Anti-political sentiment in contemporary liberal democracies

Michael Hogan, The University of Sydney

ABSTRACT

A healthy liberal democracy depends upon the willingness of citizens to appreciate the value of the institutions and processes that are central to its operation—genuine elections, representative assemblies, political parties, politicians with human frailties, and the need for compromise and protection of the interests of minorities. This paper compares the anti-political sentiment of the 1920s and 1930s (when many democratic regimes were swept away by fascist and authoritarian governments) with more contemporary forms of anti-politics. It asks whether there is an imminent threat to the survival of liberal democracy and suggests areas that need reform.

Michael Hogan <m.hogan@econ.usyd.edu.au> is an Honorary Associate in Government and International Relations at The University of Sydney. He is the author of many books and articles, including The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History *(1987) and* Local Labor: A History of the Labor Party in Glebe 1891–2003 *(2004).*

ISSN 1832-1526
Australian Review of Public Affairs
Volume 8, Number 1: August 2007, 1–18
© 2007 Faculty of Economics and Business, The University of Sydney

A certain degree of suspicion about the work of politicians—even some political cynicism—seems to be healthy for modern liberal democracies. Not all political systems have made suspicion about the exercise of power, or the need for 'checks and balances', as central to their constitutional arrangements as the United States, but virtually all recognise the reality expressed by Lord Acton that all power tends to corrupt. Consequently, most of the central institutions of modern democratic states have built into them some mechanisms for guarding against political corruption and the arbitrary use of power. Representative assemblies, courts, and the mass media have special responsibilities in this regard.

This paper focuses on liberal democracy, for which there is no adequate and accepted definition. There are huge variations among contemporary regimes describing themselves as 'liberal', 'democratic', or 'liberal democratic': differences in political and social institutions; constitutional safeguards; political culture and history; or the willingness of elites and non-elites to accept compromise. The questions asked in this paper can be asked of them all—wherever there is competition between politicians and/or political parties that can influence the way a society functions. However, it is precisely among those regimes that have some claim to be most 'liberal' or 'democratic', especially the economically prosperous and long established western nations of North America and Europe, that the suggested answers may seem most surprising.

Although some measure of popular cynicism seems to be the norm, not all its consequences are positive. British academic, Bernard Crick, saw the need to point out that liberal politics in Europe after the Second World War was actually doing quite a good job. His book, *In Defence of Politics*, was first published in 1962, but has been revised and re-edited many times since then because that point still needed to be made for the rest of the century.[1] Politics, for Crick, is the messy, usually incremental, process of making policy by persuasion in a world of complexity. It is a process that involves compromise, where the rights of minorities are protected at the same time as majorities achieve many of their demands. It is brokered by politicians, especially within and between political parties, through tasks such as interest articulation and interest aggregation, so that citizens in elections can choose the package of issues that most attracts them, even though some items in any package may be merely tolerable and not positively desired (Hogan 1986). Anti-politics, then, involves a rejection of that kind of political activity: because of disillusionment about corruption in politics and politicians; because of a dissatisfaction with incomplete remedies for problems; because of a belief that there are always simple solutions to any problem; or because compromise seems to involve a denial of precious or absolute values.

---

[1] The most recent edition is the 5th, published in 2000.

The extent to which suspicion of politics remains healthy for any particular political culture is a matter of degree. There are historical examples where a strong rejection of conventional political activity has become a threat to the continuation of democratic regimes. The clearest example can be found in the widespread European rejection of liberal democracy, with the adoption of various forms of fascist and authoritarian rule in the 1920s and 1930s. In many cases it was elected politicians themselves who helped install such regimes. Not every European nation succumbed to anti-political pressure during that time, but virtually all were affected by it. The same trends were clear in the Americas and in Antipodean democracies such as Australia and New Zealand. Anti-politics, in the sense of distrust of deliberative elections, competing political parties, and representative democracy, has also been one of the defining characteristics of authoritarian regimes both of the Communist and anti-Communist kinds.

There are clearly great variations in the amount of trust or distrust of politics. There have been a number of periods when a wave of optimism and trust in political activity has swept round the world. The clearest example was the hope that the First World War (1914–18) really was the war to end all wars, along with a wave of initial popular enthusiasm for the plans of American President Wilson that resulted in the League of Nations. Sadly, it soon became clear that attempts to moderate conflict between nations and ideologies were not going to satisfy many nations, let alone prevent another war. Similar hopes that politicians could create a new order of peace and harmony can be detected after the Second World War. At a national level the fall of authoritarian regimes often provokes a popular enthusiasm for democratic politics, as in the period of democratic transition in post-Franco Spain or the post-Marcos Philippines. The rallying cry of 'people power' has become one of the expressions of a trust that politics is healthy when it has close links to the common people. In almost all these cases the period of enthusiasm, trust, and hope has been short lived. The choice has been made clear that the only alternative to war or authoritarian rule is democratic politics.

Yet suspicion returns. At the beginning of the 21st century there are some signs that anti-political sentiment is alive and well in most working democracies. There is room for argument about whether it is increasing compared with previous stages in the 20th century, and whether it is approaching a stage where it might become a threat to the survival of regimes. One commentator has argued that even the elitist version of democracy described by Schattschneider (1960) where the people do not rule, but merely choose which elites will govern, is losing its relevance:

> For today even semi-sovereignty appears to be slipping away, and the citizenry are becoming effectively non-sovereign. What we see emerging is a notion of democracy that is being steadily stripped of its popular component—democracy without a demos (Mair 2006, p. 25).

Several characteristics of anti-political sentiment are unique to the age we live in. Examining these, and making some comparisons with the conditions of the fascist era, might help to suggest a way forward.

ANTI-POLITICS BETWEEN THE WARS

There were clear signs even before the outbreak of the First World War that liberal democracy was under strain in number of developed countries. This was not surprising, since liberal democracy had very fragile roots in all but a few nations such as Britain, the United States, or Switzerland, and even in those the stresses were obvious, as in the constitutional confrontation between the elected government and the House of Lords in Britain, or successive waves of populist sentiment opposed to corrupt political machines in America. The core nations of continental Europe—France, Germany, Italy, and Spain—exhibited some of the forms of liberal democracy but not the consensual political culture needed to maintain it. As Eric Hobsbawm (1994, p. 110) points out, the First World War initially seemed to revive the prospects for liberal democracy:

> Politically, indeed, the institutions of liberal democracy had advanced, and the eruption of barbarism in 1914–18 had, it seemed, only hastened this advance. Except for Soviet Russia, all the regimes emerging from the First World War, old and new, were, basically, elected representative parliamentary regimes, even Turkey.

That comment, however, appears in a chapter entitled 'The fall of liberalism', because within a few years the dominant model had become some kind of authoritarian rule—fascist, corporative, or military. Why was liberalism so comprehensively rejected, except in a few of the older democracies?

Hobsbawm is almost certainly correct in giving priority to an economic explanation. Except in America, national economies refused to revive to pre-war levels, so that even in the 1920s high levels of unemployment and poverty were normal in most developed nations. The key European economy of Germany virtually collapsed under the scourge of hyperinflation. Then, at the end of the 1920s, the Wall Street Crash in America set off the catastrophic Great Depression of the 1930s. Not only were liberal regimes discredited because they could find no answer to the economic problems, so that pendulum swings of party support at elections seemed to change nothing, but there seemed to be some evidence that authoritarian regimes could be more successful. Certainly, once Hitler revived the German economy by pouring state capital into his preparations for war, the trend away from liberalism became a full retreat. Even if only as an early example of political 'spin', Mussolini's promise to make the Italian trains run on time became an appealing dream for many citizens in other countries critical of the seeming inefficiency of their liberal democratic governments.

Faced with what appeared to be insurmountable economic problems, many people found faith in simplistic economic theories that seemed to promise a quick fix simply by manipulating the money supply. Such 'funny money' theories had also been popular in the previous worldwide depression of the 1890s, when Henry George gathered disciples for his Single Tax doctrine, which proposed taxing only land (and therefore only landholders), and abolishing all other forms of taxation such as tariffs or income taxes (George 1883). In the 1930s there was a similar popular enthusiasm for Social Credit (which proposed that governments make up for deficiencies in purchasing power in the community by making adequate credit available to all, while guaranteeing just prices and incomes) and similar solutions (Douglas 1924). The important point is not that such ideas were popular, nor that they were necessarily devoid of merit. The problem was that by promising a simple solution to an enormously complex problem they repudiated conventional liberal politics, which at least recognised the complexity. They might have been adopted by some politicians and political parties, but they were fundamentally anti-political.

Along with depressed economic conditions went a fear of revolution among the middle classes. Various parties/movements/ideologies competed to attract the have-nots, including a wide variety of forms of socialism and anarchism. In particular, the Soviet Union provided a working model of one alternative to liberal democracy, so that fear of Communism became a paranoid feature of the political culture in most developed nations. Although the Soviet model was potentially exportable, again Hobsbawm is correct in pointing out that the overwhelming challenge to liberalism between the wars came from the political Right. That said, the forces on the political Left which defended liberal constitutionalism in many countries were scarcely the kind of allies that liberal democracy needed at the time. For example, with supporters like much of the Left in the Spanish Republic (1931–39) and Civil War (1936–39), the resulting chaos in its liberal regime was not surprising. Even where they were not corrupt or ineffective, politicians of all shades in many liberal regimes between the wars seemed to give more attention to divisive rather than constructive policies.

National and ethnic identity was clearly an important consideration in inter-war politics. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires at the end of the First World War had resulted in a wholesale shakeout of national boundaries. In retrospect one can appreciate that there was very little chance that many of those lines on the map could survive long. There were too many displaced ethnic minorities on the wrong side of what appeared to them to be arbitrary borders. Parliamentary debate showed no indication of being able to solve the issues. The pan-Germanism of Nazi Germany was merely one of many pressures promoting force as a remedy for the situation.

The issues of ethnicity and concern for economic security came together in one of the most destructive tendencies of the 1920s and 1930s—the rise of anti-Semitism. Why is

the economy in chaos? Blame the Jews. Again, this was a fundamentally anti-political ideology. Effective liberal politics seeks to find solutions that will protect the rights of minorities, while anti-politics too often seeks solutions by finding someone to blame and looking for conspiracies. That is part of the attraction of an authoritarian regime; only a dictator (so the popular thinking goes) can punish the culprits and root out the conspiracies which have infiltrated the institutions of democracy and capitalism.

One should not neglect the importance of personality in explaining the attraction of authoritarian regimes. There was widespread belief that only a strong man with vision could take the reins and lead the nation. It was not just fascism but Mussolini himself who offered a vision of renewal to Italians; in Spain it was not just the support of the Catholic Church, the army, and the Falange that gave success to Franco, but his ruthless personal political skills; Hitler made sure the Nazi movement was his tool, while his own personality was the main guiding force in Germany. Populism has been an important feature of political leadership in many periods of history, but it has probably never been so apparently successful and accepted as when confronting the challenges of the Depression. Even in remote, and firmly liberal, Australia at the beginning of the Depression a number of spokesmen for the Church of England argued that parliamentary forms were useless for solving the problems; the Bishop of Goulburn argued that perhaps what was needed was 'a Cromwell or a Mussolini' (Radford 1931, p. 16).

Finally, there were forces peculiar to individual nations that led them to reject liberal democracy. The Catholic Church was a strong anti-democratic influence in Spain; but less so in Italy; and even less again in Germany. The level of economic development, and the size of an industrial workforce was another factor that had differing influence in different countries; France, Germany, and Britain all had highly industrialised economies, yet pursued quite different paths with respect to rejecting democratic institutions. The ideologies adopted by dictators and their supporters placed different emphases on religion, class, militarism, ethnic purity, and social justice, although by the mid-1930s some form of fascism was becoming the clearly preferred model in continental Europe, driven by the perceived success of Hitler and Mussolini.

THE NATURE OF CONTEMPORARY ANTI-POLITICS

It must be said that it is easier to make contrasts rather than comparisons between the anti-politics of the 1930s and that of the first decade of the 21st century. There is no full retreat from liberal democracy among developed nations. Indeed, the great majority of countries represented in the United Nations accept many of the forms of democracy—elections, representative assemblies, liberal constitutions—even if the reality is often at variance with those forms. Rather, the phenomenon to be examined here in most modern democracies is the fairly high level of contempt for the effectiveness of such institutions and even more for the practitioners of the craft of

politics. If democracy is not at present under full challenge, neither does the profession that drives it have many fervent supporters.

Some indication of the level of support (or lack of support) for liberal democratic institutions can be seen in Table 1, with data gathered in the 1990s. Most of the seventeen developed countries listed in the table manifest majority support for the armed forces and the police, while offering only minority confidence for central liberal institutions such as the parliament, the civil service, and the free press. Interestingly, Austria and Germany go against the trend by giving more confidence to their parliaments than to their armed services. Perhaps memories of the mistakes of the 1930s are stronger there than elsewhere. On the other hand, those two nations come last in overall confidence in social institutions, so they are scarcely examples of comparatively strong support for liberal democracy.

Table 1: Confidence in social institutions: Proportion in 1990s surveys expressing confidence in each of the institutions

	Police	Legal System	Armed Forces	Compa-nies	Church	Civil Service	Parlia-ment	Trade Unions	Press	National Mean
Norway	88	72	69	56	49	47	64	63	38	**61**
Ireland	86	47	61	52	72	59	50	42	36	**56**
USA	73	48	65	52	72	56	38	34	44	**54**
Canada	84	54	57	51	63	50	37	35	46	**53**
Denmark	89	79	46	38	47	51	42	46	31	**52**
France	67	58	56	67	49	49	48	32	38	**52**
Finland	82	68	72	47	47	34	32	44	33	**51**
Sweden	78	59	52	59	43	45	46	42	31	**51**
Switzerland	70	68	49	46	42	50	47	38	26	**48**
Netherlands	73	63	31	48	32	46	53	53	36	**48**
UK	77	53	81	47	45	46	44	27	15	**48**
Belgium	51	46	34	50	51	42	42	37	43	**44**
Australia	76	35	68	59	43	38	31	26	16	**44**
Japan	69	61	44	38	12	36	28	36	65	**43**
Italy	55	32	46	62	60	25	31	33	40	**43**
Austria	67	58	29	42	50	42	41	35	18	**42**
Germany	66	56	38	35	38	37	39	35	27	**41**
Mean	**74**	**56**	**53**	**50**	**48**	**44**	**42**	**39**	**34**	**49**

Source: Tiffen and Gittins (2004, p. 244).

Data from social surveys is useful, but interpretation of the figures is often problematic. To take that same Table 1, for example, in Australia the level of support for the armed services is more than twice that for parliament. However, one explanation for that might be that the reputation of the armed services owes a great deal to the annual celebration of the armed services on Anzac Day. That national day recalls a senseless military defeat, not a glorious victory, and much of the popular rhetoric of the festival is anti-militaristic. A more recent study using similar comparative data for 27 developed nations suggests, in fact, that Australia would come fairly high (5th) on an international ranking for 'trust in government', while Norway (14th) and the United States of America (11th) would drop lower on the scale than Table 1 might indicate. (Donovan, Denemark & Bowler 2007, p. 84) There are also suggestions that 'political trust' itself may not always be a virtue for a democratic culture. Analysing social surveys of recent years for Australia, Clive Bean discovered that 'respondents who express political trust display lower levels of participation than those who distrust the government' (2005, p. 136). If we want a healthy democracy we may have to choose between satisfactory levels of trust or high levels of participation.

More direct indications of levels of support for democratic institutions can be found in other data. In virtually all modern democracies, for example, membership of political parties is in decline. Low proportions of eligible citizens who actually vote in national elections can be an indication of apathy or even alienation (except where, as in Australia, voting is compulsory). However, here again interpretations can be problematic. Is declining membership of political parties and a reluctance to record a vote in elections an indication of alienated disenchantment or perhaps quite the opposite—a confidence that the system will work quite well without my interference?

The most convincing evidence of contemporary anti-politics is more anecdotal than scientific. It can be found in the reputation and image of democratic institutions and democratic politicians purveyed in the mass media throughout the world. Yes, such evidence can be quantified and rendered scientific by methods such as content analysis, but that is one example of the use of numbers not adding much to our understanding. One does not need to do a quantifiable survey to appreciate that most television news images, press headlines, cartoons, opinion columns, and radio talk-back sessions are much more negative about politicians and the way the system works than they are positive. Good politics is not news. Bad politics is. Politicians are apparently liars, cheats, and scoundrels, interested only in working the system to their own advantage. The reputation of politicians seems abysmal, as suggested in Table 2. That example is from Australia, in a survey conducted for a newspaper (originally for the *Australian Financial Review*) but the pattern is likely to be similar in most contemporary democracies. It is not a pretty picture. Only where the local political regime controls the mass media and prevents press freedom is one likely to find positive images predominating. And that is much more likely in an autocratic, not a genuinely democratic, society.

Table 2: Perceptions of the trustworthiness of social and occupational groups, ranked in order of trustworthiness, Australia, 2005

1	Ambulance officers	16	Priests/ministers
2	Fire fighters	17	Domestic cleaners
3	Mothers	18	Bartenders
4	Nurses	19	Builders
5	Pilots	20	Life coaches
6	Doctors	21	Taxi drivers
7	Pharmacists	22	Lawyers
8	Fathers	23	Stockbrokers
9	Police officers	24	CEOs
10	Teachers	25	Mortgage brokers
11	Child-care providers	26	Journalists
12	Bus/train drivers	27	Psychics
13	Chiropractors	28	Real-estate agents
14	Judges	29	Car salespeople
15	Accountants	30	Politicians

Source: *The Sun-Herald*, Life Magazine, 23 October 2005, p. 24.

THE ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY ANTI-POLITICS

Although there are fundamental differences between the state of the world in the 1930s and the early years of the new century, the political, economic, and social crises of that period provide some useful questions that might shed some light on the origins of contemporary attitudes.

Primacy of the economy

The link between contemporary anti-politics and the state of the economy is not as simple and direct as for the 1930s, but it is nevertheless an important factor. In most developed nations there has been a long period of economic growth, accompanied by a rise in the standard of living for most of the second half of the 20th century. Occasional hiccups, like the consequences of the oil crisis in the 1970s or the excesses of finance capitalism in the 1980s, have merely served to remind investors of the necessary truth that some caution is appropriate. However, while most national economies have boomed, wealth has not been evenly shared. At the same time as many salaries have skyrocketed, for most workers job security has declined, unemployment has become more tightly segmented, and social welfare programs

have been cut. Whereas the discontent with politics in the period between the wars was most significant among established middle class citizens whose savings were under threat, in the new century the centre of attention is on the so-called 'aspirational' class—that is, people who aspire to be prosperous and economically secure, but who have not yet attained those aims, despite their educational level or their purchase of good homes and cars. For such people a threatened incremental rise in interest rates is not just a necessary economic adjustment but a personal crisis.

In 1992 Bill Clinton's electoral slogan, 'It's the economy, stupid', made the point that the central job of governments, and thus of politicians, was to manage the economy. Yet what has become clear is that, in virtually every developed nation, governments are losing the ability to control their economies. The blame is usually laid on the modern trend to 'globalism', which is most obvious in matters of economic management. It is virtually impossible for any individual nation to isolate itself from the market forces of capitalism that push capital and investment around the world looking for the highest and most immediate returns. Economic superpowers, like the United States or even China, may be able to resist some of the pressures and pursue an independent line, but smaller nations must conform to the demands of the global economy, usually by reducing the costs of labour and discounting the price of commodities. In the 1950s it was conceivable for national economies to control the value of their currencies, to expand welfare state policies significantly, or to institute controls over prices and incomes. Although some commentators (for example, Brooks & Manza 2006) argue that the welfare state can still survive, as indeed elements of it do survive in many countries, it is very difficult for any individual nation to move further in that direction without withdrawing somewhat from the international marketplace.

What this means is that the scope of politics has narrowed, precisely in the area that is seen as central. For major political parties the main task of politics and politicians in modern democracies is concerned with distribution of the wealth, not its creation or control. Tax concessions can favour one group of society—usually one whose electoral support is needed—at the expense of others. No wonder that the dominant economic issue in most elections has become promised or withheld tax breaks. No wonder that voters are cynical. Politicians, even the most senior and talented, cannot do the job that is expected of them.

Technocratic governance

At the same time as whole areas of economic control have been removed from politicians, the centrality of economic management has introduced another anti-political factor. If the main task of governments is seen as managing the economy, then it is an easy step to suggest that this is best done by qualified economic managers, rather than by elected politicians who may have no economic credentials

at all. There is an echo here of a distrust of vested interests promoting policy agendas that was a feature of the 1930s, both in the frankly anti-democratic authoritarian political movements, as in the more liberal Keynsian ideas of economic reform. This contemporary trust in managerialism sees an increased role for specialised advisors, greater domination by civil servants with economic credentials, and a strong pressure to hand over whole areas of traditional government enterprises and services to the private sector. The paradox is that, in trying to confront the consequences of a contraction in the scope of political control, most modern governments react by reducing the scope even further by policies of privatisation and outsourcing. Who, then, is accountable? That is one of the central questions in any liberal democratic regime, yet many national and regional governments seem to be going out of their way to say: 'Not us; blame the managers; blame the private sector'.

Another strategy of political leaders is to divert attention away from economic issues to what Dionne (1991, p. 9–18) has labelled 'false' and 'symbolic' issues such as fears about crime levels. Faced with a narrowing of the focus of politics in the economic arena, another response of political leaders has been to widen it in other areas. If the state cannot control investment, savings, prices, jobs, and incomes, it can reach into areas previously left to individuals and families, such as smacking of children or the control of domestic pets. The evolving phenomenon of the 'nanny state' is best seen as a diversion from real politics and buck-passing of responsibility.

Immigration

It is not just capital that has become extremely mobile across international borders; so has labour. As ever, many local workers are reluctant to move from their home city or region in search of work. However, at the beginning of the 21st century many others—non-locals—are very willing indeed to move, especially from less economically developed or strife-torn countries towards the dream of a better life. Every prosperous nation has had to face the contemporary reality of unwanted immigration by political or economic refugees. Even where overall levels of employment in a society are maintained at reasonably high levels this does not prevent pockets of underemployment concentrated in identifiable neighbourhoods where levels of education, literacy, family stability, and social services are low. It is an incubator for the creation of ethnic underclasses and social violence. The closest thing to the 1930s middle class fear of Communism is the contemporary fear of cultural invasion and loss of jobs.

Faced with this fear, every contemporary prosperous nation has experienced a mobilisation of forces eager to exploit the underlying racism in any democratic society. The extreme, and not-so-extreme, Right has a theme with strong popular appeal, precisely among those sections of the community—the aspirational—who are already most uneasy about the effectiveness of politics and politicians in protecting

their interests. It is so easy to make the connection that it is the existing political system and politicians who have caused the problem, and who are helpless to find remedies. The extent of this challenge to democratic values varies enormously across the world, but one trend is common; more mainstream conservative parties are strongly tempted to protect their traditional constituency by flirting with the politics of exclusion and race. This helps to provide legitimacy to the yearning for a new kind of politics that will *enforce* remedies irrespective of contrary opinions and rights.

Declining civil liberty

The combination of ethnic tension, fear of violence, and questioning of civil rights has been highlighted by one of the defining events of contemporary democracy—the horrible destruction in New York referred to universally as '9/11' that has given rise to the 'war on terror'. It is normal that most societies take a more cavalier attitude than normal to conventional civil rights in wartime. Rights such as free speech, free assembly, religious equality, or equal standing in law tend to be eroded when a society's existence is threatened. However, there is usually an expectation that when the emergency is over such rights will be fully restored. There is little prospect that the war on terror will come to an end in the foreseeable future, and no modern developed or undeveloped nation is free from its impact. When such a prominent democracy as the United States embraces the wholesale denial of civil rights (even the internationally recognised rights of military combatants) and of normal democratic accountability in its military prison at Guantanamo Bay, the whole structure of rights and freedoms that is at the centre of liberal democracy is under threat. The principle has been established, not just in America, that in the war on terror there are some things that are too important to be left to politicians and the normal rule of law. It is another expression of anti-politics and a symbolic victory for the extreme Right, even if it does not put them in power.

Political party decline

Another important factor in the salience of anti-politics is a developing weakness in one of the structural pillars of modern democracy—the political party. Part of the problem has already been hinted at above—the trend to managerialism, along with the priority of economic issues, has taken a great deal of the development of public policy out of the hands of politicians. It has also taken it out of reach of political parties. Yet it has been precisely the ability of political parties to present alternative versions of public policy to the electorate that has been their strength in previous eras. People have joined parties because they want to influence, and perhaps participate in, the formation of desired policy. An influential book of the 1990s (Dionne 1991) made a strong argument about *Why Americans Hate Politics* by pointing out that the American parties, especially the Democratic Party, have virtually abandoned their reason for being. Whey should voters support them, let alone fund them and join them, if policy choices are phony and 'false choices', determined by

spin doctors rather than pushed up from the base of some party constituency? It clearly is not a problem merely for the United States party system. In many nations the response to a popular rejection of the major political parties has been the rise of minor, even single-issue parties, or a call for candidates who are truly independent of all party machines. Both the Greens on the left and racist anti-immigration parties on the right—common developments in many developed nations—manifest such a revolt against conventional party politics.

In principle a healthy democracy can easily accommodate both these trends. However, the classic role of major parties or coalitions of parties alternating in power in long-lived democracies such as Britain, the United States, or Australia has been vital for their democratic stability. In the past, a majority of citizens have been at least loosely committed supporters of one side or the other. They thus had an interest in the continuation of the party competition and the conduct of elections. At the beginning of the 21st century that is no longer so. Contemplating a future without a stable competitive party system is entering potentially dangerous territory. There is little doubt that contemporary parties need fundamental reform, but there is as yet nothing ready to take their place.

Media pressures

Liberal democracy contains within itself one of the most important pressures promoting a popular rejection of politics. In order to provide the necessary checks and balances in any constitutional system politicians are expected to criticise other politicians and make public their failings. Representative assemblies and elections become battlefields between competing individuals and parties, intent on proving that their rivals are incompetent, misguided, stupid, or corrupt. There is nothing new in that. It is one of the paradoxes of liberal democracy that the more they are successful in this competitive struggle, the more a positive image of politics is lessened. This is a matter of image, and in the early part of the 21st century image is the domain of the mass media. In every developed democratic nation a highly complex symbiotic relationship has developed between politicians and the media. Each needs the other and the mixture is potent. What is new is the contemporary role of the mass media.

There is a huge publishing industry assessing the modern role of the mass media. Clearly the entry of electronic upstarts—first radio, then television, now the Internet—has changed the impact of the media on popular values from a period when print media were completely dominant. Information has had to yield to entertainment; facts have become subservient to images; comment about politics is no longer a separate category of information written and read by an educated elite, but it has to conform to the demands of a screaming headline in the tabloid press or a television image of personal conflict. The overall impact in virtually all democratic societies with a free press has been the trivialising of politics and an emphasis on personality rather than policy.

From a British perspective, John Lloyd (2004) has examined the problem of *What the Media Are Doing to Our Politics*, making the point that, as people turn away from political parties they have only the media to inform them about politics. Yet, where conventional major parties engendered trust in the political system as a whole, the media seem more intent on promoting distrust, since it provides better stories. Commenting on this argument, one journalist (Button 2007) has headlined his article 'Fourth estate fouls its own nest', since if journalists destroy trust in politics they lose part of their own legitimacy, which will affect their long term market, especially for the print media.

A recent book by Turner and Hogan (2006, pp. 10–20) defending the worth of political engagement in Australia has highlighted the biased nature of the popular language of politics that both the media and politicians themselves use. A politician who has a change of mind on some policy is portrayed as performing 'a gutless backflip' or 'flip-flop', while another who questions the role of a party leader is guilty of 'backstabbing'. The most telling example, however, is the language of political leadership itself. Here the connotations of the preferred term—the need for 'strong leaders'—are more in keeping with an autocratic regime, where leaders decide and followers follow, than of a healthy democratic polity where good leadership is more a matter of listening, persuading, making compromises, and constructing a raft of policies that will appeal to both party members and the general electorate. The bias in the language is not a preference for this party over that, but a denial of the values of compromise and accommodation that are of the essence of liberal politics.

Religious challenges

Liberal compromise is under concerted attack from another direction. Ultimately, the worth of any democratic regime is that it allows people who have a wide range of strongly held values to co-exist peacefully in the one society, confident that public policy will tolerate their beliefs and lifestyles, and incorporate a fair proportion of their demands. No group will ever achieve all that it wants, but all groups will achieve a share. This pattern is difficult to accept for groups who hold many of their beliefs and traditions as absolutes, and not subject to negotiation. Religion is one of the main defining characteristics of such people. The impact of Christian fundamentalist groups in the United States on topics such as abortion has been highlighted in commentary over recent years. For many such people the issue is not negotiable and no compromise will be accepted.

It is not just extreme fundamentalists who toy with these non-negotiable demands. In the American Presidential election of 2004 the Conference of American Roman Catholic Bishops insisted that Catholics could not legitimately vote for candidates, such as the Catholic Democratic Party challenger, John Kerry, who supported abortion. The leading Catholic cleric in Australia, Cardinal George Pell, has publicly questioned the worth of a secular democracy that can permit abortion, pornography, euthanasia or embryonic stem cell research.

> If we think about the answers to the questions above we begin to have an inkling about what a form of democracy other than secular democracy might look like, an alternative I call 'democratic personalism'. It means nothing more than democracy founded on the transcendent dignity of the human (Pell 2004).

Pell is not just rejecting secular democracy; he is also rejecting the majoritarian process of liberal democracy. His vision of 'democratic personalism' is little more than support for the democratic process only, and as long as it produces policy in accordance with the absolute values he claims for his church. One does not have to discuss the influence of Islamic fundamentalism, which clearly is making the export or survival of liberal democracy difficult in much of the non-western world. There is a more immediate problem when the leaders of one of the world's great Western religions reject the values of liberal democracy in nations that have traditionally had its strong support, such as the United States and Australia.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

There is no immediate crisis for liberal democracy in the developed western world. Indeed, for most of the Eastern European satellite nations of the old Soviet empire who have joined or want to join the European Union, one of the great attractions is the liberal political culture dominant in the major European nations. They are reaching out for a combination of economic prosperity and political liberalism. There are no signs that democracy is about to disappear in the near future. However, that does not mean that all is healthy. The manifestations of anti-politics I have highlighted here point to a pathological condition in which many of the strongest supports for liberal democracy are quite weak. Fortunately, at the present time, there is no serious alternative, as there was in the 1930s.

One trend that does seem to be evident is an increasingly authoritarian character in many liberal regimes where elected politicians are content to hand over more and more authority to non-elected officials in the interest of national security (the impact of 9/11) or economic prosperity (the impact of globalism and managerialism). This is not altogether new: the British television series 'Yes, Minister' and 'Yes, Prime Minister' struck a chord in the 1980s with their portrayal of Departmental Secretary Humphrey Appleby consistently manipulating politician Jim Hacker to abandon his reform ideas. However, in most liberal societies there has been a decline since then in matters like the basic protection of the law for offences that can be defined as affecting national security. Even some fairly recent developments in democratic regimes, such as legislative guarantees for freedom of information, have been sent into reverse by this political culture.

Even if there were an imminent crisis in democratic regimes there is room for some confidence by examining the history of the economic partner of political liberalism—

capitalism. Since the advent of capitalist economies after the Industrial Revolution, that system has experienced a number of genuine crises of survival, but has survived and prospered by adapting itself to changed conditions. Democracy may have to do the same, as it has in the past when it broadened the franchise firstly to men without property and then to women. What will be tomorrow's leap in the dark?

However, the experience of the 1930s, when one of those crises in capitalism precipitated a collapse of confidence in liberal democracy, should give pause for thought. How confident can we be that there will not be another major and drawn-out crisis in the world economy? Who seriously believes that the growth that drives capitalism can continue indefinitely? Already there are warning signs in the phenomenon of global warming which suggest that severe 'limits to growth' may not be that far in the future. Faced with a long-term period of economic readjustment and contraction, what nation can be confident that the problems can be solved to the satisfaction of its citizens by democratic processes if there is so little entrenched support for those processes? Will we again look for scapegoats and authoritarian leaders instead of complex and messy solutions? Anti-politics is a worry, if not for now, then for the future.

Perhaps it would be wise not to wait for the crisis to happen but to strengthen the contemporary supports of liberal democracy beforehand. Not all such supports are weak. For example, the webs of voluntary associations that de Tocqueville (2004) noted as characteristic of a strong 19th century American democratic culture are even stronger in most modern democracies (despite the distracting and isolating influence of television). The 'social capital' described by Robert Putnam (1993, 2000) is certainly an important contributor to any successful democratic culture, and the evidence from countries like Australia suggests not only that its citizens tend to be 'joiners' of voluntary associations, but that such activity is closely linked with political participation (Passey & Lyons 2005, pp. 78–79.) There are some indications that contemporary uses of the internet (the explosion of personal and corporate blogs, or the popularity of search engines such as Google or Wikipedia) are reviving a concern for real information and debate that television seemed to inhibit.

If modern major political parties are losing their ability to articulate issues, especially for minorities, that is not a fatal loss. Modern pressure groups and single-issue parties are quite capable of filling the gap. The real problem area is that of interest aggregation—putting together a deal or a package that can be presented for acceptance by the electorate. The competition in this arena is coming from the mass media, which seems more interested in oversimplifying issues than in explaining the complexities. Who is going to explain that real solutions are difficult, complex and messy?

Perhaps one way of strengthening modern democratic cultures might be to look again at the nature of grass roots participation, so that citizens become as involved in the

political process as they are in their children's football team, their church choir or their book club. There has been considerable academic interest in creating new structures (for example, to foster community engagement, as in citizens' juries)—a trend to what is often called 'deliberative democracy'. In Britain the independent Power Inquiry (2006) recently conducted a national survey of responses to questions such as:

> Do you feel no one in politics listens? Do you feel too few people make the decisions that affect your life, your family and your country? That political faces come and go—but nothing really changes? And that, when things go wrong, politicians are rarely held to account?[2]

The recommendations of the Inquiry included decentralising power and increasing opportunities for popular participation in politics, so that not everything is left to elites. A good introduction to the wider literature can be found in Lyn Carson's internet site on 'Active Democracy' (2007) or in a case study of policy making that suggests how such decentralisation might work (Carson et al. 2002). As in the creation of liberal democracy (or its erosion), no single-factor proposals are likely to remedy the problems discussed in this paper. However, if nothing else, the more that citizens become involved in decision making, even at a local government level, the more they are likely to appreciate and value the skills of professional politicians who at present hold the future of liberal politics in their hands.

REFERENCES

Bean, C. 2005, 'Is there a crisis of trust in Australia?' in *Australian Social Attitudes: The First Report*, eds. S. Wilson, G. Meagher, R. Gibson, D. Denemark & M. Western, UNSW Press, Sydney.

Brooks, C. & Manza, J. 2006, 'Why do welfare states persist?', *Journal of Politics*, vol. 68, no. 4, November, pp. 816–827.

Button, J. 2007, 'Fourth estate fouls its own nest', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Weekend Edition, 13–14 January, p. 24.

Carson, L. 2007, Active democracy: Citizen participation in decision making [Online], Available: http://www.activedemocracy.net/index.html [2007, Jan 17].

Carson, L., White, S., Hendriks, C., & Palmer, J. 2002, 'Community Consultation in Environmental Policy Making', *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 1–13 [Online], Available: http://www.australianreview.net/journal/v3/n1/carson.html [2007, Jan 17].

Crick, B. 1962, *In Defence of Politics*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London.

2 This text appeared on the Inquiry's homepage. The citation refers to the report of the study, which does not include these questions.

Donovan, T., Denemark, D. & Bowler, S. 2007, 'Trust, citizenship and participation: Australia in comparative perspective', in *Australian Social Attitudes 2: Citizenship, Work and Aspirations,* eds D. Denemark, G. Meagher, S. Wilson, M. Western & T. Phillips, UNSW Press, Sydney, pp. 81–106.

Douglas, C.H. 1924, *Social Credit*, Palmer, London.

de Tocqueville, A. 2004 (1835/1840), *Democracy in America*, trans. from French, Library of America, New York.

Dionne Jr., E.J. 1991, *Why Americans Hate Politics*, Simon & Schuster, New York.

Hobsbawm, E. 1994, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, Abacus, London.

Hogan, M. 1986, 'Issue packaging: A link between pressure groups and political parties', *Politics* (later the *Australian Journal of Political Science*), vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 91–103.

George, H. 1883, *Progress and Poverty*: *An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions, and Increase of Want with Increase in Wealth: The Remedy*, Appleton, New York.

Lloyd, J. 2004, *What the Media are Doing to Our Politics*, Constable, London.

Mair, P. 2006, 'Ruling the void: The hollowing of western democracy', *New Left Review*, no. 42, pp. 25–51.

Pell, G. 2004, 'Towards a transformative democracy founded on dignity', address to Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, edited extract [Online], Available: http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/11/11/1100131141491.html [2007, Jan 17].

Radford, L.B. 1931, 'Australian nationality', *Australian Quarterly*, no. 11, September 14, pp. 16–24.

Passey, A. & Lyons, M. 2005, 'Voluntary associations and political participation', in *Australian Social Attitudes: The First Report*, eds. S. Wilson, G. Meagher , R. Gibson, D. Denemark & M. Western, UNSW Press, Sydney.

Power Inquiry, 2006**,** *Power to the People: The Report of Power, an Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy,* Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust & Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, London [Online], Available: http://makeitanissue.org.uk/devlog/2007/01/the_power_commission_was_estab.php [2007, Jan 24].

Putnam, R.D. 1993, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

Putnam, R.D. 2000, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York.

Schattschneider, E.E. 1960, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America,* Rinehart and Winston, New York.

Tiffen, R. & Gittins, R. 2004, *How Australia Compares*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Turner, K. & Hogan, M. (eds) 2006, *The Worldly Art of Politics*, Federation Press, Sydney.