

Uniquely Political: Rebuilding Resources in Opposition

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ABSTRACT

Opposition political parties are unusual in often facing major challenges in developing knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs). Many KSAs required in opposition are different to those in government. In adjusting to electoral defeat, the party may experience 'Schumpeterian shock' while seeking to rebuild depleted human resource capital. How organisations rebuild KSAs is often cited as a major weakness in contemporary human resource theory such as the Resource Based View (RBV) (Barney 1991). However Newbert (2008) notes, few empirical studies test these hypotheses conceptually. This theoretical work-in-progress paper draws on the management literature on organisational effectiveness and competence in addressing the on-going attraction, retention and development of key human resource assets. This analyses aims to help develop research on organisational re-building.

Keywords: Resource based view; capacity building; legislature; NGOs; organisational learning; parliament; training.

This is a conceptual paper aims to develop the validity of the resource-based view of the firm (RBV) (Barney & Wright, 1998), a popular theory of the factors affecting the capacity of business organisations, through examination of its application to a quite different type of organisation, the Opposition parliamentary political party. Amongst other characteristics, Oppositions must mobilise and apply their resources to survive and recover from shocks very different to those experienced by business firms. The full title “resource-based view of the firm” derives from the theory having developed from study of business firms. Business firms are a specific type of social organisation. In Australia and New Zealand most enjoy the legal status and advantages that derive from incorporation under law (e.g. Corporations Act 2001 (Cth) 2001) and operate within markets regulated by competition and other laws. Firms exist to supply goods and services and their viability is dependent on successfully competing for sales and profitability with other firms operating in the economy. According to RBV, there are three types of resources that act as sources of a firm’s competitive advantage: physical capital, organisational capital and human capital (Barney & Wright, 1998). Increasing levels of technological sophistication and the speedy transfer of information have diminished the competitive advantage that was once available through the first two resource bases. There is increasing recognition therefore of the potential of the latter of the three resources, human capital, to make a substantial and lasting impact on sustainable competitive advantage (Barney and Wright, 1998; Wright, McMahan and McWilliams, 1994).

The RBV provides a framework to analyse appropriate organisational approaches to the long-term development of the human resources (Penrose 1959; Barney 1991; Boxall 1996). In recent years, attraction and retention of highly skilled employees has become an increasingly significant aspect of building organisational capabilities to ensure sustained competence and capacity. It has been argued that those organisations that invest resources in employee attraction and retention turn a potential problem into an opportunity to gain an advantage over their rivals (Boxall and Steenveld 1999). The RBV focuses on how organisations build unique ‘bundles’ of resources that generate sustained competitive advantage (Boxall and Purcell 2008). Inimitability, for example, is potentially increased as groups of skilled workers from unusual dynamics that are difficult to replicate and can be leveraged

in the organisation's favour (Barney 1991). In line with RBV, the approach developed by Hamel and Prahalad (1993) and Leonard (1992, 1998), argued that long-term investment in core competencies provides sustained advantage over time as contemporary competencies become baseline capabilities. Both Hamel and Prahalad (1993) and Leonard (1992) highlighted that in response to the shift to a knowledge-based economy, attraction, retention and, increasingly, the development of human resources are the key to the long-term renewal of the organisation. These points are supported by Boxall and Purcell (2008), who argue that firms need to attract and nurture people who have the competencies and ability that will make the organisation productive. Failure to do so may jeopardise the organisation's continued failure or at the very least uncompetitiveness.

Whilst acknowledging the suitability of RBV to knowledge based organisations, it is important to note criticism of this approach. The RBV can place too much emphasis on internal aspects of the organisation. Several writers have argued that the RBV does not take account of the potential for 'Schumpeterian shock', i.e. "an aberration in normal economic activity that fundamentally restructures an industry" (Norton, 2004, p.1) or creative 'gales of destruction' which radically redefine the basic concepts of the organisations environment and that particular sector (Schumpeter 1950; Barney 1991; Evans and Wurster 2000). These 'Schumpeterian shocks' are generally seen in the context of causing the destruction of the organisation (e.g. Lehman Brothers Bank) or requiring the organisation to be protected and rebuilt through a form of nationalisation (e.g. General Motors). However, for political parties that go into Opposition there is little support to rebuild their position as the 'Government in waiting' and they must undertake this process autonomous of the support found recently for the private sector. Thus the rebuilding of Opposition parliamentary political parties and their resource bases provides a unique opportunity to explore the application of this theoretical model and identify the processes for improving the operation of organisational systems.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties are non-government organisations which have a peculiar legal status, notwithstanding their central roles in the political system. In Australia, they are not incorporated under any of the customary legal forms such as companies, cooperatives or incorporated associations. They have been

described as “unincorporated non-profit societies” (Bennett, 2002). Each operates according to its own internal rules, subject to the requirements for registration for public funding purposes. A key function of political parties is to pre-select, endorse and support candidates for election to parliament. Like modern the firm, the party’s key resource is its human capital. Parliamentary political parties comprise the parliamentarians elected at elections which they contested as candidates representing the corresponding political parties. They depend on their political parties for campaign resources and support in policy development, but the roles of parliamentary political parties are separate and distinct from those of the organisational wing and local branches. It is a general legal principle that parliamentarians must act in the interests of the citizens on whose behalf the parliament acts rather than according to any direction from their political party (Stretton, 1967). This creates a distinction between political parties, usually referred to as the organisational wings and their associated parliamentary political parties, the parliamentary wings. How each parliamentary political party interprets the best interests of the citizens is, of course, the stuff of politics. Only a parliamentarian, whether a member of a parliamentary political party or an independent (i.e. non-party), can enter a Chamber, to which he or she has been elected, to participate in any of the functions of parliament. This paper focuses primarily on Westminster-style parliaments although it is applicable to other legislature models. The functions of these parliaments are: representation; legislation; deliberation; scrutiny; budget setting; making and breaking governments; and redress of grievances (Hazell, 2001). Also, only a parliamentarian can be a member of the Executive (the government) i.e. the head of government (Prime Minister, Premier or Chief Minister) or one of its Ministers. The head of government is the individual commissioned by the Head of State (e.g. the Queen of Australia or her representative, the Governor General) because he or she enjoys the support of a majority of members of the House (i.e. chamber of a unicameral parliament) or Lower House (if a bicameral parliament). The support of a majority of the House is possible as a result of leadership of a major parliamentary party but that may not be sufficient for an overall majority e.g. after the 1998 elections, the largest single parliamentary party was in fact the ALP but Howard had majority support as Leader of the Liberal Party with the support of the National Party; after the 1999 Victorian elections Bracks was

Leader of the ALP but required the support of three independents for a Lower House majority. The Head of State commissions the head of government to form a government. Members of the Executive are generally members of the parliamentary party or coalition which supports the head of government, although there are rare exceptions such as the single Nationals SA Minister in the Rann ALP South Australian Government.

OPPOSITION POLITICAL PARTIES

The one major parliamentary role which is not occupied by a parliamentarian who is supportive of the head of government is Leader of the Opposition. That position is recognised by the Parliament as the leader of the parliamentary political party that has the largest number of parliamentarians who do not support the head of government. That party is usually referred to as the Opposition. It is generally regarded as the alternative government i.e. the party most likely to form government if the current government were to be defeated whether in parliament or at the elections. This institutionalised internal challenge to the authority of the executive within parliamentary systems creates a very different dynamic compared with that found in most organisations. The status of the Opposition gives it particular functions within the general functions of the parliament.

HOW DID WE END UP IN OPPOSITION?

The path by which parliamentary political parties find themselves in Opposition is familiar but quite unlike the experience of most other decision-makers. Even company directors are rarely defeated at elections of board members (company directors in Australia are re-elected with an average of 96% of votes in favour (Mayne, 2009) and if they are, they no longer have any role beyond that of ordinary shareholders. Boards of directors are not internally divided in the same way. Non-executive directors are expected to work harmoniously with executive directors rather than compete with them for authority over the company. Oppositions are almost always parliamentary parties or coalitions that had a majority and formed government until they lost that status at a past general election i.e. an election for all members of the Lower House.

In adjusting to electoral defeat, a party may experience something akin to a 'Schumpeterian shock'.

However, in the case of a parliamentary political party which loses government and becomes the Opposition, the industry does not change – the democratic system remains – but the role and functions of the party are fundamentally different. The changes to the functions of a party making the transition from government to Opposition become apparent when the functions of the parliament are reviewed. Some functions of the parliament are dependent on Opposition actions for their effective discharge, whilst some others are the prerogative of the Government in Westminster style systems, as outlined below.

OPPOSITION FUNCTIONS

Budget setting is overwhelmingly a government function in Westminster-style parliaments, with the Opposition's roles limited to the opportunities discussed above. Representation and redress of grievances are general functions of parliamentarians with no distinctive features for Opposition parliamentarians. Breaking government is the Opposition's most powerful potential role. If it gains majority support in the Lower House and blocks the passage of the budget Appropriation Bill or other key legislation, or successfully moves that the House declares its lack of confidence in the head of government, the government cannot remain in office. In some parliamentary systems, the Executive cannot take office until the House has approved its membership. Legislation can be used by the Opposition in two ways. Primarily, Oppositions must debate bills for acts, almost all of which are introduced by Ministers. These debates can be used to challenge the policies which the bills implement and to advocate alternative policies. Secondly, an individual Opposition parliamentarian, usually the relevant Shadow Minister (i.e. portfolio spokesperson) can propose a private member's bill as a way of advancing a policy advocated by the Opposition policy.

Deliberation occurs whenever there is a question before the House, but most significantly on legislation and motions such as "no confidence" in a Minister or the government and Matters of Public Importance (MPIs). MPIs are most commonly initiated by Opposition parliamentarians to attack or condemn some alleged failing of the government or to advocate the Opposition's policy position for example "that a definite matter of public importance be submitted to the House for discussion,

namely: The growth in Commonwealth Government debt which this week passes \$100 billion” (Australian Parliamentary Debates, 2009). Scrutiny is one of the most constant functions of Oppositions, whereas parliamentarians supporting the government do just that – support and defend even the indefensible actions of ministers and their department and other agencies. There are many opportunities for Opposition parliamentarians to scrutinise government actions and seek accountability for and redress of failings of policy and administration. These opportunities include asking questions without notice (Question Time) and lodging written questions, debating legislation and other motions or MPIs, and using parliamentary committee inquiries including estimates committee hearings. The extent and effectiveness of the use of these opportunities depends on the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) of both individual Opposition parliamentarians and the parliamentary party or coalition collectively, including its “institutional” knowledge and culture. Coghill (1999) demonstrated wide variations in these between Oppositions in three Australian State Parliaments (Coghill, 1999). In order to successfully execute the parliamentary functions of an opposition and to remain a viable organisation, the party must re-structure its KSAs. It must rebuild its depleted human resources stocks. Often, it has little support in doing so.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

The length of time spent in government, the parliamentarians defeated at the last election and the period since the loss are all relevant to an Opposition’s KSAs.

Length of time spent in government

Parliamentarians in government, especially if ministers, have little opportunity to practice the roles and functions of an Opposition member. For those first elected when the government came to office, as some and often many inevitably are, there is no opportunity to develop KSAs from an Opposition perspective. All government supporters are responsible for defending government policy and administration, actions and even inaction. The longer in government, the more out of practice former Opposition, now government, parliamentarians become. The more often the government is re-elected, the more parliamentarians will have been elected to replace retiring members of the government party

or coalition and thus the fewer government members with experience of and KSAs relevant to Opposition. In recent decades, it has been very rare for governments to be defeated after one term of three or four years. Two terms have been uncommon e.g. Fraser Coalition Commonwealth of Australia & Kennett Coalition Victorian governments. Three or four terms have been more common e.g. Cain-Kirner ALP Victoria, Hawke-Keating ALP Commonwealth of Australia, Howard Coalition Commonwealth of Australia governments. More than four terms have been rare. Thus it is common for parties going into Opposition to have been in government for at least 10 years and to do so with many of their parliamentarians, even those holding senior office, having had no personal experience of Opposition roles. Furthermore, parliamentarians in long serving governments have an observed tendency towards hubris, less concern for the Executive to be held accountable and an increased risk of unethical behaviour. Again, these tendencies are poor foundations for Opposition roles.

Parliamentarians defeated at the last election

Electoral defeat occurs, of course, because of the loss of seats in parliament (i.e. electorates, electoral districts, constituencies etc) formerly held by the now Opposition. Almost inevitably some of those seats were held by parliamentarians with prior experience in Opposition, further depleting the capacity of the Opposition to execute its functions. Often, the defeated head of government resigns as leader of the Opposition party and may resign from the Parliament. In the latter case, there are significant risks that the seat could be won by the popular newly elected government, further eroding the Opposition's KSAs e.g. Kennett and his Deputy Premier McNamara both resigned and, at the by-elections, were replaced by ALP (government party) members.

Period in Opposition

Following electoral defeat and while the new government remains popular, an Opposition struggles not only to perform effectively but may also suffer severe difficulties recruiting personnel.

NEW PERSONNEL

Dismissal or forced resignation is impossible in most democratic systems, as it offends the basic principle that the parliamentarian is elected as a representative of the citizens. This principle is not

diminished by the observation that voting decisions by most citizens are strongly influenced by the political parties with which candidates are associated. In a small number of systems citizens can initiate a vote to recall (i.e. dismiss) an elected member (Bowers, 2003). UK Prime Minister Brown canvassed the idea at the time of the recent controversy over entitlement claims by House of Commons parliamentarians (Daily Mail Reporter, 2009). However, such provisions are not at the initiative of nor under the control of the Opposition and they cannot assist it to re-build. New personnel can be “recruited” following the retirements or resignations of sitting members. However, if a sitting member resigns before general elections, there is a risk that in the by-election the party could lose the seat to the government party. Accordingly, Opposition parliamentarians rarely resign to facilitate “recruitment” of a new member except from “safe” seats (i.e. where the Member’s party has very strong support and its candidate is most unlikely to be defeated in a by-election) or if the Government appears to be so unpopular that the risk is low. If a sitting member decides to not to seek re-election at the following general elections, it is unlikely he or she will apply great vigour to Opposition roles. If a sitting member is defeated for pre-selection, that parliamentarian is even less likely to be dedicated to the Opposition’s cause. If the Opposition appears to have little chance of being elected to government at the next election, it may find it difficult to attract candidates with appropriate distinct campaign skills for successful candidature and potential KSAs for Opposition. The longer a party is in Opposition without the scent of victory in the wind, the more these recruitment issues undermine its capacity to discharge Opposition functions. For these several reasons, it can be very difficult for Opposition members to maintain morale, a key factor affecting the application of KSAs. There may also be additional challenges faced by the organisational wing of the party, but those are beyond the scope of this paper.

SHOCK OF DEFEAT

Electoral defeat, even where foreseen, often has a dramatic impact on a parliamentary political party which has been in government. However, the impact is not necessarily related to the extent of the loss of seats. For example, the Kennett Coalition Victorian Government suffered a very narrow defeat in 1999 and lost Government only because it could not persuade three independent Lower House

parliamentarians to support it. Its domineering leader Kennett resigned, an ALP candidate won the by-election and the performance of the Opposition was such that it suffered a further severe loss of seats at the 2002 general election, a position from which it was unable to recover at the 2006 elections. In contrast, the Keating ALP Commonwealth of Australia Government was decisively defeated at the 1996 elections but the ALP in Opposition (again under new leadership) performed strongly at the 1998 elections, being only narrowly defeated. The ALP went on to suffer further defeats in 2001 and 2004 until successful under Rudd's new leadership in 2007. The maturity and stability of the Australian and New Zealand political systems is such that "gales of destruction" have not led to the annihilation of major political parties in the post WW2 period. Rather, the creative effects that have often followed the shock of defeat are evident in the cycles followed by a number of parliamentary political parties which have returned to government. In many cases the key personnel who have led their party at its re-election to government did not occupy leadership positions when the party was previously in government. Often they were not parliamentarians at that time e.g. Bacon (Tasmania), Bracks (Victoria), Rudd (Commonwealth of Australia), Key (New Zealand); others had been government party backbenchers or Ministers but neither heads of government nor deputy leaders for example Rann (South Australia) and Barnett (Western Australia). The parties which have successfully made the transition from Opposition to Government have generally had not only new party leaders but shadow ministers newly familiar to the public. These personnel developed and displayed the KSAs to argue persuasively against the style, policies and management of the outgoing Government and present new, relevant alternative policies. These transformations have, in effect, been generational changes. The new faces of the leadership and its shadow ministerial team have shared and marketed a distinctive approach to policy and government administration which could be distinguished from its precursors by the electorate.

RESOURCE BASED VIEW OF OPPOSITION

The above RBV analysis has enabled the identification of KSAs which are key factors in the performance of an Opposition. How then does an Opposition develop its KSAs? As Newbert (2008:746) argues, in order to truly understand why a resource or capability contributes to a firm's

competitive position its underlying characteristics must be examined. The political system within Australia is an ideal research opportunity as it is effectively a closed system with two main political parties vying for power and government and opposition cyclic. This paper provides an initial theoretical proposition to better understand how the resource-based view operates practice and whether such an approach can reduce the time in opposition.

For an Opposition, KSAs have two aspects – collective and individual.

Developing collective KSAs

No formal training for the collective KSAs that can assist an Opposition's effectiveness has been reported. Each parliamentary party has its own culture and observation suggests that they learn little from their political party affiliates in other jurisdictions (Coghill, 1999). These include coordinated exploitation of provisions in each House's rules of procedure and committee processes for holding government to account for its policies and their implementation and the raising of other public policy issues for debate. International research has thus far not revealed such training in other jurisdictions (Coghill, Holland, Donohue, Richardson, & Neesham, 2008). In addition to the KSAs of Opposition parliamentarians, resources are provided by Opposition parliamentary party staff and other individuals and organisations who offer support e.g. in the development and or communication of policy.

Examination of those resources is beyond the scope of this paper.

Developing individual KSAs

Many of the KSAs relevant to parliamentarians generally are also important to the effectiveness of parliamentarians in their capacities as members of the Opposition. Most parliaments provide orientation including in rules and procedure which are necessary for performing the basic functions of a parliamentarian. Less common is training in discharging the parliament's function of scrutinising government policies and administration and in drafting legislation and amendments (Coghill et al., 2008).

WHO SHOULD DEVELOP OPPOSITION KSAs?

An important question arises as to whether it is a legitimate function of the parliament to provided

training for all parliamentarians in order to facilitate the execution of the functions of the parliament (Coghill, Holland, Donohue, Richardson, & Neesham, 2009). Political pragmatists might argue that to do so would be for the parliament to assist the non-government parties and according to that logic somehow against the interests of the parliamentary majority (i.e. the Government) and by extension to play a partisan role inappropriate to parliamentary staff. This is a complex and grey area. The KSAs involved are ones which assist an Opposition to use parliament to discredit the Government and gain advantageous public support. They do not include the political campaigning KSAs which are at the heart of successful election campaigns. It is important to the integrity of democratic systems that parliamentary staff are not and are not seen to be biased in their advice or support provided to any parliamentarians or parliamentary political parties. We support argument that it is also important that they uphold and advance the interests of the parliament through support which facilitates the discharge of the institution's functions (Coghill et al., 2009).

FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the insight from the theoretical model the paucity of research using the RBV framework is surprising. In response to this gap in the literature this paper sets out the arguments to use Parliamentary systems as an ideal sector to test the RBV and its assumptions. It is anticipated that the empirical research that will follow from this paper will add to our knowledge by testing the RBV theory and lead to improvements in organisational capabilities.

CONCLUSION

This review of the Resource Based View of organisations has sought to apply it to Opposition parliamentary political parties and the development of Opposition KSAs. This largely theoretical paper advances the argument that further research on Opposition parliamentary political party could provide a useful base to develop the resource based view. It suggests the potential for research which could lead to findings of benefit to operation of a wide range of organisations. Among these are training in the collective KSAs to improve the effectiveness of the key roles of Oppositions and training for all individual parliamentarians in KSAs which include some that are important to the

functions of both parliament and the Opposition. This is of critical importance as Newbert (2008) concludes, without such research it is difficult to advise practitioners how to seek out and exploit key resources and capabilities.

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