

Mainstream pulls reins on runaway political masters



Marine Le Pen is not expected to win the French presidency at this stage.

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Wandering around the US last month I was reminded about the less than compelling place that partisan politics has in our daily lives.

Even in the Democrat heartlands of California and Hawaii, whether in the big cities or the back blocks, Americans didn't mention politics or their new President unless I raised the topic. They were — to use a phrase — relaxed and comfortable; just getting on with their lives.

This, of course, should be no surprise and it merely confirmed my instincts as I mulled over what we are told are tectonic shifts in the political mood in Western liberal democracies. Brexit, Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen and even Pauline Hanson are often characterised as evidence of a far-right, populist upsurge. This analysis often veers into patronising or demeaning references to the voting public.

If this were true, what could be the trigger? Why would this be happening? And where will it take Australian politics?

Perhaps much of the political/media class has misjudged what is going on. Maybe this is less a case of the public mood shifting than voter realisation that the political/media class has shifted from a once centrist axis.

In the broad, voters have a tendency to be more consistent. Maybe, rather than behaving with volatility, they are the ones who have applied, or are applying, a corrective on a runaway political/media class intent on a damaging progressive course. Central in this

corrective is a reassertion of a fundamentally sensible principle: the primacy of the nation-state and the sacredness of sovereignty.

The voting public has shown it values the cultural and institutional heritage — the hard-won gains — of its liberal democracies more highly than the political/media class, which seems willing to risk bedrock priorities such as national security, border control or separation of church and state to ingratiate themselves to virtue-signalling contemporaries or to win approval from non-government organisations or supra-national bodies. The political/media class, for instance, would allow free movement across borders into Europe, the US or Australia so as not to wear the opprobrium of the UN — the same UN that puts countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran on bodies promoting women's rights.

Much of the political class in centre-right and centre-left parties, and throughout media and academe, would portray so-called Islamophobia as a bigger threat than Islamist terrorism.

Voters have been calling time on this sort of nonsensical posturing. Brexit is perhaps the clearest example because there was little by way of personalities or party politicking that contaminated the referendum about membership of the EU. Indeed, the major party and media consensus favoured the remain case. But voters preferred Brexit. The political/media class still derides this as a foolish, regrettable and even xenophobic decision, yet it was eminently sensible. This was reclamation of sovereignty and is likely to be reaffirmed at next month's general election.

The public probably has been quite steady on all this through the years, but the political/media class had rushed on without it, ceding ever more bureaucratic, legal, economic and immigration power from London to Brussels. Given the chance, voters opted to protect what they had rather than risk further experimentation and diminution of their sovereignty.

The nation-state matters. Borders are meaningful. Immigration needs to be organised. The rule of law and equality before it must take precedence over cultural tolerance. This is not reactionary. This is not a redneck backlash. This is rational. It is common sense.

And it represents a commitment not to squander the unequalled gains and privileges of Western civilisation.

To the extent we are seeing culture wars, they are eminently justifiable. Our culture and what it has nurtured — from science and technology, through democracy and the rule of law, to high art and unprecedented standards of living — represents the pinnacle of civilisation to this time, and the aspirations of just about everyone on the planet except those who would tear it down to create a bleak caliphate.

Mainstream people know this, even though the political/media class has made us almost ashamed to say it.

There should be no need to apologise for defending this bounty, this legacy.

In America, eight years of Barack Obama saw endless apologies for American exceptionalism and a retreat by the US from its role as a global enforcer of order. The Republican Party was unable to coalesce around a strong establishment candidate, so voters were left with a choice between two unappealing options.

One of them, however imperfect, actually spoke about reasserting sovereign priorities on foreign policy, immigration, economic development and trade. When the alternative was more of the same progressive drift, Trump became a viable option.

In France the differing dynamic fits the pattern even though Le Pen is not tipped to win (at this stage). To understand her success so far we have to consider the Muslim integration problems that have manifested in no-go zones, social strife and horrific terror attacks, as well as the example of Britain showing that it is possible to turn your back on Brussels (and Berlin).

The point is that whether you endorse these correctives or not, they are understandable and rational.

So Malcolm Turnbull will be making a major miscalculation if he dismisses these trends as some far-right or conservative backlash that he must resist at home; quite the opposite. If he further blurs the distinction between the Coalition and Labor he will embed the perception that the political/media class has drifted from mainstream values. This will only inflame the corrective we have started to see already through Hanson's One Nation and Cory Bernardi's Australian Conservatives, and deliver Bill Shorten into the Lodge.

Turnbull has had one of his better weeks since taking over the prime ministership. His natural instincts for deal-making have produced an ideal (if expensive) outcome for Sydney's second airport and a plausible (if also expensive) compromise on education funding. We can expect to see something similar on Medicare funding in the budget. This is all aimed at neutralising difficult issues for the government and stemming Labor attacks, which is well enough as far as it goes.

But to capture a sense of purpose for his government and provide a reason for re-election, he must accentuate some differences. Labor has been soft or wrong-headed on visceral issues such as borders, budgets, Islamic extremism and climate/energy pricing, but the government has not taken advantage.

The Coalition faces a relatively easy task — should it recognise it — of convincing the public it is the party that can be trusted to strongly defend and protect the hard-won qualities, values and priorities that underpin our prosperity and security. Whether they have been here for generations or arrived last year, Australian families, in the main, will value strong borders over UN posturing, solid schooling over gender and sexuality options, affordable energy over climate gestures, balanced budgets over grand promises, and job opportunities over union deals.

The Coalition has surrendered enough already, giving up its advantage on leadership stability and gradually reducing its dominance on fiscal rectitude. It needs to press home key differences that advance the national interest.

Given where Labor is on the defining issues — divided and weak on borders, high risk on energy pricing and firmly in favour of higher taxes and deeper deficits — Turnbull is fortunate indeed. Aligning with mainstream sentiment should be easy.

Capping the renewable energy target would be the best start and most worthwhile battle. The greatest threats to the Coalition are the lure of political/media class approval, limiting itself to what the Senate will allow and showing a lack of confidence in its values.