



## NO NEED FOR MERGER

Is the Liberal Party finished? Does it have a future? Former Liberal senator Chris Puplick's book "Is the party over?" asks whether the Liberal Party is headed for extinction.

Puplick posed these questions in 1994. The answer could not have been more emphatic. What followed soon after was 11 years of successful Coalition government, with the Liberal Party front and centre.

When a political party falls on hard times, either after a devastating loss or through prolonged periods of electoral failure, there are always those who are moved to question the future. All sorts of cures are dreamt up for a party's ills. Some good, some not so good. The latest craze is to call for a merger of the Liberal and National parties.

Those advocating a merger are essentially arguing that the Liberal and National brands are irreparably damaged and beyond redemption, and therefore new branding is needed. The facts do not support this. The Liberal Party has held federal government in Australia for all but 16 years since 1949. Over 4.5 million Australians voted for the Liberal Party at the last election. The hopes and dreams of millions of Australians still rest with the Liberal Party. Now is not the time to walk away from the great party founded by Sir Robert Menzies over 60 years ago.

The Liberal Party has lost government before. At a federal level it occurred in 1972 and 1983. It has happened many times at a state level. And each time the Liberal Party has fought back. There is no reason why it cannot do so again. And there is no need for panicked responses like merger.

More than being unnecessary, a merger would be dangerous on two fronts. Firstly, the major political parties have a degree of credibility with the voting public built up over decades. It is naïve to assume that this support would automatically transfer to a new entity. Voters are not like shares that seamlessly change hands when one company takes over another.

Secondly, many voters in rural and regional Australia do not view the Liberal and National parties as freely interchangeable. A merger would be the catalyst for the formation of a new country party. Let's not forget, One Nation won 11 seats and almost a quarter of the vote in the Queensland Parliament at their peak, and

there have been a succession of independent country mayors in the NSW Parliament. The ground would be even more fertile for such electoral movement in the absence of the Nationals. A fledgling opposition does not need this sort of challenge and distraction.

Other than an unnecessary and risky re-branding, a merger of the Liberal and National parties would accomplish little that can't be achieved working as a coalition.

A name change or a new entity is not going to make the Liberal Party more electorally appealing. What is needed is renewal and a return to policy positions that better exhibit our core beliefs of small government and individual freedom. We need to develop our narrative, based on those beliefs and expressed through policy, to better answer the question "why should we vote for you?" We can do this effectively as a Coalition.

It would be too easy for the parliamentary party to look to reform the organisational wing as a substitute for addressing its own shortcomings. A new party structure is no magic bullet for the parliamentary party's electoral woes. The last thing the parliamentary Liberal Party needs right now is to become distracted by debates over organisational change.

In the week after the 2004 election, a devastating loss for Labor, dozens of journalists and Labor figures were talking about a "two-term strategy." Others contemplated whether the Labor Party was finished as a force. However one perennial wise head in the press gallery wrote that Labor "over-reacts at its peril." Labor didn't over-react and three years later they have won government in a landslide.

It would be delusional to deny the Liberal Party has some problems. Some organisational reform is certainly needed, but the Liberal Party should reject the idea of a merger. This is no time for nervous Nellies. We are a proud party with a long and successful history. We are facing our toughest test. As always, the Liberal Party will be up to the task.

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