

Just Comment: Consensual Democracy vs. Conflictual Democracy - Dream or possibility

The Dream

Following the 2010 federal election, the phrase 'new paradigm' was heard frequently, including the Opposition Leader's hope for a 'kinder, gentler, polity' that would draw the crucial Independents onto his side.ⁱ He lost, Labor formed government and he returned to his long-standing pursuit of 'adversarial politics'.

The Reality

An over-emphasis on adversarial or combative politics can lead to parliamentary ineffectiveness and a deprivation of the wisdom and contribution of half its members. An adversarial approach means conflict where beating the enemy at all costs means that truth and wisdom are early victims and whilst bickering occurs real problems are ignored and meaningful action is impossible.

As we busied ourselves in the lead up to the election, leaders bickered and policies relating to climate, indigenous people and immigration were suspended if not ruined. World events escalated and posed major problems: North Korea tested a nuclear bomb; Iran defied four rounds of UN Security Council sanctions and rushed towards a confrontation with Israel; Iraq's post-election parliamentary deadlock and instability served to strengthen and embolden Iran; Afghanistan's destabilisation and corruption continued; Pakistan's inability to deal with the recent flood disaster led to calls for the military to take over; systemic global crisis revived by hyperinflation of world food prices, imposed hardship and hunger across the developing countries threatening serious political destabilisation.ⁱⁱ

It has not always been this way. In 1952, whilst Australia was transforming itself into a more diverse nation, prime minister, Robert Menzies, did not seek to appease opponents but kept immigration rolling when most Australians wanted it reduced. This was possible because the Opposition supported a policy initiated in 1947. It was not a political issue. A Morgan poll in 2010 found 58% of Australians supported the official immigration program of 170,000 or wanted it higher and 40% wanted it lower, but many politicians tried to appease minority focus groups with scare campaigns. It was/is not only a failure of leadership, but an inability to produce bipartisan policies in the face of humanitarian concerns. The previous Howard government authored a high-immigration policy that his heirs now campaign against. It was a policy that recognised the need for many skilled workers and attracted skilled migrants was cheaper than training them in Australia. This policy is now judged as out of control. It is a failure to distinguish between opposition and opportunism.ⁱⁱⁱ

Social reform has come under the control of cynical calculators who measure success by winning elections, patronage and status on the political ladder. Political parties seek power, not change.^{iv} Causes have given way to careers. Even the party that had in the past raged against social and economic injustice saw the price of sporting equipment and white goods as

the only barriers to a fair society.^v No party can ignore the challenges of breaking the entrenched intergenerational, social and economic problems that create cycles of dependency. This becomes more difficult in the kill-or-be-killed game of politics when the Opposition leader is hell-bent on exterminating the government.^{vi}

The possibilities

Though there are politicians who would like to adopt a more meaningful, inclusive and less aggressive approach to politics,^{vii} civil and reasonable dialogue on major issues seems the exception rather than the norm, and the volume and shrillness of debate contributes to policy gridlock, civic disengagement, declining standards of behaviour, and lack of accountability. The role of leadership is to envision and enlighten, to put the national interest before personal gain, to think about the next generation rather than merely the next election, to look for what is right and good and fair so that most can agree to it rather than seek only to humiliate and embarrass political enemies.^{viii}

These make it difficult to maintain meaningful civic engagement and commitment, and to develop and sustain bona fide national policies off the back of national civic and civil values. We need go beyond the view that the status quo is the best one can hope for.^{ix} This is a point that many commentators are calling for.

The damage they do to public debate through spin, obfuscation, trivialisation and demonisation of others is the same as the vandalism of any other public property. But how to count the cost? As economic growth, social inclusion, poverty, health, housing affordability, infrastructure, population, immigration, water, climate change, education and crime confront us, we demand a more civil way to obtain better public-interest outcomes rather what reflects the 'pub brawl' which leaves important issues unaddressed.^x

Of course, bipartisan support itself is not always a guarantee of 'a good thing'. Overseas military deployments such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, on-going military aid to repressive regimes and the treatment of asylum seekers all have support from both sides of politics and as a result there is no real questioning of these violent policies.^{xi} When the views of a misguided section of the community becomes a central and bipartisan part of policy making, the result is an abdication of responsibility: 'Pandering to prejudices is easier than educating people to the truth'.^{xii}

Earlier in 2010, New York's mayor, Michael Bloomberg, took a principled stand when he defended the right for Muslims to build a cultural centre and mosque close to the site of the World Trade Centre where nearly 3000 people were killed on September 11, 2001. His inspiring words of support reflected real leadership and care rather than caving in to opportunistic manipulation of popular sentiment. Contrast that to a government that continues to play to the fears of a minority in marginal seats, parroting the expressions of focus groups rather than shaping the 'national conversation on the bedrock of principle, reason and evidence'.^{xiii} Australia is witnessing a race to the bottom where both sides frantically try to appease focus groups who fear 'their ceilings will explode at any minute,

that an Afghan village is about to move in next door and that, without another truckload of middle-class welfare, the new jet ski will remain beyond reach.’^{xiv}

Political leaders are expected to act responsibly, have a vision for us all and make decisions in the national interest. What sort of society do we want? Who do we care about? What can we do to forge a path to a society that is better, in every sense, than the one we have now? Or are our present circumstances all we can expect?^{xv}

Some good bets

The example of New York mayor Michael Bloomberg is an illustration of the possibilities open to leaders. He found a resolution that was nonviolent and encouraged cooperation and consensus.

A recent Australian example was Tony Windsor’s approach in response to the rural backlash to the Murray water buyback scheme. He suggested a way through where there was no ‘one size fits all’ for farming communities. That means resolutions valley by valley, even town by town, because of different impacts of change on a whole range of communities. He suggested that we walk slowly with the people that are affected and see if there’s a range of options that will fit their particular stressed circumstance. Some people may be able to make a 20% cut without real economic disadvantage. In other areas, 20% could annihilate a particular town. To overcome that, some sort of micro-management was necessary instead of throwing a blanket over the whole catchment. This way forward suggests that a committee process – rather than the usual combative politics - could work to bring people ‘from different political backgrounds together, engage with the community, look at the socio-economics of all of this, look at the various proposals as to whether there can be evaporative savings or there can be water introduced into the system, or which valleys will water use efficiency work better in or where will buyback be the most effective tool to get water back into the system?’ Though there would not be a ‘win-win’ for all, there would be a ‘better-better’. Windsor finds that people need some room to move to enable deeper solutions. The old conflicts would result in the worst thing for the river and the people living on it.^{xvi} There was an example of this on ABC recently: farmers freely giving up ‘their water’ so the wetlands would recover more quickly.

The challenge for us is what this approach models:

- It requires partnership
- It requires listening to the voices of the people most affected and often times are rarely considered
- It requires inter- and intra-dialogue amongst the parties concerned.
- It reminds us that that security should be based on trust not fear
- It calls us to stop demonisation in order to enter into dialogue

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