

Centre of politics pulled apart by outsider centrifugal forces

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The great political lesson of the “black swan” 2016 year of disruption is the tearing apart of the political centre and the rise of radicals, populists and frauds from opposing ends of the political spectrum defying conventional wisdoms and up-ending weary orthodoxies.

Amid the confusing trends in varying countries, the weakening of the political centre — once the main battleground of politics — and the rise of polarising forces on the Left and Right is the pivotal event with the most alarming consequences. This model is most obvious in the US, where Bernie Sanders erupted from the Left in the Democratic primaries and Donald Trump took over the Republican Party from the populist Right.

Historical comparisons are useful yet misleading. It was, however, the 1930s that saw a deep polarisation when Fascists and communists in Europe became the ideological beacons and the weak middle ground testified to a decline of Western democracies.

In compulsory-voting Australia most of the postwar period has been dominated by the Coalition-Labor competition to win the “politics of the centre”, with the inevitable and desirable result being that ideological extremes were marginalised.

“I see particular commonalities in the rise of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders,” Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of France’s National Front, told Foreign Affairs magazine. “Both reject a system that appears to be very selfish, even egocentric, and that has set aside the people’s aspirations. There is a form of revolt on the part of people against a system that is no longer serving them but rather serving itself.”

Australia has no Trump or Sanders or Le Pen. What happens if their equivalent does emerge? Australia exhibits to a far less degree the trends in other Western democracies. But distrust of the major parties is growing as part of system disillusionment, with the recent Newspoll showing a total of 75 per cent primary vote support for the major parties and the Fairfax/Ipsos poll showing only 66 per cent such support.

Every sign is that politics is being reshaped, with the Greens, Pauline Hanson’s party, Nick Xenophon’s party and a “revolving door” of Senate minor party candidates now entrenched in influential positions in the Australian parliament. The appeal of the “outsider” trading on grievance and exploiting regional and demographic alienation is the new gospel. The question for Australia becomes: is such disillusionment now factored into our system or does the tidal wave of disruption still lie ahead fed by economic downturn and cultural conflict?

Malcolm Turnbull was re-elected this year and Labor under Bill Shorten staged a year-long surge in the polls. Yet neither looks convincing. The latest trend in political discourse cannot be missed: lumping Turnbull and Shorten together — despite their hefty policy differences — as figureheads of a discredited system and a polemic technique to promote the outsiders to “shake up the system”.

The upshot is a vicious circle of failure — a dysfunctional parliament unable to address national problems in relation to the economy or budget. Governments are in office but not in power. Decisions are impaired or not taken. Governing is more difficult; reform is more difficult still. The result is obvious: the system is further discredited and support for outsiders keeps growing. When does the bubble burst?

The litany of the optimists — that such diversity will encourage compromise and better outcomes — must be a joke. The answer is more of Hanson or Xenophon or the Greens or Derryn Hinch? The only trouble with this polemic is the evidence against it. The recent Senate negotiations over the Australian Building and Construction Commission bill — a flawed law from a chaotic process — testify to the authentic decline of the system.

Elections are the lifeblood of democracy. But our national elections are failing in their purpose: they deliver weak government and they fail to resolve issues. What happened after the last election? Labor lost but acts as if it won. The Coalition won but struggles to assert its authority. Deadlocks on the budget, economic policy, climate policy, tax reform and the same-sex marriage plebiscite are the main story. Turnbull correctly points to the legislative progress he has made, but that comes at a cost. Ministers are pragmatists: they have no option but to work with a system of declining utility.

Ideological obsessions are strong within the major parties on the high-profile issues of climate change and the economy. Where is the centre ground? It is being sacrificed to ideological fixations. Last week was a watershed for climate change policy in Australia. Labor runs an ideological mantra that will hurt living standards and investment with its 50 per cent renewable target by 2030 while the Coalition has decided it cannot abandon its ideological rejection of emission trading or emission intensity schemes — the latter cannot even be assessed despite evidence of its efficiency.

On Friday at the Council of Australian Governments meeting, the Prime Minister and premiers barely concealed their core divisions. Three Labor states refused to sign the new intergovernmental agreement on competition and productivity. Having a quarter of negative growth had no impact on these splits. Much of the press conference was consumed with ideological differences over climate change.

In Australia the weakening of centre-ground politics and the rise of new forces on the Right and Left is much less pronounced than in the US and Europe. But the trend is under way. It has three sure consequences: weaker government, ideological conflict and a decline in public policy. None of this is to deny that Trump, as president, will deliver some good results after the disappointing legacy of the Obama era. Nor is it to deny the central causes of the new populism: the sustained failure of elites in the US and Europe during the past 10 years in economic, social and cultural policy.

The reality, however, is that our politics is changing in fundamental ways. The age of the permanent campaign is at hand with Trump, as president, probably bringing this technique to a new peak. Can anyone doubt Shorten is waging a permanent campaign or that Tony Abbott did before him?

Fragmentation of media is accentuating fragmentation in politics. In Obama's recent interview with David Remnick in *The New Yorker*, he said the new media ecosystem "means everything is true and nothing is true". The agreed factual foundation for political debate is disintegrating. Remnick said of politics today that "what frustrated Obama and his staff was the knowledge that, in large measure, they were reaching their own people but no further". They could never reach behind the collective wall of the Right's media and social media edifice and, of course, the same argument applies to the Left. People choose media to reinforce their belief system. So the centre is weakened further.

The US election revealed a frightening decline in standards of discourse, with Obama saying "until recently, religious institutions, academia and media set out the parameters of acceptable discourse". But this has changed with a "social permission" for Trump's aggressive language in relation to race, ethnicity and women. Trump was retaliating against the destructive and patronising identity politics used by the Left. The upshot again is apparent: the language and debate around politics is being shaped not by the centre but by the ideology of a polarising Left and Right.

As a resilient and successful society, Australia's defences against such destructive trends are not to be underestimated. Yet the forces driving the new populism and the decline of the political centre are immense. They are starting to penetrate in this country and the result will leave us diminished.