

SATURDAY PAPER

Trumpism and ‘The Courage Party’

Trumpism

Barry Jones

The year 2016 is likely to be recognised as one of those great turning points of modern history, even more than 1979, 1989 and 2001. Democracy faces its greatest existential crisis since the 1930s. What is sometimes called ‘the Enlightenment project’ has come under sustained attack in the United States, much of Europe, and to a lesser degree, so far, Australia. Despite the promised benefits of the Information Revolution, new technology is often used not to reach out for the universal, recognition of our common humanity, but to reinforce the personal, creating ‘echo chamber’ politics, a form of tribalism, in which users seek to justify their own preconceptions.

Donald J. Trump’s election as the 45th President of the U.S. marked the beginning of a new political era – post-truth, post-evidence, post-courage – which is particularly confronting, considering that Americans, like Europeans and Australians, are part of the most highly educated (on paper, anyway) cohort in their history. (Reflect that Germany was very well educated in the 1930s.) The truth of a proposition means nothing, and evidence is irrelevant.

Paradoxically, both in the U.S., much of Europe and Australia, as levels of formal education rise, and information is readily available on an almost infinite number of issues, debate becomes infantilised and reduced to the narrowly economic and personal. There appears to be an inverse relationship between available knowledge and the operation of political systems.

The principal elements in any Trump speech are the ranting style, endless repetition (reminiscent of the Bellman in Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark*: ‘What I tell you three times is true’), reliance on slogans (‘America First’, ‘Make America Great Again’), the adoption of ‘truthiness’: just enough truth to make an assertion vaguely plausible, inconsistency (‘I know Putin’; ‘I don’t know Putin’), hypersensitivity to criticism, vulgar abuse of opponents, use of childish language, sense of improvisation, as if he doesn’t know what he will say next, lack of empathy or understanding of other

points of view, and the most important subject of all is himself, something he returns to constantly, often referring to himself in the third person. Obviously many voters, but not a majority, see that style as authentic, and they identify with it.

Disconcertingly, he claps himself as he comes on stage, a distinctly North Korean touch. His presentation is reminiscent of Mussolini and Kim Jong-un.

The most worrying factor about Donald Trump is his complete lack of curiosity. On the issues raised with him in the campaign, he either knows the answers already, or he has no desire to hear the elements of discourse – the case for and against a proposition. He has surrounded himself with ‘yea sayers’ who are of the one mind. He looks for simple solutions for complex problems. He seems to be bored by or hostile to science. He sees the environment as a barrier to development and employment.

In 1860 Abraham Lincoln became the first Republican Party candidate to be elected President of the United States. In that year, access to education was rather primitive, especially outside the great cities of the east coast and Chicago, with extremely limited communication: by railways, roads, canals, telegraph, newspapers, postal services. Nevertheless, the quality of political debate was sophisticated.

Lincoln’s views, published on broadsheets, were extremely subtle and nuanced, without bitterness, personal attack or exaggeration. He could always see the other side of an argument and often set it out, fairly. He appealed, we might say, to the Highest Common Factor (HCF.) He was widely read, and kept his religion (if any) to himself.

In 2016, 156 years later, Donald Trump won the Presidential nomination of Lincoln’s Party. America had been transformed by the IT revolution, with capacity for instant retrieval of the world’s knowledge. Americans had universal access to education of varying kinds. The US had the world’s best universities (and some of the worst), it was No. 1 in Nobel Prizes for chemistry, physics and medicine and also first in technological development. And yet to describe its quality of political discourse as appalling is actually to overpraise it. Candidates for public office felt obliged to declare their religious faith (although Trump has made no admissions here),

were shifty on key questions like the age of the earth, hostile to Darwin's theory of evolution. There is serious doubt about whether Trump has ever read a book, even those with his name on the title page. His campaign was surreal, aggressive, misogynist. There was no argument, just assertion after assertion, with a strident appeal to rage, fear, envy, conspiracy theories and the Lowest Common Multiple (LCM).

Lincoln was reflective, self-doubting and he talked in testable propositions, evidence based, with sentences, paragraphs, chapters. He appealed to 'the better angels of our nature'. He never used his own name in a speech. He wrote wonderful letters.

Trump is unreflective, posturing in a way that may conceal deep insecurity, narcissistic, always personalising issues (the hero v. the devil), talking – shouting, really – in slogans, endlessly repeated with no evidentiary base. He appeals to fear, anger, envy and conspiracy theories. He is an incorrigible tweeter.

I grew up with the conviction that activists observed a problem, collected evidence, worked out a strategy, explained it, sought reactions, addressed objections or criticisms, corrected errors, then sought to act, but even after legislation was enacted, it still had to be explained until the community understood and accepted it. But now this approach seems obsolete. Evidence doesn't matter. If you don't like the facts, somebody can find alternative facts. And, as Groucho Marx said, 'If you don't like my principles, well...I have others.'

'The Courage Party'

Malcolm Fraser, in his controversial period as Prime Minister from 1975 to 1983, was often seen as rigid and remote, although always good on race and refugees. After his defeat in 1983 he became increasingly progressive, resigning from the Liberal Party in 2009. On some issues, such as the Republican referendum of 1999, he formed an unlikely alliance with Gough Whitlam, collaborating in campaigns.

He thought that both the Coalition and the ALP had become corrupted and timid, looking for immediate advantage, adopting a narrow focus on economics, as if humans could be defined as consumers only, as *homo economicus*, that the goals of life were

entirely material, and that great long term issues, involving the fate of the planet and non-commercial values could be ignored.

Fraser hypothesised that a new political force could emerge out of the ashes of the two major parties. But was our crisis big enough to break or change the existing system? We did not have an Algeria, nor a de Gaulle.

I proposed 'The Courage Party' as a working title for a new political force, although Fraser had some doubts about the name.

It would not have been a 'centre party' which explored the policy differences between the major parties – when any could be found – then split the difference, opting for something safe, in the middle, offending nobody. It would have been radical, more so than other parties on most issues, dedicated, to quote the Polish political philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, 'to a number of basic values, hard knowledge and rational calculation'.

Fraser used his formidable networking skills to invite experts in foreign policy, taxation, defence, environment, science, health, education and law reform, including drug laws, to prepare detailed position papers, analysing evidence, proposing long term solutions to intractable problems. All agreed. Each expert was dismayed by the failure of both Government and Opposition to act courageously on the great issues of our time.

Mike Richards, political scientist, author of *The Hanged Man* (2002), formerly deputy editor of *The Age*, who worked happily as Chief of Staff to John Cain and Simon Crean, and unhappily with Mark Latham, collaborated with Malcolm Fraser in exploring alternative political structures and policy formulation.

Then in 2015 came two dramatic changes.

In March, Fraser died, unexpectedly. In September, Malcolm Turnbull displaced Tony Abbott to become Prime Minister, after a Faustian bargain with elements of the right inside the Liberal Party, and maintaining the Coalition with the National Party. He traded a promise of inaction on contentious issues, such as climate change and the Republic, that he had advocated in his first period as Liberal Leader to secure the votes he needed to defeat Abbott. This

meant adopting most of Tony Abbott's policies, as he was quick to point out.

Membership of both the Liberal and Labor Parties has become small and sclerotic. Public funding and compulsory voting are bomb shelters that protect the existing hegemonic parties and make reform virtually impossible.

Most electors are loyal to the major parties on polling day but many cast their vote with pegs on their noses – and have no interest in joining. Our major parties are claimed to have a total membership of about 80,000 – or 0.6% of voters. The true figure is more likely to be fewer than 30,000, not all of whom will know that they hold party tickets. By contrast, total membership of sporting, especially football, clubs would be somewhere north of 800,000 – a differentiation of 1:10 (or 1:26).

The creation of nation-wide factions in the late 1980s led to the 'privatisation' of the ALP in which factional leaders became traders and conviction politics was replaced by retail – or transactional – politics.

The central question about policy was no longer 'Is it right?' but 'Will it sell?' Factions are essentially executive placement agencies – and the members of each owe their primary allegiance to the faction or sub-faction. (That sounds like 21st century feudalism.) Loyalty to a faction (or sub-faction) is more important than commitment to a principle or ideal. Parties have become closed corporations, oligarchies. Political operatives have become traders.

Greyhound racing, not generally regarded as a high national priority, was an important factor in the downfall of Mike Baird, after he tried to close it down in New South Wales. I am told that in Victoria legalisation of 'caged fighting' (often involving women), which had been banned by the Brumby Government, was significant in winning support in a few critical electorates on the Frankston line when Daniel Andrews took power in 2014.

Some citizens share the delusion that Left and Right are fighting tooth and claw on major issues and that there is a deep ideological divide in our Parliament. This is not only wrong, but absurd. The

bitterest fights in Parliament are not on major issues, but on personalities, relative trivialities and ‘gotcha’ moments. Within the major/ hegemonic political parties there are factions often described as ‘Left’ or ‘Right’ but in practice this means no more (or less) than referring to ‘The Cats’ and ‘The Bulldogs’ in the AFL. They are just labels.

What are these ‘narrow ideologies’? Where are they to be found? The most common complaint about the hegemonic parties is not that they are fiercely divided on ideology, but that they don’t stand for anything. This was the key finding in the ANU’s report *Trends in Australian Political Opinion 1987-2016*.

There is no significant difference between Left and Right on refugees, on taxation, on coal, on gambling, on ICAC, a Bill of Rights, a Republic, on preservation of the ABC and CSIRO, on planning a post-carbon economy, on foreign and defence policy and the surveillance state? If there is a difference, I had not noticed.

In an era of ‘retail politics’, the voters, in effect, have a choice of Coles or Woolworths, BP or Shell. The hegemonic parties could be renamed the Timid Party and the Tepid Party.

The major issues that disturbed Fraser remain unresolved.

These include Australia taking a leading role in setting high targets in tackling global warming, phasing out coal, rethinking our foreign and defence policies, along the lines set out in his book *Dangerous Allies* (2014); radical changes in our treatment of asylum seekers generally, giving them names, faces, identities and access to the law; becoming a Republic; a thorough revision of the taxation system; a Bill of Rights.

The need for policies based on evidence, analysis and statistics is disputed by many, who prefer to rely on instinct, feelings and intuition, for example on global warming or refugees.

The treatment of refugees is described as ‘operational’, coded language for saying that the subject cannot be discussed. Neither of the two political oligarchies competing to form government will open up debate on the subject – so that evidence or statistical analysis is not just suppressed, it is treated as irrelevant.

One of the worst features of adopting a bipartisan policy on ‘turn backs’ for boats carrying refugees/ asylum seekers, is that it kills debate on the issue.

Paradoxically, Australia now has the best educated cohort in its history, with 4.5 million graduates, 15 times more than in the 1970s, but in recent years our level of public discourse has fallen abysmally. Who are the current equivalents of leaders we had in the 1970s: Whitlam, Fraser, Hamer, Dunstan? Where are the politically engaged professionals when we need them?

It is as if voters say: ‘We are powerless. There are thousands of party insiders and only 15 million of us...’

Will existing political structures break down and force a reconstruction of our political duopoly? There are signs of massive disillusionment with existing parties and serious damage to social fabric in some regions. Many Australians are no longer talking to each other.

‘Political correctness’, originally a coinage by the Stalinist far Left in the 1940s, has been high-jacked by the populist Right to produce a false antithesis, that ‘elites’ deny citizens their capacity to make choices, by arguing that some attention should be paid to evidence or expert opinion. In the United States the Trump phenomenon fed on concerns about ‘political correctness’ and in Australia the issue has been taken up by the National Party, Pauline Hanson and some protest groups. So, essentially, dissident voters have been asking: ‘What would the Bureau of Meteorology know about climate change?’, ‘What would doctors know about vaccination?’, ‘What would lawyers know about human rights?’, ‘What gives experts the right to tell me how to run my life, to stop smoking, or lose weight? They have evidence, but we have strong opinions’.

Nature, notoriously, abhors a vacuum. At present there is a serious withdrawal from political engagement by people with high levels of education or professional skills. They have deserted the field of action with disdain, wring their hands, express dismay or even contempt for the political process, but refuse to engage. I can understand those feelings but they lead to a deformation of how democracy works. The politics of reason/ knowledge are being displaced by the politics of frustration and anger.

There are at least two possible alternative models for a third political force:

Model A: This could be The Courage Party. It would be significantly based on our 4.5 million graduates, including professionals, teachers, performers, writers, artists, social workers, scientists, doctors, intellectuals and other knowledge workers. It would probably include the Greens, progressive reformers from Labor and a handful of Liberals. Unions and professional associations might affiliate. Its policies would be essentially evidence-based and it would emphasise finding solutions to what sociologists call ‘wicked problems’: refugees/asylum-seekers, a new taxation system, climate change, a post-carbon economy, biota sustainability, needs-based funding for education, ending the toxic political culture.

Model B: We could call this The Left Behind Party. Its common elements are identifying victims and denouncing enemies, resentment about rapid change, nostalgia about the past, apprehension about the future and many aspects of modernity, responsiveness to fear about the unfamiliar, especially mixing with other races and cultures, particularly Muslims, finding simple explanations for complex problems. A Model B party has these characteristics: rejection of evidence and reliance on opinion/feeling/ gut reaction, low levels of formal education, resentment of elites and ‘political correctness’, seeing the 1960s as a ‘golden age of full employment’, with a heavy emphasis on ‘nativism’, as they call it in the US. Many of these voters used to be with the ALP (and in the U.S. with the Democrats) but now are often (but not always accurately) identified with the nativist populism.

The Model B phenomenon resonates in small towns and rural areas of most states. Unhappily, it may be the more likely prospect if the major parties – for all their deficiencies – fail.

Model B supporters are at least visible, and vocal.

Model A supporters exist, but have other priorities and are not to be seen.

Great crises often produce great leaders – Lincoln, Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin too, for all his brutality, Curtin, but Australia, like

most other Western nations, does not have heroic leadership on offer – instead, our leaders are essentially followers. They lack courage and vision, and fail to explain, explain, explain to win public support on difficult issues. Instead, they read Newspoll obsessively and say, timidly, ‘I am their leader. The people will tell what I must do’.

Australia has been a great political innovator, convict origins notwithstanding, well ahead of Great Britain with the secret ballot, universal male suffrage, votes for women, and Labor played a great role in promoting change. This is no longer the case. The political system is producing more cynicism and withdrawal than action and outcomes. The precondition for a Courage Party would be courageous people prepared to sacrifice time, effort, money, thought, and driven by strong convictions, knowledge, and ethics.

Posterity will judge our generation harshly if we fail to act.

Barry Jones is an increasingly unhappy member of the Tepid Party, looking for courageous leadership.