

We, the populists

The perils of populism

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IN October 2010 Australia's Director of Military Prosecutions, Brigadier Lyn McDade, brought charges against three Australian soldiers, resulting from an incident in which six people were killed – one Taliban insurgent, but also four children and a teenager.

Australia's most famous talk radio presenter, Alan Jones, led a vociferous campaign against the prosecutions: 'The government should revoke the powers of this woman, and these charges should be withdrawn...Join the campaign to stop the prosecution of our troops doing what we sent them to do.' Jones frequently and vehemently denigrated the prosecutor, noting she had never been in combat or commanded troops in combat, quoting one listener who said McDade was trying 'to big-note herself; she has no idea'. Jones believes that the parliament should respond to the national anger about 'the obscenity of charging these people'.

Jones's style in this episode embodies the central elements of populism. There is an assumption that the truth is known and clear, and that no one of good faith could doubt or dispute the facts. There is a lack of respect for – indeed, a disdain for – due process, and a refusal to even countenance that these institutional processes (set in place under the Howard Government, not the Rudd Government as Jones asserted) might serve an important and legitimate function, or that there may be other dangers involved in so blithely recommending political interference in the (military) judicial system. There is the demonisation of the individual, 'this woman', seen as the villain, ascribing to her without evidence unworthy motives, and damning her legal expertise because of her lack of practical combat experience. There is an insistence on in-group virtue, an inability to believe that our troops could have done anything wrong. There is a lack of empathy or willingness to appreciate the feelings of the out-group, the Afghan victims and their families, or to contemplate how this might complicate any sense of 'what we sent [our troops] there to do'.

The populist strain in Australian politics and media has become more marked in recent years. When politicians are criticised for being populist it means that they are

pandering to what is popular, reinforcing public prejudices irrespective of their validity, over-simplifying and distorting policy options, taking the politically expedient rather than optimal or principled course. In Australia now, populism is a style rather than an institutionalised movement, but in other countries populist parties have played and continue to play an important role.

Historically, populism has described a type of political movement that is ideologically ambiguous, whose views do not fit neatly into a binary left/right opposition between state and market. Many of these movements arose in rural areas. Such agrarian populism often espouses 'producer economics', wanting security of income, to be insulated from the vagaries of prices fluctuating with strength of demand and protected from unfair foreign competition. 'Right' and 'left' populism are distinguished less by their economic ideology and more by the nature of their targets – typically, ethnic minorities or weak or deviant groups for the right; and powerful groups, such as business interests and large corporations, for the left.

Over the past two years Sydney newspapers have used the word 'populist' almost invariably without elaboration, and simply as a self-evident term of criticism. Often there is disagreement about what is dubbed populist – my charismatic speaker can be your demagogue.

In the *Daily Telegraph* nearly all references, particularly by its columnists, were critical of 'left' populism, moves by the government to tax mining companies or public criticisms of banks. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* almost all uses of the word were about 'right' populism: for example, hardline stances against asylum seekers or punitive attitudes towards crime.

THE MOST IMPORTANT populist groups in contemporary democracies are the radical right-wing parties of Western Europe, where the proportional-representation electoral systems make it easier for new parties to emerge and quickly gain a substantial legislative presence.

The most famous have been Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front party in France, Jörg Haider's Freedom Party in Austria and the Swiss People's Party. In the latter half of 2010 the formation of governments in two of the countries most associated globally with enlightened social policies depended on the decisions of far-right populist groups. The Sweden Democrats, who ran on the slogan of 'Keep Sweden Swedish', hold the balance of power with 6 per cent of the vote. Geert Wilders, who ran a campaign to stop the so-called Islamisation of The Netherlands, won a concession that the conservative government will ban the burka in exchange for his support.

Such parties are always greeted with particular alarm in Europe because they appear to evoke the past. But it would be wrong to see them as a contemporary

equivalent of Nazism or fascism, however distasteful their ideologies. Moreover, while there has been some political violence on their fringes, at least so far it has not been central. Despite the intolerance and xenophobia they espouse, these movements do not in the foreseeable future constitute a great threat to democracy, and certainly not one needing anti-democratic methods to combat them.

Though great publicity greets every success of these parties, it should not be thought that their course is always onward and upward. Indeed, they have suffered serious reverses. When they became part of governing coalitions in The Netherlands and Austria they were unable to translate their platforms into attractive and workable policies, and their support fell drastically at the next election. One of the nice things about bigots is that they tend to fall out with each other, and these parties are particularly prone to splits. Their impatience with, and contempt for, institutions means not only that they find it difficult to translate their slogans into policies, but also that they produce more than their share of scandals.

Populism takes different shapes, according to whatever grievances are animating the movement in a particular country. Populist parties tend to centre on a strong leader whose individual characteristics can shape their platforms. While most such movements tend to be anti-gay, the Dutch far-right leader Pim Fortuyn was openly homosexual.

They tend to have a cluster of issues in common. The most basic is the way they draw a sharp line between in-group and out-group. Most commonly this manifests itself in hostility towards immigrants and minority groups. The most obvious and ugly result when right-wing populists come to prominence is that hostility to ethnic minorities increases. A second cluster, sometimes overlapping, concentrates on crime, calling for stricter law and order, more punitive attitudes to criminals.

There is more variety and confusion in their attitudes towards government spending, especially the welfare state. Typically, there is resentment of those they consider unworthy welfare recipients, and hostility towards anything regarded as social experimentation or unorthodoxy that defies common sense. In addition there is a low opinion of 'bureaucracy', and a readiness to believe there are vast amounts of government waste. These are mixed in with calls for lower taxation and a belief that government budgets should always be balanced, although typically there are also calls for greater government spending in their own favoured areas.

THE FIRST AND most obvious damaging consequence of these right-wing populist parties is the way they raise the political temperature, mobilising discontents and directing hostility towards targeted out-groups. But another aspect of populism has its own negative consequences. According to the leading scholar of European politics Hans-Georg Betz, populism can be described not only in terms of ideology but by its characteristic style of argument. This is marked by a pronounced

faith in the common sense of the ordinary people; the belief that simple solutions exist for the most complex problems; and the belief that the common people, despite possessing moral superiority and innate wisdom, are denied the opportunity to make themselves heard.

Populism thus not only reduces the scope for tolerance and compassion in public life, but also for reason and dialogue, as evidenced in the Jones tirade about the Australian soldiers' military prosecutions. Because their favoured way is seen as the way of common sense, populists view all else as unacceptable, leading to an intolerance of alternatives – ideas that only fools or knaves could favour. The elevation of common sense often leads to a suspicion and rejection of expertise; and, although they are hardly alone in this, their political debate tends to proceed through the denigration of opponents, rather than the examination of evidence. At its worst, populism promotes betrayal narratives and conspiracy theories, the belief in evil forces that have betrayed the public.

The populist style of argument is most evident in the rise of the Tea Party in the United States and its favourite 'mom', Sarah Palin. In the American political system it is almost impossible for new groups to break the grip of the two major parties, so this is an internal Republican battle.

A distinctive aspect of American populism is the pronounced disgust with politics-as-usual. Government is pictured as full of self-serving hypocrites, experts who lack common sense and elites whose activities run against the interests of the people.

Palin contrasts 'real Americans' with 'East Coast elites', and claims that 'everything I ever needed to know I learned on the basketball court.' At her best, Palin's themes are leavened by a becoming homespun modesty. The eminent American journalist David Broder described this as her 'pitch-perfect populism': 'I do want to be a voice for some common-sense solutions. I'm never going to pretend like I know more than the next person. I'm not going to pretend to be an elitist. In fact, I'm going to fight the elitist, because for too often and for too long now, I think the elitists have tried to make people like me and people in the heartland of America feel like we just don't get it, and big government's just going to have to take care of us. I want to speak up for the American people and say: No, we really do have some good common-sense solutions. I can be a messenger for that.' But these pleasantries quickly give way to more sinister expression of such themes.

The Tea Party takes its name from the Boston Tea Party of 1773 – which, with its rallying cry against the British colonists of 'no taxation without representation', was a pivotal moment in the build-up to the American War of Independence. It is thus a symbolically powerful, if substantially absurd, name for the movement, which calls on 'American patriots' to 'take back' their country.

The anti-colonial imagery is less appropriate when the patriots are being asked to take back their country from other Americans. But rationality is not a major inhibition. An estimated one-quarter of Americans believe Barack Obama is not a Christian and was not born in the country. If he were born elsewhere, he would be ineligible to be President, and leading Republicans have encouraged this vocal minority. Sarah Palin said, 'I think the public rightfully is still making it an issue...I think that members of the electorate still want answers.'

A defining characteristic of the Tea Party is the way its members rejoice in the militancy of their rhetoric. When the Republicans had been criticised for being the party of no, simply opposing everything, Palin proclaimed her movement 'the party of Hell No!' After Obama's health care package was passed, she tweeted, 'Commonsense conservatives and lovers of America: Don't retreat, instead – RELOAD.' Soon after, her website featured pictures of Democrats in the crosshairs of a rifle sight.

A NEW FEATURE of American right-wing populism is that it is intertwined with Rupert Murdoch's Fox News. Fox has abandoned any pretence that its role is simply to report politics. Increasingly it acts as a player, one that has abandoned most senses of professional journalistic standards and constraints. It constantly promotes the Tea Party; and, while the most obvious feature of Fox is its partisan bias, its constant vilification of Democrats, perhaps even more important is the way it is a force within Republican politics, making the task of moderates in the party much more difficult.

Fox now has on its payroll four of the five leading potential Republican contenders for the 2012 presidential nomination: Palin, Newt Gingrich, Mike Huckabee and Rick Santorum. This creates its own complications. When an editor from another network wanted to interview Palin, he was told he would first have to get Fox's permission.

The network already had leading personalities, such as Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity, who were famous for their right-wing views and the way they used their programs as vehicles to promote them. But their 2009 recruit has, if anything, eclipsed them in both public profile and the extremity of his views. On 28 August 2010 Glenn Beck again made his own news by staging a Restore Honor rally in Washington, and attracting around 90,000 people.

In his first eighteen months on Fox News, Beck and his guests invoked Hitler 147 times, Nazis 202 times and fascists 193 times. These mentions were usually in reference to Obama. He claimed in one broadcast that the President has a 'deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture'. For Beck, progressivism, which he has called a cancer, is the enemy. Alluding to the mission of Jewish Nazi-hunters he says, 'To the day I die I am going to be a progressive-hunter.'

There has been widespread debate about the partisan effects of these developments. A Republican moderate, the former Bush speechwriter David Frum, forecast that while it would help the party in the mid-term congressional elections by mobilising the base, it will hurt it in the 2012 presidential and congressional elections, when turnout is much higher, by taking it away from the mainstream. The first part of his prediction proved correct in November 2010. But more important than whether Beck and his comrades at Fox News sway any votes is the way such rhetoric compounds intolerance and polarisation.

IT WOULD BE easy to sit back, as Australians are wont to do, and deplore the craziness of Americans. There is nothing as extreme and irrational as the Fox News and Tea Party rhetoric in Australian politics. But, arguably, there has been a similar trend towards anti-intellectualism and distrust of expertise in Australian public life. When the Murray-Darling Basin Plan was published in October 2010, angry farmers at one rally burned copies of it. This book-burning passed without condemnation, or even comment, by any politician or commentator. Barnaby Joyce, Leader of the Nationals in the Senate, has said he used Productivity Commission reports as toilet paper. Global warming, in particular, seems to have aided an increasing distrust of science and expertise in Australian, as in American, public life. There have been many media people peddling conspiracy theories. To the Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi the science is simple: 'The earth is actually not warming. We still have rain falling, we have crops still growing. We can go outside and we won't cook.' Tony Abbott was equally dismissive: it was just 'crap'.

While Australian populism draws on similar grievances and factors as populist movements in other western democracies, it occupies a different place in the Australian party configuration. Except for Pauline Hanson's relatively short-lived One Nation party, it is not marked by the emergence of new entities. What is perhaps most notable about populist issues in Australia at the moment is that the parties tend not to stake out explicit pro and con positions so much as seek to outdo each other in responding to – and at the same time reinforcing – the public mood. This was the case in New South Wales state politics for several years, where one party tried to outbid the other in a law and order auction, both seeking to demonstrate their superior toughness on crime.

AUSTRALIAN AND AMERICAN populist rhetoric share a similar counterposing of the elites and the people. According to Glenn Beck, 'on one side we have the elites, and on the other side we have the regular people.' The elite label was similarly used constantly to attack the democratic credentials of critics of the Howard Government.

The two labels, populist and elitist, capture curious ambivalences about our attitudes towards democracy, reflecting the shifting associations between popularity and virtue. 'Elite' has a positive set of connotations to do with achievement and

excellence. But in political discourse it carries connotations of exclusivity – of feelings of superiority to, and disdain for, the popular and ordinary.

‘Populist’ has a similarly long lineage and convoluted mix of meanings. Its roots lie in an upper-class distrust of democracy and distaste for popular culture. While the contemporary usage focuses on politics, the cultural uses to some extent run in parallel. In the arts, high culture is extolled as more authentic and deeper. A populist approach is derided when it implies that commercial success is achieved, and aimed for, at the expense of more artistic motivations. But this easily slides into a smug superiority towards anything popular. For some defenders of public broadcasting in Australia, for example, the assumption seems to be that the size of the audience is in inverse proportion to the height of the brow, a recipe not only for snobbery but for justifying failure.

Democracy celebrates the wisdom of the people, and popular support is the ultimate justification for a government and, often more problematically, for its policies. But again there is an ambivalence, captured in the contrasting postures in which leaders indulge. One common stance is to insist – bravely – that they will do what is right, what is in the national interest, irrespective of the political consequences, and not pander to what is popular. But equally commonly they adopt the stance – always humbly – of listening to the people, and showcasing their responsiveness.

Julia Gillard was ostentatiously listening to the people before the 2010 election when she paraded her concern about the most obvious example of populist politics, asylum seekers arriving by boat. The classic symptoms are present in abundance. Sympathies are determined with a strict demarcation of in-group and out-group. There is no sense of proportion in relation to the total number of immigrants arriving in Australia. Both parties – and the media – act as if the number of boat arrivals is principally or even only a matter of pull and not of push. There is almost no attention to conditions in the countries that ‘boat people’ have arrived from. All sides demonise people smugglers, as if highlighting their evil deflects the human plight of the asylum seekers. There is a determination to ‘protect’ Australia’s borders by processing people offshore, whether or not that is more cost effective than other options.

Again, in 2010, the similarities between the major parties were more marked than the differences. Neither was prepared to concede the populist ground to the other.

IN UNDERSTANDING THE increase in populism, and acknowledging the likelihood that it will continue, we need to appreciate both the demand and supply factors. The demand factors come from the resentments and insecurity generated by socioeconomic conditions. The pace of change and its relentlessness, the complexity of a globalised world and the challenges that confront it all contribute to political

disenchantment. Such feelings are far from universal. They are most likely to be present in groups feeling left behind by change, or when economic conditions are less buoyant. But there is likely to be a substantial constituency susceptible to populist appeals in the future.

Two factors are noteworthy. One is the disconnection between the sources of the anger and the targets against which it is politically expressed. Sometimes it seems as if there is free-floating resentment, ready to be attached to whatever scapegoat is to hand. Before the 2010 election Labor politicians stated how strongly people in Western Sydney felt about boat people. Whatever real grievances residents of that area have, boat people have done nothing to add to their problems.

The second is to understand the restorationist rhetoric in which their complaints are often framed. Populists frequently and fervently profess patriotism, but it is a patriotism expressing alienation from the actual country, from the present. They want to restore their country to a simpler, purer imagined past, to take it back from those who somehow have taken it away. This is the politics of estrangement masquerading as expressions of intense attachment.

While social conditions provide the fertile soil in which populism might grow, we need also to examine how such sentiments are fertilised, and here we need to look at trends in contemporary politics and media. The supply side has increased in tandem with political professionalism and ruthlessness, and with media shrillness.

The parties have become ever more calculating and cynical in their pursuit of political advantage. They are relentless in their determination to attack each other. The result is a constant stream of invective, nitpicking and slanderous character attacks. The fatuousness and hypocrisy of this posturing no doubt discourages many from tuning in to political debate.

But the parties have not only become more aggressive: they have also become more defensive, less willing to offer targets for the other side to attack. This caution has led them to depend on polling and focus groups as counsels of conformity. Increasingly they are unwilling to challenge public perceptions, whether these are soundly based or not. Instead we have both sides escalating rhetoric that caters to such prejudices.

Developments in the media have moved in parallel to exacerbate the trend towards populism. The 24-hour news cycle has become more intense, and as a result the total amount of information becoming public has probably increased. But, if anything, it has worsened the fragmentary way in which political arguments and evidence emerge, rather than enabling wider perspectives and aiding comprehension. And not only are the pressures for journalistic productivity increasing, but marketing seems to be ever more to the fore. Patriotism may be the last refuge of a scoundrel, but it is the first instinct of many news executives. The search is always on for stories that fit and reinforce existing public opinion.

Just as importantly, there are ever more outlets where the strength of opinion offers more commercial and personal reward than the uncovering of information. Commercial talk radio, the sensationalist presentations of the tabloid newspapers and the large number of columnists who rely more on opinion than analysis together form an ever louder echo chamber escalating the sensation *du jour*.

We are faced with a party logic and a media logic attuned to reinforcing rather than challenging public prejudices. Each abets the other in a chorus of conformity. Together they form an outrage industry that absents proportion, reason and reasonableness, and where it is difficult – soon, perhaps, near impossible – to have a measured debate of policy options. It is unlikely that populism will beget a significant radical-right party in Australia. But with the current mix of political and media incentives, the populist mood in Australian politics is not likely to change. Those whinging elites will continue to have much to be unhappy about.