

Liberals should pin poll hopes on a working-class plan

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The defection of Cory Bernardi is a seismic event in our national politics. It is a crisis for the Liberal Party. Let's leave aside judgment on the morality and effectiveness of the senator's move. It is worth trying instead to understand the crisis in Australian politics in its international context.

That is not to deny Bernardi the full measure of his political free will, his own agency. But what is happening here is symptomatic of the broader crisis in Western politics. We are living through our version of the dynamics that elected Donald Trump, brought Brexit and which threaten an electoral tsunami in much of Europe this year.

It is impossible to forecast who wins and who loses in all this. How can this be when the crisis in the Liberal Party is so great? Yet Donald Trump was a crisis for the Republican Party; it now holds more state and national offices than at almost any time in the past century. Similarly, Brexit was a shock.

The Right should not take too much comfort from this. Trump's victory was lucky, a statistical fluke — so many states were narrowly won and he lost the popular vote by three million. More relevant to Australia, perhaps, a perfectly good, stable, successful centre-right government — Stephen Harper's in Canada — was defeated by a virtual pop star with no political achievements.

Politics is completely unpredictable now. As yet, nothing is won, nothing is lost. Everyone in Australian politics has everything to play for. The number of factors at work is vast. Marxists were wont to distinguish between the objective and the subjective factors. It is always possible for the subjective to overwhelm — any actor can play their hand so badly that they lose, no matter how promising the circumstances.

To isolate some of the objective factors, consider what Trump, Brexit and the rise of the European Right have in common. All involve large numbers of working-class people abandoning parties of the centre-left and voting for traditionally right-wing parties or causes. Although all the disruption seems to be on the Right, it is actually the centre-left parties that have paid the biggest penalties.

Trump hurt Hillary Clinton much more than he hurt the Republicans, though that could well change if his presidency unravels. In the short term, he has stolen working-class voters from the Democrats in the midwest. UKIP destabilised Britain's Conservative Party and brought about Brexit. This cost Conservatives a leader, Europe was supposedly their nightmare issue. But it has torn the Labour Party to bits as its core voters outside the inner cities desert it.

Much is made of the peculiar circumstances of our time — income stagnation for the bottom half of society, episodes of corruption or extravagance discrediting the political class and so on. But in the past 100 years it is not so strange for the Western working class to switch from Left to Right. It frequently does this if the Left loses credibility in national security or economic management.

Beyond that, there are two positive ideological issues that have often driven structural change in the working-class vote, from Left to Right: social values and nationalism or patriotism. Both are tricky for the Right to use effectively but can yield dividends. Both are very much in play now.

On social issues, working-class people are typically more conservative in outlook than the academic classes. But they are not reactionaries, they are not restorationists, wanting a return to the 1950s or before.

However, they value common sense much more than more academic folk, and they have a great distrust for social ratbaggery. The contemporary Left's embrace of toxic identity politics creates a target-rich environment for the Right. The key is to expose the innate lunacy, the grievous offence against common sense that modern identity politics represents.

In Orwell's terms, you have to be an intellectual to support things like the Safe Schools program, the way section 18 C of the Racial Discrimination Act operates, different rules for people of different backgrounds, postmodern approaches to learning, for no normal person could be so stupid. Working-class people are acutely sensitive to manifest nonsense being spruiked to their children.

Clinton's embrace of identity politics was fundamental to her defeat. Her embrace of Black Lives Matter — which they certainly do — but declaring it unacceptable to say all lives matter, and even more unacceptable to say blue lives matter, ensured that almost every police officer, and everyone who cared about a police officer, voted for Trump. The key to defeating toxic identity politics is to expose the radical and extreme nature of its content, the sheer, unrelenting idiocy it represents.

The other lesson for the Liberals — and this is absolutely crucial — is that while these issues must be approached with care, you can't win if you won't fight. Some Liberals misinterpreted Malcolm Turnbull's early popularity as PM to conclude that political success required mainly a pleasant technocratic leader of a pleasant technocratic government. Dead wrong.

The government is right to use powerful rhetorical words such as practical and pragmatic to describe its policies but it cannot hold on to office by dodging the great ideological fights. Politics is a business red in tooth and claw. You can win only by polarising the electorate in favour of one approach and against another. This is still a government which doesn't show enough fight. The recent commitment to fight for coal may be a sign of change. The government should look to create moments such as the one John Howard achieved when he was cheered by timber workers. They weren't cheering for economic management in the abstract. They were cheering for Howard because he was fighting for their specific jobs which were threatened by Labor and the Greens.

Patriotism, which is a noble emotion and which never really goes away, is the other big, historic vote changer for working-class people. It certainly worked for Trump, it worked in Brexit and is once more powerful in Europe. It is a natural for the centre-right and the further right and is structurally available to incumbent governments. But they have to fight. It is almost criminally negligent that the government fails to provide a proactive narrative on defence and security. Defence and strategic matters more generally — national security, patriotism — appeal viscerally to working-class voters and to new migrants who have chosen to identify with their new nation. But you won't win on these issues if you don't fight on them.

The conservative electoral quest — for a political and social majority — always rests on this same demographic, though it has many different names: Reagan Democrats, Howard's battlers, hard hats for Nixon, Tony's tradies, French Poujadists, Margaret Thatcher's former council renters who bought their homes under her reforms, anti-communist Catholic Australian Labor voters who left the party in the Cold War — they are the elusive structural swing factor in all Western politics.

Does Bernardi have anything to say to these people? Does he, like Pauline Hanson, take some of them away from the government, or will he and Hanson, like UKIP, act surprisingly as a reverse bridge to bring working-class voters to the Right?

No one yet knows. It's all to play for.