, the ALP launched its ‘Kevin07’ marketing blitz with t-shirts, websites and blogging from Rudd in the form of his ‘KMAIL’ (Jackman, 2008: 159). The approach, which was meant to tie into the party’s ‘New Leadership’ theme, focussed on attracting young voters and Rudd’s appearances on FM radio and youth television programs, as well as the use of *YouTube*, *MySpace* and *Facebook* were meant to provide clear contrasts with the government and in particular the ageing prime minister (Van Onselen and Senior, 2008: 172-3; Megalogenis, 2008: 326-330).⁴

When the 2007 election campaign proper was finally called, the government’s tactics were clear, they believed a long campaign would test Rudd’s discipline and endurance (Hartcher, 2009: 241-2). The campaign which lasted six weeks mirrored much of the year with climate change and the *Work Choices* legislation being central throughout the campaign. At the ALP

⁴ See Crook (2009: 2-9) and Gibson and McAllister (2011) for more on the impact of the internet on the election.

campaign launch on 14 November, two days following the Coalition's, Labor and Rudd again promoted his 'economic conservatism' by pledging to stop the 'reckless spending'. In the final week of the campaign, Rudd appeared on the television show '*Rove*', further highlighting the differences in age between the leaders. By comparison, their opponents relied on more traditional electioneering techniques in the print media, while the ALP broadened its focus to include skywriting, text messaging, as well as sending out 300,000 DVD's that featured Rudd (Jackman, 2008: 193). These techniques, combined with the use of new media as well as links to the Kevin07 website on major news portals, pushed Labor's campaigning into areas that no political party in Australia had ever been and further accentuated the deeply personalised campaign the FPLP were running.

The second part of electoral face presidentialization is about the focus of the media and the key is to examine whether "media coverage of politics focuses more on leaders" (Poguntke and Webb, 2005: 345). In particular, "growing emphasis on leadership appeals in election campaigning" should be noticeable (Poguntke and Webb, 2005: 10). Throughout 2007, it was clear that as the Australian economy was still strong, the perceived ability to maintain this strength was going to be central and much of the focus of the media was developed within this framework with the key issues being water, climate change, interest rates, and the *Work Choices* legislation (Younane, 2008: 62). When the ALP launched its 'Kevin07' campaign, and with the continuation of the ACTU's *Your Rights At Work* campaign, there appeared to be little chance of exposure for other key actors. Murray Goot's (2008: 102-6) comparison of the campaign coverage of candidates proved this, as Rudd's level of coverage compared to his colleagues in the shadow cabinet was roughly double in all mediums. As a single case this might not tell us much, but as much of the literature suggests, this was not a one-off and had become symptomatic of the major parties and the mainstream media's increasingly leader driven campaigns (Walter and Strangio, 2007: 54-63; Lloyd, 1992: 110-137).

When it comes to voting behaviour in the 2007 election, it was clear that the 'Rudd factor' was substantially overstated initially. However, a number of studies released since have shown that leadership was *not* one of the key factors in the 2007 election result. In fact, the Liberal Party's own research suggested that "the three principal reasons for the Howard Government's defeats were the Prime Minister's long incumbency, the Government's

position on climate change, and *Work Choices*” (Hartcher, 2009: 148). The ACTU produced similar figures which showed that “*Work Choices* was driving 8 percent of Coalition voters to the Labor camp, while only 1 per cent were going the other way” (cited in Megalogenis, 2008: 340), and similar figures were produced elsewhere. Watson and Browne (2008: 5) who conducted an exit poll to find out which issues mattered most to voters discovered that “Those voters who felt leadership to be very important...were only about one quarter as likely to vote ALP, compared with LNP”.⁵ As a result, while the evidence shows that Rudd was more personally popular than Howard, it is clear that it was policies rather than Rudd’s leadership that was central to the victory. Rudd’s leadership provided enough stability that concerns previously held about Labor could be sidelined allowing voters to shift to the ALP, without fearing any radical departure from the status quo. However, this did not translate directly into a personal impact on the voting behaviour of the electorate and adds further weight to McAllister’s (2007: 3) argument that during elections, leaders clearly matter but usually much less than is often supposed. In fact it was clear that despite what some commentators were claiming about the influence of Rudd on the poll, the evidence showed that for many in the community, their decision had been made early and *Newspoll* confirmed that “53 percent of voters reported having decided their vote choice more than six months before the polling day, the highest level of early deciders since before 1996” (cited in Williams, 2008: 123).

The electoral face of Kevin Rudd’s leadership highlights the contingent nature of leader effects in the presidentialization thesis. In fact, while the ALP and the media are focussing more on the leaders and leader centred electioneering, the direct impact on voting behaviour still remains less than what otherwise may have been expected. The actual voting effect Rudd had was to neutralise the scare campaigns and negative publicity often associated with Labor leaders. In essence, the support for Rudd was ‘soft’ support as it was based more on a dislike for the alternative than any new policies with the exception of repealing the *Work Choices* legislation and it was the union movement, not the ALP, who were at the forefront of driving support for opposition to the legislation through the very successful *Your Rights At Work* campaign. As a result, the electoral face of presidentialization for the Rudd period showcases two things. It highlights how personalised the election campaign became and also an obvious

⁵ See also *Newspoll* (2 December 2007) which showed leadership ranked behind health, education, water, the economy and the environment.

disconnect between the strategies of the parties and the voters who were still predominately voting on issues rather than personalities.

The Rudd Leadership Period and Presidentialization

By using the Poguntke and Webb (2005) model, evidence of presidentialization in all of the three faces can be identified. However it is determining what is conditional and what represents a structural change to the polity which is critical. In the executive face, it is clear that centralised policy making through the SPBC in particular became common place as was the marginalisation of Cabinet and the Caucus. However these trends were heavily dependent on the style of the leader rather than any structural need to govern in such a manner. Nevertheless, it is also clear that a trend is emerging of increasing resources in and around the PMO and this is significant to note (See Holland, 2004: 15 for more on this). In the party face, Rudd's leadership is almost uniquely consistent with what Poguntke and Webb (2005: 9) described as the logic of presidentialization. Namely that: "It is likely that leaders who base their leadership on such contingent claims to a personalised mandate will seek to consolidate their leadership by enhancing their control of the party machinery, not least through appropriate statutory changes which give them more direct power over the party". Almost prophetically they noted that (2005: 9) "This may be a risky strategy in that it could provoke reactions by the party's middle-level strata. While they may have been prepared to accept leadership domination as long as it was contingent on (the promise of) electoral appeal, they are likely to resent the formalisation of such power". In the end, Rudd, who Faulkner (cited in Stewart, 2009: 17) argued was as "dominant as any Labor leader we've seen since the birth of the modern Labor party under Whitlam", had solely electoral appeal to base his leadership upon. In the electoral face, the 'Kevin07' campaign showcased how personalised that election campaigns can become. The media naturally focussed on Rudd as a consequence of this. Yet the evidence suggests that Rudd had very little direct impact on voters shifting towards the ALP. Hence, while the party and the media may focus more on the leader, it was clear that in the 2007 election, what made voters switch between the major parties were still key issues and the most critical of these were industrial relations and climate change.

Poguntke and Webb (2005) argued that when examining presidentialization, they were looking for leaders having an increase in resources as well as an increase in autonomy from their party's, within the executive, as well as for any sign of electoral processes becoming increasingly leadership-centred. It is clear that the most compelling signs of growing autonomy and resources during the Rudd period were in the party face. In particular it was the changing dynamic between the parliamentary leadership and the rank and file membership, most visibly manifested in how the national conference was conducted and in how candidates were pre-selected, which sidelined local and state powerbrokers and the middle level agents within the party were this was most apparent.

The Poguntke and Webb Presidentialization Model

The Poguntke and Webb (2005) conceptualisation of presidentialization is one of the more systematic explanations of a thesis that is often viewed with a degree of suspicion from the academic community. The framework they have created, which allows for comparative analysis, takes the thesis beyond the usual debates about single case studies and allows macro-level analysis to be conducted about the changes that democratic polities' are experiencing. When this model is applied to the Australian context, comparisons with the British system are to be expected. In using the Poguntke and Webb (2005) model to examine the situation in Britain, Heffernan (2005: 56) argued that election campaigns have become more candidate centred, party leaders have more intra-party power and the potential for prime ministerial power within the executive has increased. In many senses, the expectation would be that a similar situation would exist in Australia. However, as Weller and Tiernan (2010: 11) noted, the Australian prime minister has in the modern era had huge advantages over their British counterpart with the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), giving the Australian Prime Minister a much larger share of resources than their British counterparts. This difference alone does not mean that when the Poguntke and Webb (2005) model is used that we will see a case of Australian exceptionalism, but it does highlight that when generalisability is increased for studies of this kind that the validity of the thesis can and will be challenged on the basis of comparability (See Karvonen 2010: 10 for example).⁶ In spite of this, the model is still extremely useful and can overcome these criticisms of method and comparability by undertaking a long run in-

⁶ However Poguntke and Webb have responded to these criticisms (See Webb, Poguntke and Kolodny, 2011: 2).

depth analysis in the one polity as long run trends and even counter-trends can be thoroughly examined, which Rhodes, Wanna and Weller (2009: 97) in particular have argued was a key limitation of work on the presidentialization thesis to date.

In the Australian context, it is in the party face of presidentialization where Poguntke and Webb's (2005) conceptualisation is most useful and in particular when examining the ALP. While the changing nature of the ALP has been written about extensively in the last twenty years (See Jaensch 1989; Thompson, 1999 as examples) and tied into a broader literature about changes to centre-left parties in Liberal democracies, the model provides a barometer to measure these changes against especially when the examination is a long-run in-depth investigation. For the ALP, while the changes that allowed the leadership to wriggle free of the internal constraints of the party can be traced back to Whitlam and accentuated under Hawke it is clear that these were heightened further during the Rudd leadership period. Hence, de facto presidentialization in both a structural and contingent sense is identifiable. Political parties have always played a central role in Australian politics, however with the death of the mass parties and with rank and file membership at an all time low; the party is not only weak financially but structurally as well. Some of the causal factors that Poguntke and Webb (2005) identified have certainly played a part in the shift towards less collective modes of decision making within the party. As the ALP simultaneously responded to the death of the party below and to changes to the dominant mass communication mediums, this friction has allowed the elites to dominate the party like at no point in its existence. This structurally weak, increasingly leader driven party has one central motivation, electoral victory and with this comes greater insecurity for leaders. No longer will leaders be allowed the luxury of pursuing policies that stay true to the traditional values of the party if they are electorally unpopular, such as Ben Chifley's attempt to nationalise the banks. In fact, the platform of the party has been disregarded of late and the leaders the ALP has turned to in more recent times, reflects this hyper-focus on short term solutions. Their rise to the leadership is primarily based on polling and Rudd is symptomatic of this, as leaders who do not even have their own power base in the party rise to the top in this "electorally motivated presidentialized setting" (Webb, Poguntke and Kolodny, 2011: 1; Walter and Strangio, 2007).

The Rudd leadership period highlights how party campaigns have become more leader-driven and that the mainstream media is focussing on leaders more than previously. Even those sceptical of the overall thesis have acknowledged this (See Rhodes, Wanna and Weller, 2009: 97). However, the flow on effect to voting behaviour is minimal at best. Webb, Poguntke and Kolodny (2011: 8) noted, that in terms of the Blair impact in Britain, while he might not have had a direct impact on voter decisions, it is unlikely New Labour would have been as warmly embraced without him and the same could be said of the Rudd. Hence, their argument that “it is extremely difficult statistically to untangle the strict causality in the relationship between party images and leadership images” is likely to apply not only to the Rudd period but for the Australian context generally (Webb, Poguntke and Kolodny, 2011: 8). In fact, this case study reveals a fundamental disconnect between parties, the media and voters. Party campaigns are becoming more personalised and the media is focussing more on personalities; however this is having very little direct impact on the voting public. Hence, while it may be difficult to unambiguously declare the electoral face of presidentialization systematic, it does further highlight the disintegration of the relationship between parties and their base and Poguntke and Webb have acknowledged that the electoral face might be the least convincing aspect of the presidentialization thesis (Webb, Poguntke and Kolodny, 2011: 8). This should not be disregarded however as it still adds to the literature about parties and to arguments about the tendency of centre-left parties to become oligarchic as Michels noted a century ago in *Political Parties* (Michels, 1962).

The Poguntke and Webb (2005) model provides a systematic conceptualisation of presidentialization that allows comparative case study analysis and when an in-depth analysis of one polity is conducted, the framework allows for clear, long-run trends and counter-trends to be identified. Ultimately, the executive face of presidentialization in the Australian context may not reveal as much as in other systems because Australian Prime Minister have always enjoyed institutional advantages that the British Prime Minister for example could only dream of. The party face of the presidentialization thesis interlocks with other literature which has highlighted the increasing dominance of leaders within the major parties and is where the Poguntke and Webb (2005) framework is at its strongest in the Australian context. In many respects, this adds further weight to questions about the appropriateness of the party government model, considering the growing strength of leaders within this framework (Webb, Poguntke and Kolodny, 2011: 8). In the electoral face the model is extremely useful

in highlighting how the media and parties have shifted to increasingly leadership centred electioneering techniques and reporting. Unfortunately, the inability to show the impact leaders are directly having on voters weakens any conclusions that can be drawn in this aspect of the presidentialization thesis. However, the utility of the thesis and the Poguntke and Webb (2005) framework remains undiminished.

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