We’re getting on with about local politics

REGIONAL politics is about getting your voice heard and making a difference. We thought about it, we talked about it, we spent time and energy on it. But it’s about having it spent wisely. It’s also about protecting your patch, and making it better for the future. Healthy and successful regional politics though are the region’s lively conversations about a better future and how we might achieve it.

But these conversations are disappearing. Which is puzzling. Fifty years ago, there were giant antennae atop all the Hunter’s houses, three free-to-air television channels, a handful of scratchy AM radio stations, and the papers. But regional politics was strong then. Today we swap images and text across the planet in micro-seconds using devices that store all the deck of cards. We draw on multiple television channels, radio from the world over, and endless websites. We can read newspapers from just about anywhere online. Yet our regional politics is weak.

I feel sorry for our region’s politicians. How do they know what they should represent? Fifty years ago our politicians stood on street corners on Saturday mornings, smoking, and they walked the post office at the foot that afternoon, having their ears bashed by community. The morning they stood on the church steps and talked politics after mass. On Monday night it was on again at the local branch meeting before a late drive to parliament. On Friday they were back in town to front up to a union delegate’s meeting. And then it was Saturday again.

Back then the valley was filled with politicians and political conversations. No one could avoid it. Everyone belonged to institutions – a church, a lodge, a school auxiliary or P&C, a political party, a trade union, a rugby club or a football club. Rotary, Lions, the CWA, the Vincent de Paul Society, the WEA. People met weekly at these institutions and talked, and invariably they talked politics. They learned how to express an argument and hold a point of view, and test that view against the views of others.

Politicians couldn’t avoid these conversations because their lives were defined by the very same institutions. They owed their political history to them. It was the people from the church, the trade union, the club or the lodge that got them into power. Now it is different. We live in a world where these institutions are gone or are less important. Fewer than 20 per cent of workers belong to trade unions. Fewer than 30 per cent of Australians attend church weekly. Lodges are closed. Party branch meetings want for a heartbeat. We have less time for such things. Our lives – work, home and family – are over-filled. And we have less time to talk and argue. There is always so much to be getting on with.

Our politicians, then, comes to us in quick short grabs, mostly from television, radio and the newspaper, or the web-based versions of these. And these short grabs have to be packaged to attract our attention. We will only watch if the footage is alarming or funny or sexy. We will only listen if the presenter is witty. We will only read if the graphics are bold and the text excites us. Meaning that we gravitate to where politics is shown as entertainment. We end up at the television and internet sites owned by the media moguls, those who hold the rights to the best shows and sporting events.

Each evening we invite the network’s celebrity presenter into our living rooms for our daily dose of politics via technologies that deliver amazing images and sounds. The losers in this high tech, expensive, minute by minute response to our attention deficit disorder are the regional media. Local media outlets – newspapers, television, radio – have no choice but to be affiliated to or owned by a national or global media network. They take their national and international material off that network. Our local media, then, in part feed our regional lives with the news of the lives of others.

But the reverse isn’t true. Stories about our own dam, our new mine, our transport competition, might get local newspaper, radio and television coverage, but they won’t be transmitted to capital city audiences unless there is novelty value, like when a giant coal vessel runs aground on a city beach.

As our local institutions fade – the places where we once learned and talked politics – we substitute a one-way flow of information from the major capital cities, and from their politicians and their big smoke celebrities. It is their more important stories that we know: how do our politicians know about our lives? Harder still, how do we know what we want to tell them when our politics has become so thin?

Professor Philip O’Neill is director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

God’s ecological gift sustains and nurtures

Religious traditions are engaging with the environment, writes John Power.

OUR politicians continue to debate the seriousness of climate change, peak oil, species extinction and the implications of these dangers for our way of life.

However, we are not all waiting on our politicians to get it right.

At the local level there is active grassroots concern and action on environmental issues. That includes the growing number of local Landcare groups, to citywide associations such as Transition Newcastle and to involvement in national organisations such as Greenpeace.

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