

Oakeshott: from independent to kingmaker

Independent member for Lyne, Rob Oakeshott, joins Lateline to discuss his kingmaker role.

Transcript

LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: One of the men playing a crucial deciding role in who will form government is the independent member for Lyne in New South Wales, Rob Oakeshott.

He joins me now from our Parliament House studio in Canberra.

Thanks very much for being with us at what I'm sure is a very busy time, Mr Oakeshott.

ROB OAKESHOTT: Thanks, Leigh, and good to see you again.

LEIGH SALES: You're in Canberra tonight as I said. Give us the latest on where everything is up to. Have there been any developments tonight? What is planned for tomorrow?

LEIGH SALES: Look, when I left from Port Macquarie to come to Canberra, seats such as Denison I think were being claimed by the Labor Party and by the time I have arrived this evening, they're now back in the game.

So this is fluid and it's happening as we speak. Those two or three seats that are still in doubt are critical for the next week or two. Negotiations can start to get framed. Conversations can start to be had. Relationships can start to be built.

For example, I've never met Adam Bandt from the seat of Melbourne so we need to form a relationship pretty quickly in this process. But really we can't get down to any formal negotiations until that final count is in, because each one of those seats changes the implications and the strategies around the negotiations for all the stakeholders involved.

LEIGH SALES: So what meetings are scheduled for tomorrow?

ROB OAKESHOTT: The three independents are coming from all over the place. There are some logistic issues three days after an election. So I am hoping the three of us will get to meet tomorrow afternoon and probably have a fairly lengthy conversation just about the lay of the land, both in the Lower House and the Senate.

And our approach to negotiations over the coming period as these seats start to come in and the clear numbers start to unfold.

LEIGH SALES: And are you anticipating meeting with Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott tomorrow?

ROB OAKESHOTT: Probably not tomorrow. Like realistically, both Tony Windsor and Bob Katter will only be getting in some time in the middle of the day. And so we will then hopefully catch up as soon as possible on a face to face basis.

We don't want to be rushed on this and there is time on everyone's side. And there are still these seats in play.

So as I say, they're general conversations. They are very healthy. People such as Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott are on the phone and several discussions have already taken place. That is healthy.

And it's hopefully showing a commitment to all of us wanting to get away, find a way through in the national interest rather than in any political party's best interests.

So over the next couple of days I'm sure we'll all have face to face time, I'm sure everyone in the media will know about it, and this will unfold as the week unfolds and as those seats come in.

LEIGH SALES: Julia Gillard says Labor's case for government is that it receives most support on a two party preferred basis. And also that all of the polls have her as the preferred Prime Minister.

Tony Abbott argues that the Coalition won more first preference votes. Do you find one or the other of those arguments more persuasive?

ROB OAKESHOTT: No. Look, I think - And I have heard it a lot today. There have been a lot of Monday experts out there today not reflecting on Julia Gillard or Tony Abbott but plenty of foot soldiers have been out there trying to pitch the case for their political party.

I think a lot of that is unhelpful, unwelcome and unnecessary because this is the type of election that's looking like you could build a case either way and you've just used one good example where primary votes could swing it one way, the number of seats could swing it another way. Second preference votes you could build a case around.

Really, in the end, we've got a challenge in front of us but it's a simple exercise that we've got to resolve. And that is, how can we form stable government where no clear political party has a majority and how can that hopefully 76 members in whatever form they may make deliver outcomes for the nation?

That's where I think the Senate make up is important, and is needed to be considered. And if we can get a stable government and an outcomes focused government for the next three at least, then we have started to answer the question that was put to parliamentarians at the ballot box on Saturday.

That was that Australia has been completely underwhelmed by the last nine months at least of public policy development, where lots of good talk, lots of bells and whistles around imminent reports. But really, implementing them and bringing them home has been a bit of a fizzer.

LEIGH SALES: I want to talk about some policy detail in a second, but first, let me pick up on a couple of things you said there. When you say the make-up of the Senate is important, does that mean that you will be considering what sort of a government in the House of Representatives could work best with a Senate where the balance of power is going to be held by the Greens?

ROB OAKESHOTT: Yeah, look, that's a personal view, but I think yes.

So this is before I have spoken with colleagues but if we're serious about what we're doing for a living, if we're serious about our job description, about getting outcomes through this Parliament - it is a bicameral system - and so in a situation such as this where it is tight in the House of Reps, consideration at least of the make up of the Senate and consideration of who is willing to work a legislative program through the Senate, I think is really important.

We're wasting our time if we have the two chambers in deadlock. Where we have a majority in the House of Representatives that could pass legislation through, that cannot get through the Senate, and vice versa, that the Senate is introducing pieces of legislation that cannot get through the House of Reps.

We may as well all go back to the ballot box tomorrow if that's the case.

I would hope therefore that Bob Brown and the Greens - like them or not, this is a pragmatic exercise now - are considered in part of the equation and that this is a conversation between Julia Gillard, Tony Abbott and Bob Brown, as well as relevant cross benchers who try and get this stable government question answered as soon as possible.

LEIGH SALES: Other than that Senate question, what are the other criteria you're looking for in terms of ability to deliver a stable government?

ROB OAKESHOTT: Numbers. You know, I think in the end - And there are concerns from-

And again, these are personal reflections, before we've met - before I've met with both Tony Windsor and Bob Katter, but the way this is looking based on the numbers is either side maxes out at best at 76.

Now there is concern about that. We're one by-election away from trouble. And so even before we get to a model which is a minority based on a political party, plus, plus, plus, with a bit of a turbo charge from the cross bench, there is another way which is some consensus politics.

There are other models in other jurisdictions around Australia and around the world where, you know, a bit of power sharing arrangements across political party lines might get us a bit further than 76, might provide a buffer that's necessary to have true stability in the Lower House.

And certainly it's a numbers game now and that would be quite obviously - if we're serious about getting budgets through, if we're serious about preventing no confidence motions every second day in the Parliament - we need to build that bit of a buffer.

And a model, a consensus model of politics that considers how we can build a bit of a buffer, I think, is something I'd be very interested to talking to anyone with.

LEIGH SALES: How exactly would that work practically? Are you talking about certain members of one side or the other saying 'We would support the other side on issues of supply' or something like that? What exactly do you mean?

ROB OAKESHOTT: Yeah, look, there are some really interesting models around the world but also in State houses.

I think one of the more creative ones was South Australia. There was a National Party member in the Cabinet of a majority Labor Government, for example, even when it wasn't a situation like this.

So there are creative models out there. We can when the will is there and if we focus on things such as the national interest for once, if we are serious about making this work, and not sending the Australian population back to the ballot box, I think we can come up with some potentially really creative opportunities for the country and engaging the Australian population better in public policy development and outcomes.

And you know, I think that's a response - and a positive response - to the big message of the ballot box last weekend, which is this sense of being underwhelmed in the Australian community by the current state of the way politics is played on these rigid adversarial lines between a blue team and a red team.

LEIGH SALES: On that point, when you've been asked in the past few days about how you're going to make up your mind about who to support, you said that one of the things you would like to see is the reform of the processes of Parliament.

What exactly are you looking for there?

ROB OAKESHOTT: That's one example. Trying to move the Australian Parliament towards compromise and negotiation rather than strict one says black the other says white.

Things such as the committee structures: The whole building is built around the committees in a symbolic sense because they are supposed to be the engine room of this place. There would've been a bucket-load of reports that were delivered over the last three years that are now sitting on shelves collecting dust.

In a bipartisan way members of Parliament engage in that process and do a lot of research, talk to eminent people, recommendations are made and really not a lot comes from that exercise - so really re-energising the committee structures.

But things such as private member's Bills. I think it is a blight on our system in Australia that a private member who might have certain beliefs about what's important to their electorate and their country cannot get a private member's Bill voted on in the Parliament. They can introduce it, but they cannot force a vote.

Now that is unusual in most jurisdictions around the world. And I think it is wrong because it is disengaging. And what it is saying - and this is where we've ended up - is that power rests with the executive, and if you leave it up to a red team or a blue team to fight over the executive, it even gets worse than that as we saw in the last parliament where a gang of four people ended up running the entire show.

And it completely disengages local members of Parliament and by logical extension people and it gives power to vested interests, to head offices. Whenever a hard decision needs to be made, the polls kick in and there seems to be some weak-kneed responses to times of when courage and bravery are needed to get good decisions for the country.

LEIGH SALES: A lot of people watching this around the country probably hadn't heard of you until the weekend.

ROB OAKESHOTT: (Laughs)

LEIGH SALES: I just wanted to give people a sense of what you are and where you come from. You've been in public life since 1995. You were a State New South Wales National Party MP. Before that you were a political staffer. What is it about politics that attracted you, given that you clearly are not a fan of the party system?

ROB OAKESHOTT: (Laughs) Look I always had an interest and I didn't mean to become a member of Parliament, and just seemed to keep drifting through gates that directed me on this life path.

When I was young, I used to talk about politics and read the current affairs in the newspaper. And you know, I've even got friends from school who said or now say that I was going to end up doing this but I don't remember that.

LEIGH SALES: Do you have any political hero or role model?

ROB OAKESHOTT: Not necessarily within an Australian political context but I always enjoy seeing people stand on their digs regardless of the consequences. In my university days, I was at University College where the reverend of that college was all but excommunicated from the Presbyterian Church in New South Wales, a bloke called Reverend Peter Cameron.

As a student he was a pretty interesting fellow but standing on his digs over some of the speeches and some of the sermons he used to give. And in his parting speech to the students, he said, "I hope the great lesson I've taught you as the leader of this college is that you've got to stand up for what you believe in regardless of the consequences."

So people like that in history, the Stephen Bikos of the world - but there's plenty of them but not necessarily in a Westminster parliamentary sense because it's pretty difficult to see leaders and find leaders in the way our Parliaments are structured.

LEIGH SALES: I want to before we run out of time whip around a few quick issues just to get your thought on those.

Do you support Labor's broadband Internet policy or are you more in favour of the Coalition's plan to wind it up and go with something that's a bit more market based?

ROB OAKESHOTT: Look, I come from a regional area where if I was sitting in my electorate office right now, I could walk you 500 metres to find people still on dial-up. You know, that's 1980s technology.

And it's not only a technology question in play here, it's also a cost question. For lower socioeconomic areas what is supposed to be the gap filler in technology is just costing people out and so they're disengaging.

So I don't think it's an either/or choice necessarily. Fibre optic to the home, I get. Project of national significance, I get. Wireless in an area such as mine is going to be in play. We do have a lot of hills and valleys.

So there is an answer in there somewhere that is that consensus model but I do get what the OECD has been saying, the World Bank has been saying, the UK digital agenda, even Barack Obama is using the last government's model as a base for policy on their agenda.

So that I get that and if you were going to make me choose one or the other, it probably would be that. But in the end I think we could work through a policy that is a combination stir fry and still get something that's pretty exciting.

LEIGH SALES: Okay, so I take it from that you're saying you favour the Labor policy.

ROB OAKESHOTT: Well that would be if you were making me choose one or the other, but there is a third.

It's not just rocks, paper. There's also scissors and that is trying to pull together more of a wireless option. Fibre optic doesn't necessarily have to go to the home. It could be going to the node. We could have some combinations of both.

But if you were going to push me on one or the other, it would be the faster, more reliable and more expensive option and that is the current Government's option.

LEIGH SALES: Okay, on asylum seekers, particularly those who come by boat, what's your view on offshore processing?

ROB OAKESHOTT: I've been very loud in my electorate that we are the moat people. The very fact people have to come here by boat says we've got a huge strategic advantage in dealing with this.

They've normally come through three or four countries where those countries don't even know that people have passed through their borders. So I think we can manage this and manage it in a strategic sense. Our offshore processing is about \$470 million a year of taxpayers' money.

I'm not fussed about Nauru, Christmas Island, East Timor but I would ask that at least we consider onshore processing under UN conventions and 90 day rules. I'm sure we could find a mayor or a council in the North or Northwest of Australia who would be very interested in the 350 jobs that we're currently exporting to Christmas Island because we are driven by some sort of fear of dealing with this issue on the mainland.

And they're 350 well paying jobs. They're Defence. They're ASIO. They're Customs.

So you know, I think we need to put fear in the back pocket, deal with it strategically, deal with it on a regional basis, stick to UNHCR guidelines and targets and really step up and deal with the issue on the mainland as much as trying to farm the problem out to some regional neighbour.

LEIGH SALES: And very briefly, climate change. You want an ETS back on the agenda?

ROB OAKESHOTT: Yeah. Look, I think if we are serious about the job we do, there were people who dedicated their lives to the science who said there's a problem. The response was to get eminent economist Ross Garnaut to write up a report about how we turn the science into an economic model and the whole thing went to mush after that.

I'd ask this Parliament to at least consider going back to the Garnaut Report, and see whether we can lay a platform for delivering on and fulfilling our duty of finishing the process that's gone from the science to the economics. Let's get it through the politics and let's deliver something for this nation.

LEIGH SALES: Rob Oakeshott, I've got about an hour's worth of questions but I will have to wrap up. We'll have to do it another time.

Thank you very much for joining us.

ROB OAKESHOTT: Thanks, Leigh.