**DEMOCRACY AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

Dinner address by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC to Collegiate Way International/University Colleges Australia Conference, Old Parliament House, Canberra, 16 November 2016

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Our presence here in this Old Parliament House, where I first learned the art of publicly acceptable adult misbehaviour nearly 40 years ago, and which has now been reincarnated as the Museum of Australian Democracy – a rather ominous title when you think about it – made my choice of topic this evening rather irresistible, as has the outcome of last week’s US Presidential election.

What many of us have been worried about for quite some time – the increasing dysfunctionality of our systems of representative democracy – came to a very visible head in the Trump victory, giving us as the most influential leader of the free world for the next four years, voted for (as well as against) by 60 million Americans, a vulgar, sexist, racist, ignoramus.

So let me talk to you about democracy and its current discontents, and what we might be able to do – at least in Western societies like our own – to restore some credibility to our governing systems. I’ll also try to offer some thoughts on what we here might specifically be able to do – we who have some responsibility for nurturing and mentoring those who we hope will be our next generation of political leader.

**Democratic discontent: the state of play**

Looking at the democratic state of play worldwide, it’s not a happy picture. We have **non**-democracies like China, where democratic values and systems have failed to gain any toehold at all. We have **façade** democracies, really de facto autocracies, who might have the trappings of elections, but lack the institutions or institutionalised right protections that give any content to the idea of liberal democracy – e.g. Russia, which may be a majoritarian democracy, but is not remotely a liberal one; or Cambodia, where the system is so corrupted it is not even clear that the government has a majoritarian mandate.. We have manifestly **illiberal** democracies – e.g. the Philippines under Duterte, Hungary under Orban, Poland under Kaczynski’s Law & Justice Party and Turkey under Erdogan. We might also have some latter day examples of what might be **Reichstag** democracies, where a democratically elected government uses that mandate to move to a fully authoritarian system – as may be happening in Turkey if present trends are not reversed.

Compared to that lot, being a merely **dysfunctional** democracy might not appear to be too bad. But in terms of the way our systems have been functioning in recent times in the US, Western Europe, and here in Australia, we do have a lot to be concerned about. We have seen a serious decline in the capacity of governments to govern effectively, with populist pressures and the associated rejection of ‘elites’ and ‘experts’ inhibiting good policymaking, and sometimes any at all; single issue parties and politics gaining ground, and the major parties losing support (or becoming captive to single issue politics – or both) ; internal stresses mounting (especially on the conservative side of politics, with a big cultural divide evident between those comfortable and uncomfortable with change; and a breakdown in civility in those systems which depend on this for their effective functioning, almost wholly (as in the US, with the division of power between President and Congress) or partly (as in the Australian Senate).

And we have seen the way in which dysfunctional democratic politics seems to be accompanied by a slide toward illiberal democracy – with the visibly growing strength of far-right parties in countries like France, Austria, Sweden and the Netherlands, and the emergence, albeit still only at the fringes, of the Hansonsites in Australia; we have seen Brexit in the UK, clearly driven at least in part by the nativist, anti-immigrant dimension at the heart of the UKIP campaign; and now the Trump phenomenon in the US, with the populism maybe primarily economically driven, but clearly also with a strong illiberal, racist dimension.

It’s not all bad news for the mainstream Western democracies. Reasonably functional democracy is alive and well in many parts of West with which we like to compare ourselves, like New Zealand and Canada; and there are still some good news stories to be found in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. But overall, the trend over the last decade has been to reverse many of gains of previous decades.

There is genuine ground for anxiety that the classical liberal democracy model – implemented through major parties of broadly left and broadly right of centre orientation competing for the centre ground and alternating in government – is losing its appeal. And there is genuine concern that accompanying this is a loss of capacity to deliver good economic policy (growth – and shared prosperity), good social policy (equitable and tolerant) and good foreign and security policy (protecting and advancing the country’s interests – in the broadest sense, including reputational interests). These trends have been evident elsewhere, and it can’t be assumed that Australia is at all immune from them.

We shouldn’t rush to assume that democratic dysfunction is a wholly new phenomenon. Romanticising the past can be too easy, and for all that many of us like to talk about the Hawke-Keating period as a golden age in Australian government, neither this or any other period was a golden age of bipartisan cooperation: nearly every one of the heralded big economic changes we made were fiercely opposed by the other side (although it is fair to say they were not subsequently unwound by our successors) – and the 52-hours I spent on my feet in the Senate fending off the Opposition’s assault on the Mabo native title legislation will be forever engraved in my memory.

I think that was the context in which I said to Senator Bronwyn Bishop, as she then was, that if she did not cease and desist from whatever provocations she was then hurling at me I would be tempted to ‘quietly, deliberately walk across the chamber and garrotte her’. In these properly more sensitive times, I would be more likely now to be on the receiving end of a motion for expulsion from the Parliament, if not public execution, than the polite request for withdrawal I then received from the chair (‘That is going a bit far, I think’). I can only console myself with the thought that, much more recently, United States Senator Lindsay Graham managed to escape such a fate when, equally outrageously, he said of a similarly under-appreciated colleague, ‘If you killed Ted Cruz on the floor of the Senate, and the trial was in the Senate, nobody could convict you.’

But, that said, it is harder to navigate Senate majorities than in the past. I had my problems with the Green Senators Chamarette and Margetts in particular, who I described at the time as having:

a total sense of their own rectitude on any given issue combined with a totally invisible conceptual framework within which that sense of rectitude operates. It’s almost random in its application. It’s anarchic. It’s nihilistic. Anywhere else in the world, you begin with the assumption that people have objectives they want to achieve. There’s absolutely none of that with the Greens. The notion of decisions flowing almost randomly in completely inconsistent directions makes them deeply comfortable.

But as bad as things were in the 1990s, the present scene in the Senate is even more like the bar scene from *Star Wars*: the combination of not only Greens and Xenophons, but now Lambie, Hinch, whichever non-bankrupt Australia First can find to fill its seat, and the bizarre gaggle of Hansonsites, is the stuff of which nightmares are made. And we have become acutely aware that governing in a policy vacuum, by reactive slogan rather than proactive substance, is not the thing of the past many of us on both sides of politics were rather hoping it would be after the unlamented departure of Mr Abbott. (That said, there are *some* three-word slogans in recent times that have had a certain visceral appeal. One I particularly treasure was a bumper sticker reading *Abbott’s Australia: Meaner, Dumber, Hotter*)

**Why liberal democracy is under strain**

The question that everyone is asking is *why* is effectively-functioning Western liberal democracy under strain? To this a fairly common set of answers are being given, with the main trends now quite evident in Europe and the US also showing up here to an ever-increasing extent. It’s a combination of three different kinds of anxieties, which have been mutually self-reinforcing.

The first is e**conomic anxiety.** The world not only *globalizing* but *digitalizing* at crazy speed: old jobs are being lost and people just don’t see where the new ones coming from. This kind of anxiety has been associated with every economic transformation since at least the agricultural revolution, and has usually proved unfounded as new technology and social and cultural change sooner or later created opportunities for many more than those displaced. The dramatic expansion of the service economy has been a huge absorber of the less skilled during the last series of changes, as familiar manufacturing jobs went offshore or disappeared, but most of the analysis I’ve seen is very pessimistic that that can be sustained: emptying Baby Boomers’ geriatric nursing home bedpans does not seem to be much of a foundation for confidence about the future of work.

People do feel that they are being left behind, and they are not satisfied by Turnbull-speak or its international equivalents -- talk about ‘exciting times’ and the miracles that innovation will produce. And they are not satisfied by economist-speak generally. Economists talk in aggregates, but people’s experience is granular, in microcosm: they can see there will be winners (the skilled), but *know* there will be losers (the unskilled, and those in certain locations). If there has been a loss of faith in experts and institutions, that’s because the experts have so often let down ordinary working people. The Global Financial Crisis of 2007- 08 is the prime example overseas: while that is less resonant here in Australia – because the underlying macro and micro-economy was stronger, and the crisis was much better technically managed. But there is a strong feeling everywhere that no one in authority is *listening.*

This is the first time in generations that parents are worried that kids will be worse off than they are, and in Australia in particular, that they will be unable to ever buy a house. People are more conscious than before of income inequality, and rightly so, because that is now gross by historical standards: whereas during most of my life there was an understanding, and acceptance, that senior executives of big companies could be expected to be remunerated maybe 15 or 20 times the income that of their lowest paid workers, that multiple has now blown out to up to 200 to 250 or more.

The second factor is **security anxiety.** Since 9/11 the fear of terrorism has been palpable, reinforced by horrifying further assaults in Paris, Madrid, Bali and elsewhere. While the scale of these incidents in Australia has been minimal by comparison, and the intensity of intelligence and law enforcement effort have meant that these risks have in fact been reasonably contained everywhere, no-one anywhere can assume immunity. There is a further longstanding fear in Western cities of violent crime, and – unhappily – a tendency to conflate with the fear of Islamist extremism, given issues associated with the absorption of large numbers of those displaced by the terrible continuing conflicts in the Middle East. Adding to the box of security anxieties, especially in the US, has been an understandable growing reluctance to be killed fighting what are seen as other people’s wars.

The remaining inter-related factor driving current unhappiness with traditional democratic politics is **cultural anxiety.** It is anall too familiar phenomenon for economic and security anxieties to manifest themselves as backlash against ‘the other’ – with complete indifference to evidence and rational argument, immigrants are seen as taking jobs, asylum seekers as taking welfare, and Muslims as threatening our security. Many people are inherently less comfortable with cosmopolitanism – with diversity and difference – than metropolitan elites assume, and this is much compounded when overlaid with economic and security anxieties. As one commentator in a national paper put it earlier this year: ‘the world looks quite different when viewed from Caboolture than Carlton’.

All this translates into a political environment where traditional **left-right** ideological orientation has to a significant extent morphed into much less tribal, party-rusted-on, cultural differentiation – between those more instinctively oriented to an **open,** and those to a **closed,** society. The key differentiating issues here are support for open rather than closed borders; free trade rather than protectionist barriers; a cosmopolitan society rather than one driven by nationalist and nativist sentiment; and an international outlook which is globalist rather than isolationist. To the extent these issues are becoming more salient differentiators than the traditional left-right ones, it is not surprising to see that more people are finding find major parties less able to meet their ideological and emotional needs, and become more willing under these circumstances to support single issue or limited issue groupings – protectionist like Xenophon/xenophobic like Hanson/ vaguely all-purpose idealist like the Greens – which they find more satisfying.

**Restoring democratic credibility**

So what is needed to restore effectively functioning Western liberal democracy? I think three big things, which might be summarised as new listening, new thinking, and new acting.

**New *listening*.** Given that there’s not much prospect of implementing Bertold Brecht’s famous suggestion – ‘Would it not be easier…for the government to dissolve the people  
and elect another?’ – the sensible course would appear to be not to blame the people, but to understand why they are reacting as they do: and that means leaders listening, and being seen to listen, not to lecture. Not many leaders in our recent Australian past have had that instinctive ability to connect: Bob Hawke was probably the last to be able to do that across pretty much the whole social spectrum, though John owHowH

Howard also seemed to manage it across a wider spectrum than I’m comfortable acknowledging!

**New *thinking*** means new policy approaches to the issues that are really resonating with the disaffected – above all being seen to seriously address the central concern that *no–one is left behind*. We simply have to find new ways of compensating, and trying to meet the life aspirations, of those who are now finding it very hard, and are going to find it even harder in the future if present trends continue, to be winners in the new economic environment. The Hawke-Keating Government was able to achieve massively necessary and long overdue economic efficiencies by combining very dry economic policies with very warm and moist social policies, and bundling the two together through the concept of a ‘social wage’, in which health, and education and other social spending, and national superannuation, were seen as more than making up what was lost from increased wages, and no tax reform was introduced except as a package in which gains and losses were seen as equitably balanced.

Maybe these kinds of strategies are harder to implement now. Maybe we have to start thinking about quite radical approaches, like Guaranteed Minimum Income or Universal Basic Income which are being trialled in Finland and looked at in Canada, New Zealand and elsewhere. But whatever the answers prove to be, it is imperative that our political leaders visibly start looking for them, and not just peddling the same old remedies, or looking for the same old (or new) scapegoats.

**New *acting*** means above all else bringing a new style to the business of politics, not just doing more listening, but making a genuine effort to be less confrontational and more cooperative in making and delivering policy. In government, that means focusing less on point scoring and more on finding common ground, supporting summits and consensus-building conferences of the kind that Bob Hawke made an art form. In Opposition it means accepting what the government of the day wants to do, albeit while spelling out the preferred approach the opposition party would have adopted if in power itself – and opposing outright only those measures which are absolutely fundamentally at odds with party policy or ideology. It’s fine for both sides to keep their product differentiation in key areas, to campaign hard on those policy differences, and go negative if they have to – but only when this is against a foundation of positives, and in the context of having a coherent overall philosophy and narrative.

The media have undoubtedly contributed to the present malaise with their infinite appetite for win-loss personality politics, ‘gotcha’ moments, and political blood-sport generally. But the current political generation doesn’t need to feed either the traditional media or social media beast as much as it does. In particular it should not be as spooked by the 24/7 media cycle as it has been: there’s a great deal to be said for the old rule (not that I always observed it myself!) of talking to the media only when you have something to say, not talking when you don’t. Not all publicity is good publicity.

What all this really boils down to is that most Western democratic systems – including our own here in Australia – badly need an infusion of good, old-fashioned political leadership, which has manifestly been in short supply. We will all have our own check-lists of what personal qualities are required for leadership positions generally. From my own body of experience in politics, international NGOs and education, I think that there are at least five qualities that you need to have – or at least persuade others to *think* you have, bearing in mind that, as Groucho Marx once said – and it could equally well have been Tony Blair – ‘The secret of success is sincerity: if you can fake that, you’ve got it made ’ These are a clear sense of direction, intelligent judgement, integrity, a strong work ethic, and above all *empathy* (a lack of which is often at the heart of administrative dysfunctionality and poor communication skills).

To hold down a political leadership position for any length of time I think requires all these qualities – if you lack any one or more of them your colleagues or the electorate will sooner or later find you out. But I’m afraid I have to acknowledge that to *acquire* that position in the first place requires yet another quality – and that is a degree of self-belief that defies normal human inhibitions. Those of us who have aspired or come close to political leadership do, I suspect, have a missing sensitivity gene of one kind or another. And for those who actually achieve high office, I suspect the omission is of seriously clinical significance: involving a level of insensitivity to what people think and say about you that most normal mortals would regard, rightly, as pathological.

**Preparing tbe next generation**

Be that as it may, I don’t think the reality that political leaders necessarily have to be slightly mad absolves us, as educators, from the responsibility of trying to mould the next generation from whom they must come. Trying to think, in the context of this conference – and meeting you at this dinner – as to what is the particular value-added that can be added by university residential *colleges* to that moulding process, I think perhaps that the answer is to do everything we possibly can to educate our students not only for employment but for *citizenship.*

Educating for responsible domestic citizenship is I guess something that good universities, and especially university colleges, do instinctively. I’m not thinking here so much of formal civics education to ensure that students know something about their own system of government – that *should* be done at secondary school – but rather inculcating the kinds of values, and encouraging experiences, which encourage civility in discourse, participation in direct or representative governing and policymaking processes, and developing a sense of membership of a larger community.

What I think we ought to be more self-consciously focusing on is educating not just for national citizenship but responsible *global* citizenship, recognizing that – whether people like it or not – we are living in an irredeemably global world, where isolationism, and protectionism and nativism are not paths to progress but dead-ends It was the Dutch scholar Erasmus who seems to have first used the expression ‘global citizen’:  And in the 16th century it was universities, much more than any other institution, that made that aspiration possible.  But it was then only for the tiny handful of men of letters who spoke and wrote in Latin or Greek, moved comfortably around, and helped build, the great centres of learning and debate of the time like Oxford, Cambridge, Padua and the Sorbonne. Now, five hundred years later, universities are still playing that role – of developing that sense of membership of a human community quite distinct from one’s own nation state – but in rather different ways, and on a vastly greater scale.

There are now around 150 million higher education students and staff worldwide, and some 3.5 million students travel abroad to study every year. A large number of them – some 7 per cent in fact of the world’s international students – fetch up in Australia; and, with one in five students at every Australian university drawn from overseas, we in fact have the most internationalized higher education system in the world.

There are three main ways in which universities generally (and in at least one of them, colleges specifically) can better educate for responsible global citizenship. First, through curriculum content: expanding horizons as much as possible, giving students the opportunity, and maybe even the obligation, to be exposed to subject areas and disciplines other than the ones in which they are immediately immersed, opening windows into infinitely fascinating landscapes they might never have previously known existed.

The object should be not only to broaden and deepen their  knowledge and understanding of other countries and cultures, but also their understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the world of the 21st century: how global supply chains work; how delicately poised the international financial system is; how, for all their wariness about the extent of each other’s power, the US and China remain joined at the wallet; how many global public goods issues – like coping with climate change, and health pandemics and unregulated population flows, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – demand cooperative action for their solution,  being absolutely beyond the capacity to address of any one country, or handful of countries, however big and powerful.

Second, universities should give students, to the extent they can, the opportunity to travel and live abroad, experiencing life and learning in a completely different environment. Persuade them, if they need persuading, that intense experiences they are bound to have out there on the road, just about anywhere in the world they go, are bound, again, to stay with them the rest of their lives, and profoundly influence the way they live their lives. Those experiences – and I say this very much with my own student travel in mind – will tell them more about the reality of our common humanity, and how profoundly important it is that we embrace and respect that in each other across all the human divides that exist, than almost anything else they could do.

Third – and this is very much within the remit of university *colleges* to try to deliver – ensure that domestic students share their study and social time with the  international students living among them, doing your best to persuade them that while  reaching out to those of other cultures and nationalities may be a little beyond their immediate comfort zone, in doing so they will make lasting,  wonderful and productive friendships, and be better equipped, emotionally as well as intellectually, to live in the world of the 21st century.

Beyond all these mind and experience-expanding efforts, there is perhaps a more basic role that educators like us should be playing if we want to ensure that our democratic systems remain more effective and less dysfunctional than they have been in recent times, or risk becoming. And that is to use all the resources of persuasion at our disposal to make the casefor *optimism*about politics and the political process, and the absolute necessity for young people to see active engagement in politics, at all levels from grassroots policy and campaigning activism to standing for parliament, as honourable, decent and exciting – and at least to respect that aspiration in others, even if they don’t want to pursue that course themselves.

It has been all too depressingly easy in the Australian political climate of the last few years, as has obviously been the case elsewhere, to be consumed by cynicism, scepticism and pessimism about the political process. Among the current generation of students there is a perfectly understandable disposition to regard those few of their own generation who are actively engaged in politics as either apparatchiks, losers or tragics. As a Millennial-generation recent ANU graduate recently put it to me rather nicely, ‘The trouble is that the bullshit detectors of Australia’s Gen Y are currently on overdrive. The ultimate challenge is to convince them that they can overcome that bullshit by engaging in major party politics themselves.’  
  
For all the horrors and stresses that can be associated with its practice, politics – and the chance that comes with it to be part of the government of the country – offers the chance to be part of something much bigger than oneself.  Only through politics can one shape and influence the whole future course of our society.  That may make it an attractive profession for those who are consumed with the exercise of power for power’s sake. But it also makes it a hugely attractive profession for idealists, as most of the younger generation instinctively are – and as surely we want them to be – and it’s our collective responsibility to *ensure* that they are.

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