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Ballots and billions: Clive Palmer’s personal party

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ABSTRACT
Founded and led by the billionaire businessman, Clive Palmer, the Palmer United Party (PUP) achieved what was arguably the best debut result of recent decades at the 2013 Australian federal election. This article examines PUP’s ideology, organisation and campaigning strategies along with the implications of its experiences to date for Australian party politics. Based on an analysis of original party documents, policies, media communications and semi-structured interviews with PUP candidates and key figures across Australia, we find evidence of a party which is utterly dominated by its leader, which was deliberately never built to last, whose ideology cannot be easily classified and whose campaigning was well-funded but extremely disorganised. We conclude that its experience shows how more professionalised new personal parties in Australia should be able to do even better electorally in the future.

Few of the new parties created in Australia since federation have achieved parliamentary representation. Even those which have managed to do so have usually found that gaining seats is no guarantee of longevity. The rise and fall of new parties has thus become part of the rhythm of Australian federal politics. With minor parties recording a record vote share at the 2013 federal election (Green 2013), this ebb and flow seems likely to continue for some time to come. Of the newer parties to have achieved federal parliamentary representation in recent times, however, one stands out in terms of the level and speed of the electoral success it achieved: the Palmer United Party (PUP). Within a year of forming, the party won three Senate seats and a seat in the House of Representatives. These results might seem modest compared to new party breakthroughs in some other established democracies, but in terms of seats gained, PUP produced the best debut Australian federal election result in at least 30 years.1

Since there has been no systematic academic study to date of PUP, our aim in this article is fourfold and exploratory: we seek to locate the party ideologically; we analyse its organisational structure; we discuss the party’s campaigns with specific reference to the 2013 federal election; and we consider the implications of PUP’s emergence, success and failures for Australian party politics. In answering these questions, we reflect on the implications of PUP’s emergence for both the Australian and comparative party scholarship. We also discuss what PUP’s emergence can tell us about the types of political
organisations we are likely to see emerge and the role wealth may play in democratic politics in the future.

In our research, we have relied on original documentary sources such as official party literature (including items not publicly available), PUP’s voting record in parliament, its press releases and television advertisements. We also base our discussion on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with PUP federal and state candidates and several high-level figures between January and March 2015. This sample included interviewees from Western Australia (WA), New South Wales (NSW), Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland (Qld) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). As the following sections detail, the picture that emerges from our research is one of a party utterly dominated by its leader, that was never built to last and has no coherent ideology. PUP’s star in late 2015 seemed to be very much in decline, but we argue that its success shows how more professionalised new personal parties in Australia may be able to do even better electorally in the future.

A party of no fixed ideological abode

PUP’s performance in the 2013 Australian federal election positions it as one of the most important new parties to have emerged in the past half-century. In considering the emergence of successful minor parties in Australia, Miragliotta and Sharman illustrate how the four most important insurgencies in the post-war period were all ‘mobilized to support a particular issue agenda’ (2012: 579). In contrast, and as we show, this was not the case for PUP. In fact, PUP is a party of no fixed ideological abode that has presented a series of crowd-pleasing policy proposals without much concern for coherence.

We begin our analysis of the ideology of PUP by examining official party documents and manifestos. Manifestos should not be seen as indicative of the entire ideological basis of parties, but the promises they contain ‘are concrete representations of the broader ideological principles that the parties have staked out’ (Vassallo and Wilcox 2006: 415–16). PUP’s National Policy Document states that “The Palmer United Party has not a fixed ideology but a broad-based political philosophy that relates a core set of enduring values to the changing realities and challenges that societies confront over time” (PUP 2013c). It presents the ‘five key issues’ which the party has focused on since its launch. We find them repeated in the Palmer United Party Candidates Manual, with the only difference compared to the manifesto being that this time they are labelled as ‘Policies’ (PUP 2013a). These are:

1. Party Officials should not be Lobbyists, thereby taking a strong position on Paid Political Lobbyists, saving tax payers dollars and introducing Fair Policies.
2. Abolish the Carbon Tax.
3. Revising the current Australian Government’s Refugee Policy to ensure Australia is protected and refugees are given opportunities for a better future and lifestyle.
4. Creating Mineral Wealth to continuously contribute to the welfare of the Australian community. This will be achieved by utilising mineral resources from Queensland and Western Australia, and incentives from the Commonwealth of Australia to establish downstream processing in the States of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia; and exporting products at a higher dollar value, thereby creating more revenue, jobs, tax and more facilities.
(5) Establishing a System where people create wealth in various parts of the country and for that wealth to flow back to the Community that generates the wealth. For example, if a particular region creates wealth, a significant percentage of that wealth should go back to that region.

Official documents of this type do not cover the full range of policies announced by the party, however. Other policies are presented in PUP’s media releases and campaign material (see also Hawker Britton 2014b; King 2015: 305–6; Miller 2013). These include: the abolition of tertiary education fees; reducing income tax on second jobs; making $80 billion available to reform health and hospital services in Australia; increasing education funding by $20 billion; a target for 10 per cent of all vehicles to be running on ethanol-based fuel by the end of 2016; abolishing the Fringe Benefits Tax; making the first $10,000 of every home loan tax deductible; increasing funding to the ABC by $150 million and SBS by $65 million; raising pensions by $150 per fortnight. In addition, in the most widely broadcast television commercial of the 2013 federal campaign (Young 2015: 102), Palmer claimed he would reduce everyone’s taxes by $2500.

PUP’s policies were equally eclectic and generous in subsequent state campaigns and the special Senate election in WA. In Qld, the party promised to abolish payroll tax (PUP 2015). At the Victorian campaign launch, Palmer vowed that ‘Palmer United will oppose asset sales in Victoria and across the nation’ (PUP 2014a). In other campaign advertising for the Victorian state election, PUP said it would eliminate quarterly payment of tax by businesses (PUP 2014f). In Tasmania, the party promised a new fast, low-cost ferry for travel across Bass Strait to provide better links between Tasmania and the mainland (Dadson 2014). In the West Australian special Senate election, it tried to play the regional card, with particular focus on changing the way that the Goods and Services Tax revenue was distributed to the state governments. One PUP commercial asks: ‘Why should WA subsidise the rest of Australia?’ (PUP 2014e). Another claims ‘Labor and Liberal are stealing the bread from WA babies’ (PUP 2014c).

If we look at the voting record of PUP Senators, we find a similarly mixed picture. They voted to streamline the advisory and commission system for financial advisors reducing regulation. However, they were supportive of the Abbott government’s ‘Direct Action Plan’, opposed deregulation of university tuition fees, and opposed the introduction of means testing on Family Tax Benefit Part A (Hawker Britton 2014a). The party may be pro-business and supportive of free trade, but PUP refuted Abbott government claims that Australian debt was at emergency levels (PUP 2014b). Palmer has also been vigorous in his opposition to privatisation. In one television commercial aired during the WA special Senate election, Palmer stated:

Abbott wants to sell off our national assets, that is why he is having a commission of audit, he wants to sell off Australia to people only concerned with making money. Whatever they pay, they will only do it so they can charge you more. (PUP 2014d)

Overall, PUP’s policy mixture contains some policies which would increase the size and scope of governmental activities (e.g., its refugee policy), while also including policies that would do the opposite (e.g., abolishing various taxes). The party is generous to businesses, pensioners, students, refugees and families, yet miserly to no-one. It may
well therefore be the case that the party’s intention was to support a series of issues which it believed would help it to attract votes from various sectors. As one high-level figure in the party told us:

Clive worked on a theory that, rather than presenting policy, you found opportunities to take more of a populist approach to policies that were controversial and presented by the government. So you're effectively harvesting the protest vote. And so … if you develop policy and put it out there, you put targets on yourself, don’t you? That’s the argument.

As PUP was not ‘mobilized to support a particular issue agenda’ (Miragliotta and Sharman 2012: 579) it is not so surprising that the party was lacking in a coherent ideology. This should not, however, be seen as a coincidence. As we illustrate in the sections that follow, harvesting the protest vote was a clear strategy that the party embraced. This lack of a clear base (similar to the Democrats), may have been beneficial initially, but contributes to the fragility of the party (Jaensch and Mathieson 1998: 183).

**Palmer’s personal party**

PUP might have little in common with other new party insurgencies in terms of a clearly identifiable ideological basis or rationale for mobilisation, but greater similarities can be identified as regards party organisation. Although not the focus of this article, we expect that PUP will be similar in many respects to One Nation, for example. Such leader-centred parties appear, at first glance, to fit the criteria of the ‘personal party’ model used by McDonnell (2013: 222–23). These criteria build on those set out by LaPalombara and Weiner (1966: 6–7) to distinguish between ‘real’ political parties in the West and ‘oligarchic groups’ of the type found at the time in Latin America and Asia. LaPalombara and Weiner (1966: 6–7) argued that if the ‘expected lifespan’ of a political organisation was ‘dependent on the life span of current leaders’ and there were no clear, permanent structures at local level linking ‘local and national units’, then we were not dealing with a political party worthy of the name, but with a temporary entity more akin to Roman ‘factions of notables’. McDonnell (2013: 222) therefore posits that personal parties are ones in which:

1. The party’s expected lifespan is seen (not only by commentators, but also by party representatives and members) as dependent on the political lifespan of its founder leader. In other words, significant internal doubts regarding party continuity in the absence of its founder–leader are present.
2. Organisation at local level is neither constantly manifest nor permanent (again, not only in the judgement of commentators, but also according to party representatives and members).
3. There is an extremely strong concentration of formal and/or informal power in the hands of the founder–leader.
4. The party’s image and campaign strategies (in both first- and second-order elections) are centred on the founder–leader.

Assessing the first condition requires considering whether those who have been inside the party believed PUP could continue if Palmer were not in politics. The overwhelming
view of those we spoke to was that PUP would not outlive its leader’s political career. Out of our 20 interviewees, only four said they thought the party would definitely continue in Palmer’s absence. By contrast, 12 said definitely not, while three expressed doubts and one avoided answering the question. It is obviously not possible to report what each interviewee said, but it is worth noting those comments that best reflected more widely shared opinions and sentiments in the sample. As noted, the most common view was that the party had no chance of surviving if Palmer were no longer involved. Victoria Candidate A plainly told us that PUP ‘would not exist without him in any shape or form’. The party’s inability to continue if Palmer were to step down was usually said to be, as WA Candidate A explained, because ‘there’s no structure there to do it’. Likewise, Candidate C from Tasmania said ‘I don’t think it would continue’. The candidate added: ‘if the party was serious they would have things in place so that things could continue on’.

The clear implication was that these ‘things’ – first and foremost, a party structure built to last – were not in place. As we illustrate, this was a frequent complaint among interviewees.

The lack of structure was also acknowledged by the few who believed that the party would have a future beyond Palmer. However, these interviewees believed that the leader’s goal was to stay in politics until his party could continue without him. As Victoria Candidate B said: ‘PUP is his baby and he will continue to support it until it can survive on its own’. This view was echoed by Candidate A from Qld who told us that Palmer’s ‘long term agenda is to make himself redundant within three to five years to the party’. Interestingly, several interviewees told us that Palmer had said to them he did not plan to stand again for election and/or would not be in politics long-term, but we can find no record of him stating this publicly. Although only a hypothesis which we cannot confirm, we believe he may have said this to candidates in order to give the impression that, after an initial leader-centred period (necessary for electoral and communications reasons), the party would then be ‘handed over’ to members once it was a going concern. This, we presume, would have helped convince new candidates and members during the campaign that they were making a long-term investment in their futures rather than temporarily making up the numbers (as appears to have been the case).

This brings us to the second condition of ‘manifest and permanent’ party organisation at the local level. Here, the strong impression to emerge from our interviews was that Palmer has never had any interest in establishing party structures and fostering an active membership. Members may have had some limited utility as foot soldiers during election campaigns, but there has been no effort made by the party leader or head office to encourage grassroots activism beyond this. In fact, we found accounts of it being actively discouraged.

The majority of candidates we spoke to said there had been talk during the relevant election campaigns that party structures would be created afterwards when the situation was calmer and there was more time. However, this did not appear to have happened anywhere. NSW Candidate A said that, since the end of the federal election campaign, ‘the party has created no real opportunity for the membership to get involved or to feel ownership’. When asked what opportunities the party created for members to meet in their state, Victoria Candidate C replied ‘not a lot’ and said members simply received emails and newsletters and could check Facebook and Twitter. The same distancing from the party applied to candidates. Candidate A from WA told us there was ‘no communication
in a formal sense from the party’ in over a year since the Senate election. As one candidate from the ACT put it: ‘you are just left abandoned after the campaign’. Even the Qld Candidate (A) who had been optimistic about the party continuing beyond Palmer, said in late February 2015 that there had been ‘absolutely nothing’ since the state election (a month prior to interview) and considered this ‘quite disappointing’. We checked back with the candidate at the end of April 2015 and were told that the situation had not changed.

Of course, if you are not concerned about whether a party will outlive its founder and you rely on the leader’s appeal in your communication strategies, there is probably little point in dedicating the time and effort required to provide it with a lasting grassroots structure. Rather, as McDonnell (2013: 228) says, ‘it is sufficient for such leaders to rely on rhetoric about party organisational expansion for public legitimacy purposes (it still appears taboo to say that one’s party is a personal party) rather than seeking to create this reality’. For a personal party, members may simply be an unnecessary appendix: a relic of previous party models which are more trouble than they are worth. This certainly seems to have been how they were viewed by Palmer. As Qld Candidate B told us, there was ‘active discouragement of anything that looked like forming democratic branches. It was just not wanted’. This was confirmed by several key figures in the party we spoke to. As one of these put it, Palmer ‘didn’t really want any members, members were superfluous to him’. The same interviewee explained: ‘Clive was fundamentally opposed to it. He really didn’t want it. He didn’t want these people to become organised in such a way that they became autonomous or independent of him’.

Discussing the charismatic leader, Panebianco (1988: 67) notes that he/she ‘has no interest in organisational reinforcement which would inevitably set the stage for the party’s ‘emancipation’ from his [or her] control’. This seems to fully apply to Palmer and PUP. After ‘inflating’ during the federal election campaign when it sourced candidates and called for members to sign up and get involved in campaigns, the party then ‘deflated’ once the campaigns were over, remaining with just the leader, those in head of office and its four elected representatives (who, of course, have inadvertently also ‘deflated’ following Jacqui Lambie and Glenn Lazarus’s departures). PUP’s attitude to its members and defeated candidates appears to be that these are entirely dispensable and there is no interest from the leader in developing the party organisation at state and local levels.

The fact that Palmer is able to act in this way speaks to our third condition: the concentration of formal and informal power in the leader’s hands. Here, the party’s constitution is very clear, stating that ‘until 31 December 2016 or such other date nominated by the Interim Executive Committee, the Interim Executive Committee shall exercise all of the powers of the Executive and of all bodies set out in this Constitution’ (PUP 2013b: 54). The six-person Interim Executive Committee is entirely made up of members of the Palmer family, comprising Clive Palmer (as chairman), his wife, Anna Palmer, his son, Michael Palmer, and three nephews: Clive Mensink, Blair Brewster and Martin Brewster. If Palmer’s domination of PUP were not apparent enough already from this, the Constitution leaves no room for doubt by stipulating that ‘[T]he Chairman is fully authorised to exercise all powers of the Interim Executive Committee and a declaration signed by the Chairman shall be conclusive proof of the subject matter of any thing [sic] to which it relates’ (PUP 2013b: 55).

Palmer’s untouchable position in the party was commented on by many of our interviewees. NSW Candidate A said that ‘everything was done by, approved by and controlled
by Clive’, adding that ‘the national executive as far as anyone was aware was Clive, and the people named as executive were done so, to show there was more than just Clive, but it was a farce’. One high-level figure in the party told us that ‘Clive was effectively just running the show’. Another noted how, in addition to the executive being composed of Palmer family members, the staff at party central office was almost entirely made up of trusted employees from Palmer’s businesses. Hence, it is not so surprising to hear that when Candidate C from WA called head office after the election campaign to tell them something needed to be done about setting up party structures at local level, they were rebutted with the line: ‘well it is Clive Palmer’s party’.

As some of the media stories surrounding the PUP group in parliament seem to confirm (Coultan 2013; Matthewson 2014; Tin 2014), Palmer clearly dominates far more than would be the case for leaders in almost all other parties. We now want to see the degree to which this is evident in our final condition: the leader’s centrality to campaigns. In the 2013 federal campaign, this was very clear. For example, out of 107 PUP press releases (called ‘policy releases’ by the party), 92 mentioned only Palmer, seven mentioned other candidates and eight mentioned the leader and others (PUP n.d.). Candidate A from NSW told us that it was an explicit strategy of the party for ‘Clive to appear in any and all media as much as possible to increase PUP profile’. This of course makes sense. With the exception of ‘celebrity candidates’ like Lazarus, Matt Adamson and Doug Hawkins, the only PUP figure with a national profile was Palmer. We lack empirical data regarding Palmer’s presence in the media at the local level during state campaigns, but we do know from interviewees that he dominated PUP’s communication strategies in the Tasmanian state elections held in March 2014. Candidate C from Tasmania said ‘It was like a presidential campaign’, while Candidate B from the same state told us:

The candidates were not even a second thought. And that really showed in the state election. I understood it a bit in the federal election, because it was a new party and he was a recognisable face, so they branded him [Palmer] as the party. But in the state, I thought it might have gone more towards the candidates being the ones who were pushed forward. But that never happened.

Again, this may have made sense given the low profile of state candidates compared to the leader. We know, for example, that in the period from 6 March to 9 April 2014 (when both the Tasmanian state election and the WA special Senate election were held) that Palmer was one of the most prominent figures in the media (Insentia 2014a; 2014b; 2014c). Such strategic considerations aside, the evidence suggests PUP does indeed fulfil the fourth condition for classification as a personal party, just as it did the previous three. PUP is thus very clearly a personal party. Or, as a candidate from the ACT put it to us: ‘it turns out really that Clive is the party ... the party is him’.

**PUP campaign: well-resourced amateurs**

Not surprisingly given Palmer’s wealth, PUP has been lavishly funded by its creator. According to the party’s official 2013–14 accounts, around $25 million of its $28 million total spend came from Palmer and his companies, with the remaining amount being electoral reimbursements (Australian Electoral Commission 2015). The magnitude of this investment by Palmer is unparalleled in Australian political history, but internationally we have seen similar developments in recent decades. Donald Trump, Ross
Perot, Michael Bloomberg (all in the United States), Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Frank Stro- 
nach in Austria and Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic are just some of the extremely 
wealthy individuals who have turned their hands to politics.

One of the most striking aspects about PUP is that the party ‘started big’. In other words, 
it ran candidates in every lower house electorate – a strategy never before attempted by a 
new Australian party at its first election. King (2015: 298) recently argued that ‘while 
Palmer was wealthy enough to generously fund his party’s core campaign, it is truly remark-
able that he was able to find people who were able and willing to stand as candidates’. In 
this section we look at how the party’s 2013 federal election campaign functioned. We find that 
the party had a clearly defined strategy for running candidates in every electorate, but the 
campaign itself was mired by dysfunction and disorganisation.

According to those we interviewed, PUP’s strategy of running candidates in every lower 
house constituency was part of a broader push to get as many PUP candidates into the 
Senate as possible. One candidate from NSW described this as the ‘shotgun strategy’ or a 
‘shock and awe’ approach. According to a high-profile PUP official, the goal was two-
fold, ‘It was a statement in part – but it also maximised your capacity to win Senate 
seats’. The idea was that by selecting candidates in every seat for the House of Represen-
tatives, these candidates (and presumably their friends and family), would then create a 
campaign structure in every electorate. The perceived benefit of this for the party was 
that of increasing the PUP Senate vote in that state. The evidence suggests, however, 
that the strategy was, at best, only partially successful, as the party received a higher 
overall vote in the House rather than the Senate. PUP’s approach generated significant 
problems, including inconsistencies in how candidates were selected and vetted, as well 
as poorly designed campaign material and strategy.

Disorganisation is to be expected in new parties attempting to entrench themselves, but 
it is the level of disorganisation combined with the financial resources and electoral success 
that the party achieved, which makes PUP interesting. This disorganisation stretched the 
full gamut of orthodox party functions and responsibilities, including: the selection and 
management of candidates, campaign co-ordination and the production of campaign 
material. A factor central to most of these issues was that PUP’s head office in Brisbane 
was staffed almost exclusively by employees of Palmer’s various business interests. 
Hence, few of those in head office had experience running campaigns.

In terms of the vetting procedures, candidates in some cities and towns recalled a string-
ent, multi-staged process, while in other areas the process was said to be much less rig-
orous. One candidate for the federal election, for example, recounted that they did some 
research on Palmer, made email contact with a PUP official, had a short phone interview, 
‘and that was it, I was in’. Another PUP candidate from NSW informed us that in one 
region of Australia, Palmer sent his in-house solicitor (who had no prior experience in 
politics) to vet potential candidates. The priority was clearly filling the card rather than 
assuring quality candidates. A federal candidate who possessed extensive political experi-
ence said that, out of all those who were selected to contest the federal election, only 15 
‘had some experience and knowledge of campaigning, while most others had no idea 
and it showed in the results’. Once selected, candidates encountered many logistical diffi-
culties. Interviewees from across Australia told us of communication problems with PUP’s 
head office and of campaign material that never arrived or contained mistakes. The dis-
organisation of head office was also underlined by the amateurish quality of the public
documents the party released (Aston 2014). One high-profile candidate told us that some party documents were ‘taken word-for-word from the Liberal National Party’ and it is certainly the case that PUP’s policy document, beyond the key five policies, was largely copied from an earlier Liberal Party document.11

The disorganisation and amateur quality of PUP’s campaign was certainly not due to any lack of financial resources. First, all candidates for the federal election received up to $10,000 to spend on their campaigns.12 This figure seems extremely generous, but according to a number of those we interviewed, Palmer had initially promised each candidate $50,000. Second, we know that PUP spent an enormous amount on advertising during the campaign. As Young (2015: 102) has noted, ‘Of all the election ads running in 2013, it is telling that the single most broadcast TV advertisement of the campaign appears to have been Palmer’s ‘Revolution’ advertisement’. Moreover, it is difficult to ascertain how much PUP spent on advertising in total, but we can say that PUP vastly outspent any of its minor party rivals.13 Money was clearly, therefore, an important factor in the success of PUP in 2013. But it does not, on its own, explain PUP’s success. More research is required here, but the evidence suggests that for voters seeking a party expressing an anti-major party sentiment, as well as for potential candidates wanting to participate in the political process, PUP provided a highly visible and appealing choice.

What does PUP story mean for Australian party politics?

PUP may well prove to be a ‘flash’ party that rises quickly and falls steeply thereafter (Mustillo 2009). Certainly, the loss of two of its three Senators in the space of six months, the breakdown of its pact with a fourth (Ricky Muir), the resignations of its local/state representatives in Qld and the Northern Territory, its poor performances in state elections in Qld, Victoria and Tasmania, along with its failure to even register for the 2015 state elections in NSW, all indicate that PUP is a party on the slide. Polling figures in late 2015 showed PUP’s primary vote was 2 per cent (Galaxy Research 2015). This impression was reinforced by the announcement in May 2015 that PUP would no longer contest state elections. Nonetheless, PUP’s experience offers important insights for understanding contemporary Australian politics. As our discussion in the previous sections has shown, a new party with no clearly defined ideological position, no lasting organisational structures and whose image is focused almost entirely on its leader can be successful in Australian politics, at least in the short term. Our findings point to at least five, partially overlapping, lessons.

First, PUP underlines that personalisation can have a profound impact on minor parties in Australia, especially those contesting Senate elections. Debates continue about the effect of personalisation internationally (see Karvonen 2010; Kriesi 2012), but in Australia the evidence strongly suggests it exerts a lasting impact on national-level politics (Bennister 2012: 163–66; Walter and Strangio 2007: 62).14 In particular, the Palmer case highlights how structural factors, such as electoral laws, can accentuate the personalisation effect in Australia. The laws contributing to the increasing presence of the minor parties in the Senate have existed since 1984, but Green (2014b) has argued that the quota required to be elected to the Senate made preference harvesting seem impossible. However, the 2013 election showed the tactic can work.
The extensive advertising campaign, focused heavily on Palmer, also allowed PUP to leverage off the leader’s personal standing as the dominant anti-major party candidate. This placed PUP in a strong position to receive Senate votes from voters who were unhappy with the major parties and chose to vote above the line.\textsuperscript{15} Using Palmer’s personal brand, manifested in the party name, the party therefore personalised the protest vote.\textsuperscript{16}

Second, PUP shows that the market for new parties in Australia is such that one can be successful even when it runs a campaign marred by disorganisation and dysfunction. In fact, if PUP had acted like other parties created by extremely wealthy businessmen such as Silvio Berlusconi (Poli 2001), that is, employing highly skilled professionals to run their campaigns, it would almost certainly have done even better in 2013. Other new parties (in particular, we would imagine, the Nick Xenophon Team) will surely have taken note of this. In short, if Palmer had treated his political interests more like his business interests, PUP would have very likely gained a larger parliamentary presence.

Third, PUP shows that clear opportunities exist in Australia for new movements articulating an anti-major party position. PUP skilfully used the unpopularity of the two main parties to its advantage. Its campaign material and slogan (‘Not the Liberal way or the Labor way, but the right way’) were emblematic of this approach. Little has been written about what attracted voters to Palmer or PUP,\textsuperscript{17} but the initial evidence is that they came from across the political spectrum. Green, who analysed below-the-line voting in the 2013 WA Senate race, states:

\begin{quote}
[V]oters seemed to see no clear affinity between the Palmer United Party and other major parties. This suggests support for Palmer United last September was part protest and drawn equally from other parties, and also suggests that voters had no perception of a particular ideological bent to the party. (Green 2014a; see also Green 2015)
\end{quote}

In Palmer’s own seat of Fairfax, a similar trend was identified by both King (2015) and in a Roy Morgan poll (2013).\textsuperscript{18}

Fourth, PUP shows that a new Australian party can ‘start big’, running candidates in every constituency, and still be electorally successful. However, this initial success may be difficult to consolidate. Certainly, the manner in which PUP appears to be imploding suggests that the model used by parties such as the Greens, that is, starting slowly from the grassroots up and building support carefully, still provides the best platform for entrenchment within the Australian federal system (Miragliotta and Sharman 2012). Nonetheless, to return to our second point, this may be different if new parties in the future learn from PUP’s errors.

Fifth, PUP provides insights into what future new parties may look like organisationally and how party-member relationships might function. Cross and Gauja (2014: 614) note how, although membership of the major parties in Australia is falling steadily and ‘members are generally dispirited’, these parties do appear to at least be trying to get members involved in party life. They find that party elites genuinely believe ‘an active and engaged membership is necessary for them to achieve their functional objectives’ (Cross and Gauja 2014: 616). This is not the case for PUP. Like other Australian parties, it usually encouraged candidates to use members during the campaigns. This included establishing campaign committees consisting of a campaign director, treasurer and booth captains (PUP 2013a). However, they quickly and deliberately deflated the
party organisation after the campaign. It will be interesting to see whether other new Australian parties based around their founder–leaders, like the Nick Xenophon Team and the Jacqui Lambie Network, do likewise.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined PUP’s ideology, organisation and campaign strategy for the 2013 federal election, along with the implications of its experiences to date for Australian party politics. It is easy to poke fun at Palmer, not least because of his claim in 2013 that he was running to be the next prime minister of Australia. However, what should be of more interest to scholars is that Palmer created a party from scratch in just six months and produced what was arguably the best federal election debut in recent Australian history. The fact that this was possible tells us much about the current conditions for party competition in Australia and indicates that the prospects for new, more professionalised, personal parties in the future are good. Indeed, the mystery for us is not that Palmer treated his party like a business, but that he did not do so *enough*. It is no surprise that Palmer cared little for the party on the ground. However, the poor quality of PUP’s communications and Palmer’s placing of people in party central office who did not have the relevant skills to run a nationwide campaign stand in contrast to the professionalism with which other plutocrats have approached their first elections. Likewise, the speed with which PUP has seen its presence in public office reduced (thus diminishing its veto power in the Senate) shows that Palmer is plainly not as well suited to leading a party as other wealthy business people who have turned their hands to politics such as Babiš or Berlusconi.

This brings us, finally, to the question of future research. There is little comparative research looking at new parties founded by wealthy individuals in contemporary democracies. It would certainly be worth examining the similarities and differences between such parties in terms of their ideologies, organisations and campaigning, as we have done for PUP. Further research could also consider the questions of why we are seeing an increase in the creation of these ‘plutocrat parties’ in democracies and what determines their short- and long-term success or failure. We already have a significant amount of cases to investigate. Moreover, given the decline in support for traditional mainstream parties across Western democracies, the importance of money in running campaigns, the rise of ‘anti-professional politician’ sentiments, and the increasing personalisation of politics, we are not likely to lack for new cases either. PUP’s bubble appears to be bursting, but the market for new parties created by leaders with extensive personal financial resources looks rosy.

**Notes**

1. PUP’s share of the vote was slightly lower than that achieved by Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party (ONP) at its debut federal election in October 1998, but it did far better in terms of seats won: ONP gained just one Senate seat in 1998. Moreover, One Nation’s leader, Hanson, had already been elected as an independent to the House of Representatives in 1996 and One Nation had contested the Queensland state election in June that year. So 1998 was ONP’s first federal election as a new party, but it was far more established in Australian political life than PUP in 2013. Prior to this, in 1977, the Australian Democrats achieved 11.1 per
cent of the national vote in the Senate in their debut election. However, they only had two Senators elected.

2. All interviewees spoke on condition of anonymity. The only information we provide about them therefore is the state they are from.

3. The four insurgents identified by Miragliotta and Sharman (2012) were the Australian Greens, the Democratic Labour Party, the Australian Democrats, and the One Nation Party.

4. Qld Candidate B provided the Candidate Manual to the authors following an initial interview. This is not a publicly available document. The five policies are quoted exactly from the Candidates Manual. The lack of professionalism in copy editing is a feature of much of PUP’s material.

5. PUP’s policies for the state elections they have contested were equally vague (Ferrier 2014; McCann 2014: 9; Weekes 2015).

6. This piece of legislation is known as the Carbon Farming Initiative Amendment Bill 2014. The ‘Direct Action Plan’ contrasts sharply with the market-based Emissions Trading Scheme which was set to be implemented under the previous Australian Labor Party government.

7. They would also fit into the ‘personality’ based parties in Jaensch and Mathieson (1998) Australian minor party classification scheme.

8. For example, following Glenn Lazarus’ departure from the party, Palmer claimed in March 2015 that the bigger picture was that PUP had increased its membership to 10,000 (Furler 2015). If these figures are correct, our interviews suggest that it is not an active membership.

9. We were told by one interviewee that the staff in PUP’s head office amounted to less than 10.

10. As the Australian Electoral Commission does not require registered political parties to make key documents such as the constitution public once the party is officially registered, PUP Constitution cited here may have been changed since it was used to register the party in 2013.

11. For example, PUP’s policy statement about what it ‘believes’ (PUP 2013c: 6) is almost identical to what the Canberra Liberals (n.d.) listed on their webpage as what their ‘beliefs’ were.

12. Candidates in the subsequent state campaigns told us they were given no financial and limited organisational support.

13. For a more in-depth discussion on advertising, see Campaign Brief (2013) and Young (2015). It would appear that this advertising was certainly effective in increasing public awareness of the party and PUP received a significant amount of website traffic (Chen 2015: 84).

14. Below the national level the evidence is, according to McAllister (2015), ‘mixed’.

15. The vast majority of voters in most states vote above the line (see Costar 2014).

16. It is practically impossible to differentiate between votes for ‘Palmer the individual’ and ‘PUP the party’, but the fact that Palmer was not even a candidate in these Senate contests yet totally dominated the media coverage, suggests that his personal image had at least some impact. This tallies with Webb, Poguntke and Kolodny’s (2012: 85) argument that ‘a leader’s impact can also lie further back in the funnel of causality’.

17. An exception to this was Essential Media Communications (2014) which looked at the attributes of Palmer.

18. A very small sample (N = 90) of PUP voters also showed up in the Australian Election Study Series. Also see Seccombe (2014) and ReachTel (2014).

19. See, for example, the account of Andrej Babiš’ 2013 campaign in Olteanu and de Nève (2014: 17).

20. The only exceptions to this are West (2014) and Olteanu and de Nève (2014).

21. As West (2014: 93–4) notes, ‘instead of simply influencing public policy from the sidelines, billionaires have sought public office in thirteen countries during the past decade’.

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