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'coalition'

"Birds of a feather (and colour) will flock (and fly) together." — Old English Proverb, 1545 (approx)



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\* Requires registration

While the notion of the 'coalition' is one normally associated with formalised alliances between political parties, coalitional affiliations are not limited to mainstream politics, and instead share a focus on strategy and outcome across the full range of human endeavours. Parties with varying priorities will put to one side their differences in order to focus on overlapping concerns. Thus coalitions come in all shapes and sizes and cross all walks of life: from families, clubs and teams to friendships, churches and sects, from companies and co-operatives to scientific formula, mathematical groupings and multimedia/multi person online gaming environments.

This issue of *M/C Journal* mounts a timely critical reflection on the multiple contemporary meanings and uses of 'coalition' and coalitional thinking. Some of the questions the authors of this edition have addressed include: how does the notion of coalition inform political practices and powers? How have coalitions changed in recent times? What other (non-political party) coalitions exist and how might they work? How do coalitions inform understandings and expressions of race and whiteness, gender and sexuality, class and poverty, nations and borders? What does it mean to be 'post-coalitional' and how might we map persistence and change in recent political and non-political groupings and collectives?

Recent history has revealed large cracks and major shifts in public and political alliances. In Australia for example, November 2007 marked a change in politics and culture that saw the demise of then Prime Minister John Howard and his Coalition government. The coupling of neoliberalism and social conservatism was said to be the hallmark of that government's commitment to 'old Australian values', to severe forms of border control, the refusal of same-sex marriage, scepticism toward climate change, and rapid privatisation policies for public services. The Coalition, it appeared, no longer represented the interests of the public. Since then, the incumbent Labor leader was deposed from within his own party,

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and Australia's first female Prime Minister, after having lost a majority, formed a new coalition with smaller parties and independents in order to keep governing.

This new coalition came in the wake of Britain's 2010 election, in which the Conservatives joined with the Liberal Democrats to form the first ever British coalition government, and later was followed by the mid-term resurgence of Republican power in the American Lower House. And of course it was not too long ago that the 'coalition of the willing', as a collective American-led force fighting the war-or-terror, fell apart in the later stages of the Bush administration, and that the 2008 shift in American politics to Barack Obama's presidency became a singular moment of international historical significance.

We ask then, as connections to particular coalitions shift, what new affiliations are formed? And which aspects of older coalitions continue in the midst of change? What do regions, nations and individuals do when the groups they belong to fall apart or lose power? Larger coalitional shifts tell us much about culture, history, law, media, technology and human behaviour. As Australia and the Western world continually move away from supporting the power and policy of previously dominant groups, questions emerge as to the nature and ethics of collectives (of all kinds) as the expression of political, social and personal change. And despite these changes, borders are strengthened, and the associated fears of difference and otherness (from racism to war, Islamaphobia to homophobia) continue to reassert themselves across the globe.

This logic of coalition is systematically unpacked and interrogated in this edition's feature essay by **Nick Mansfield**. In "Coalition: The Politics of Decision", Mansfield draws upon the work of Jacques Derrida to carefully analyse the implications of coalition for contemporary politics. Coalition can be distinguished from community or family, and is more akin to friendship, according to Mansfield. This is for two fundamental reasons: firstly, coalitions involve "decision", and secondly, coalitions are always inevitably in relation to enmity. While coalitions start with a gesture of friendship, Mansfield argues via Derrida's reading of Schmitt, that this category can slip into enemy territory. Mansfield's paper uses this theoretical framework in order to comment on political action today.

Indeed, each of the papers presented in this volume understand and illuminate 'coalition' as a critical tool or useful conceptual framework. In this collection, coalition is deployed in a manner which illuminates the relationships between different parties, interest groups, affiliational thinking and behaviours, and even the bodily senses. Coalitions are understood as contesting and reiterating dominant political paradigms and socio-cultural norms.

**Ann Deslandes, Randall Livingstone and Christopher Phillips** bring our attention to the coalitions that contest dominant forms of political power. **Deslandes's** thoughtful engagement with the 'global justice movement' focuses on the "ethical scene of activist coalition". Deslandes examines what she terms the three ethics of coalition, risk, prayer and gift. In so doing, she asks important

questions of privileged activists, who must risk the possibility of repeating “domination”.

In both Livingston and Phillips, the Internet is a primary tool and site for critical engagement. **Livingstone's** paper looks at the “virtual coalition” of online editors concerned with combating Western bias on the major Web encyclopaedia Wikipedia: “WikiProject: Countering Systemic Bias”. Since its inception in 2001, Wikipedia has grown in popularity to be one of the most accessed websites available. This research provides much needed insight into the extent to which Western bias frames the information uploaded to Wiki. At a time when there is a temptation to regard the Internet as liberatory, discussion of its uneven political power is significant. After all, as Livingstone reiterates, the Web does not dissolve border and boundaries.

Further exploring relations between visibility and democracy. **Phillips** takes Gailbraith's *A Good Society* as a starting point for a discussion of how contemporary coalitions work, and what larger coalitions of previously marginalised or silenced groups might look like. In this way, Phillips asks if Gailbraith's vision has been borne out in the American context with particular reference to the 2008 Obama campaign's use of Internet technologies and the more recent rise of the Tea Party to a position of considerable influence. Given the surprising similarities between such opposing forces, might an understanding of the coalitional ground shared by both be possible?

An ongoing theme of this edition of M/C is its engagement with the current local/global coalitional and post-coalitional conditions in which people live - from larger contexts of geopolitics through to the micropolitics of everyday practices, pleasures and identifications.

**Elaine Kelly** engages with the changes to land rights legislation in Australia over the past five years, with the Northern Territory Intervention and more recently with the decision by the Labor Party to uphold the nomination of Muckaty as a site for nuclear waste. Kelly extends the discussion of coalition to encompass its etymology – to grow together. Framing her discussion using critical race and whiteness theory, Kelly argues that private and governmental coalitional interests are at play in land rights reform. This in turn reiterates a relationship between neoliberalism and social conservatism which prompts the question: in whose interests is this “growth”?

Also in the Australian context, **Anthony Lambert's** paper “Rainbow Blindness” filters contemporary government attitudes and legislative change with respect to marriage and same-sex relationships through the effects of recent coalitional changes in the Australian and global political landscape. Lambert argues that the confusion surrounding the issue of gay marriage and the blurring/changes within political positions constitutes Australia as living within a ‘post-coalitional’ framework – one defined by persistence and change, where a new sensibility towards equity and difference is accompanied by the reassertion of larger coalitional affiliations and normative regimes.

**Duncan McKay's** paper sees a coalitional model of engagement as potentially providing productive possibilities between governmental bodies and the Western Australian Arts community. McKay passionately critiques the WA Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA) policy document *Creating Value* arguing that it "may be considered that the DCA and many WA cultural producers may not be engaged in the same project at all, let alone be in effective partnership or coalition".

**Blair McDonald's** poetic contribution contends that out of a reading of Foucauldian resistance to sexual norms, new coalitions of behaviour and identity may be possible. In a coalitional context, Foucault cannot and does not simply seek to exit the networks of power and sexuality that he himself constructs. In retracing Foucault's attention to power and sex-desire, the author seeks a movement toward "new coalitions" or "rallying points" at the limits of bodies and pleasures; in the bodies that are as yet "unformed" and pleasures that are as yet "unknown".

Meanwhile, **Lauren Cruikshank's** "Synaesthory: Fleshing Out a Coalition of the Senses" demonstrates how understanding the relationship between senses as coalitional breaks down the Cartesian dominance regarding subjectivity as exemplified by the mind/body split. Cruikshank's careful analysis also challenges the privileging of vision in Western culture.

As noted above, around the world, many new coalitional minority governments have taken power in recent times. In Australia, Christopher Payne of the Liberal Party referred to the negotiations following the August 2010 election (which resulted in a hung parliament) as Labor, the Independents and the Greens "trying to put together a coalition of the mongoose and the cobra" (ABC). Here, Payne attempts to cast doubt over the stability of this sort of coalition, by positing the Greens as the cobra and the Independents as potential pray to be attacked and devoured. More importantly, Payne has referenced, as this collection of papers does, the changeability of coalitions, and the sometimes antagonistic relationships that may need to co-exist in coalitions of all kinds.

## References

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