

Populism in Australia: Channelling Trump “Down Under”

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Australia's prime minister has been politically tone deaf for the duration of his tenure, which was won by the political assassination of his predecessor, Tony Abbott. Since being in power, he has squandered a workable majority, been held in a headlock by reactionaries in his party, and looking every bit the straw man of politics. As he withers, opponents within and without feed remorselessly.

While this slide into oblivion has taken place, the global brushfire of populism has done its bit to rattle a few of Australia's politicians. Generally speaking, the soil for revolt in Australia has generally been infertile, much like most of the hostile continent.

There have been sharp moments of inspired anger, usually confined to the agrarian and blue-collar segments of the population. Be it the disaffected worker, or the farmer at risk of losing his or her property, such individuals provide potentially rich pickings for demagogues and party strategists.

Again, such protests have been generally contained in brief spurts of electoral indignation: Pauline Hanson's One Nation successes in Queensland in the 1990s, for instance, and, then the party's resurgence among other curious fruit salad choices for the Australian federal senate in the last election.

Australian voters have generally detested those “pointy-headed” intellectual types, let alone anything remotely resembling cerebral noise: there has, in fact, been very little need to engineer a broad war against the experts, since they were never liked to begin with. Pragmatism remains cult and practice down under. Revolutionary potential there remains modest.

At heart, Australia remains, essentially, a conservative society more interested in interest rates and franked dividends than broader arguments about liberties, the grand vision of its place in the world or the vanishing society. Even Prime Minister Turnbull has publicly reneged on his Republican vision, preferring to praise Australia's titular head of state, the Queen.

Protest against the Trans Pacific Partnership has been, relative to counterparts in the US and Europe, murmurings of regret. The sovereign surrender of the country to both the unelected corporation and the United States as bully are features that are occasionally acknowledged, though never seriously.

This is the context with which Senator Cory Bernardi, one of Australia's true reactionary conservatives, has been working within. As far back as 2014, he was already telling the

National Press Club that voters were gravitating towards independents and minor parties – the big don'ts of the country's politics – as “a popular response to a perception of cowardice and distrust of the major parties.”

Dazzled by his time in New York on secondment to the United Nations, he returned to Australia convinced that there was something coursing in the waters. He was so convinced he started giving Turnbull a splitting headache, snipingly suggesting that his leader had lost, or at the very least misplaced, the plot. Kellyanne Conway, one of the architects of Trump's victory, loomed in his consciousness.

“The past weeks,” he said reflecting on his New York sojourn with callow optimism, “have been enlightening and filled with amazing experiences. In a sense, they have extended my understanding of what is possible and reinforced my knowledge of what needs to be done.”

His Damascus conversion meant the need to leave the Liberal Party, the bosom that had nurtured and warmed his conservative instincts for years. “My time in the USA has made me realise I have to be part of that change, perhaps even in some way a catalyst for it.”[1]

Modest to a fault. “If you didn't love a guy who was so in love with himself, you'd have a lot of trouble living with Cory,” observed his wife, Sinead. As far as ego is concerned, Bernardi has it in bucket loads.

His brief speech on the reasons why he was leaving the Liberal Party cherry pick the populist tree with self-serving grit. “There are few, if any, who can claim that respect for politics and politicians is stronger now than it was a decade ago.” (For those familiar with Aussie-gazing, Australians have never deemed politics a genuinely admirable pursuit now or then.)

According to Bernardi, “the body politic is failing the people of Australia and it's clear we need to find a better way.” The major parties had been a cause of “public disenchantment,” a “direct product of the political class being out of touch with the hopes and aspirations of the Australian people.”

Political tribalism in Australia deems such acts of defection and independence as perfidious. It reeks of the rat fleeing briskly from a sinking ship; it suggests a level of intelligence and opportunism higher than the primitive collective.

“Acts of disloyalty and failing to stand by your commitments,” comments Paul Colgan, “are hallmark drivers of the type of voter cynicism which Bernardi is railing against.” Having been elected a Senator on the conservative ticket, “he will now enjoy five years of using that platform against them, while sitting in the Senate trousering \$200,000 a year in taxpayers' money as salary.”[2]

What are, then, his chances in driving this new party? Small, if not microscopic. One Nation is far more likely to scoop a larger share, as would Family First. The church, one filled with sermons against climate change as a reality, the joys of the fossil fuel state, the evils of same-sex marriage, or the tyranny of progressivism, is already rather full and particularly noisy. Bernardi will find it hard finding a chair.

We can always say that Trump's chances at political glory were similarly limited, with chances deemed so obscure the Huffington Post refused – initially – to cover his candidacy other than in its entertainment section.

But unlike Trump, Bernardi is a professional politician, the very figure of the establishment common room that many Australian voters would have trouble identifying with. The immediate future is more prosaic, though no less problematic for the government. It means that Turnbull will have a fully-fledged reactionary on the Right of the spectrum, a person outside the tent piddling in: a grim proposition for him indeed.

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Notes

[1]

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/new-york-chill-fired-up-cory-bernardi/news-story/b8cefd48194da321683dd9dfc6e1dffa>

[2]

<http://www.businessinsider.com.au/cory-bernardi-and-the-confusion-of-australian-conservatives-2017-2>

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