

Now every MP wants to barter their vote



PETER COSTELLO

The country independents Bob Katter, Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor are not accidental tourists who have wandered on to the political stage. They are career politicians who know what they are doing. For years they have dreamed of this. The public might not have heard of them before, but not because they are new to the political scene. Each has already served in state parliaments. If you add their state and federal terms, they are political veterans.

Katter holds a seat previously held by his father. He has been an MP for 35 years and was first elected to the Queensland Parliament in 1974 – when Tony Abbott and Julia Gillard were still at high school. He has spent his adult life in parliament, six of them as a minister, starting in the Bjelke-Petersen government.

Windsor has been an MP for 20 years, first elected as the member for Tamworth. If he looks like he knows what he is doing, he does. He was one of the independents who put Nick Greiner back into office after the Coalition lost its majority in the 1991 state election. He became a hero in his electorate for bringing all sorts of benefits that come to an independent holding the balance of power. That is what launched his federal career.

Oakeshott is the baby of the group, having served only 14 years in parliament. That is longer than Julia Gillard has been in parliament and a fraction shorter than Tony Abbott. Like both Gillard and Abbott, Oakeshott was a political staffer before he was elected. He used to work as media adviser to Mark Vaile (later, the leader of the National Party).

All have been members of the Nationals. Two were first elected as National MPs. By going independent they no longer had to defend difficult decisions. They could negotiate with whoever was in government and get

better returns for their local community. It paid off in spades, the locals loved it and kept re-electing them.

With the draw between the two major parties, they now have the

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chance to install a government of their choice. They have influence like never before, which they will use to benefit their electorates – and, incidentally, maximise their chances of re-election.

Other communities might start to wonder if they too should get an independent. There might be MPs who begin thinking going independent is not just a good idea for the locals, but for their own re-election prospects.

Here is the horns of the dilemma for the Coalition. The three independent former Nationals now have enormous influence, much greater influence than those who stayed. Who could blame the stayers for thinking they are not being given the recognition and influence they deserve?

It would be foolish not to accommodate the people who will decide who governs. But the more concessions the independents get, the more it will agitate other MPs. Residents of far north Queensland will wonder why electors in the seat of Kennedy get better services because their MP sits outside the Coalition party room, when the member for Leichhardt, Warren Entsch, sits inside it.

Some might think the logical conclusion is to get their MP to be a little more independent. The pressure will be on other MPs to prove they can do as well as the independents. And the secret is, they can get everything an independent gets if they are prepared to barter their vote.

We have become used to horse trading in the Senate as the government tries to round up independent votes. That game has now moved to the House of Representatives.

Any person prepared to bargain in the House now can extract an enormous price. One vote can defeat legislation or bring down a government. It is not just the independents with this leverage, but any Coalition or Labor MP who threatens to go independent or quasi-independent can end up with the same power. Every MP can become a Katter or a Windsor, and some will be sorely tempted.

Such an unstable situation can only be resolved by the next election which, for these reasons, is likely to be brought on sooner rather than later.

Peter Costello is a former federal Liberal treasurer.