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## **A Crisis in Democracy?**

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How often is it that we see the phrase “democracy in crisis”? It means different things to different people. In Beijing it means that so-called “western values” no longer have the currency they once held, and that’s a good thing if there is to be progress. The enemy here they say is self-indulgence and the indiscipline of freedom. For many critics in the West itself, some of the facts are agreed but the opposite conclusion is reached; yes, it has lost its currency but that means we are going backwards when it comes to human well-being. The enemies here are nationalism, populism and the authoritarianism they breed.

For those of us on the centre-left of the political spectrum this is a debate that cannot be avoided. It’s as relevant to the review of Labor’s performance in the last federal election as it is to the future of politics itself. Politics, as Bernard Crick reminded us way back in 1962, is all about conciliation and compromise and opposed to all forms of “anti-politics” whose goal is the mobilisation of the community to an all-consuming end – even on pain of death. Underlining this anti-politics is a fundamentalism of thought and practice, once thought defeated but now back in play. Such fundamentalism is all about holding a belief free and independent of the consequences of its application to the real world.

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## What is this Democracy About Which We Speak?

What, then, is this system which we say is in “crisis”? Is it government of, by, and for the people as Abraham Lincoln put it in his Gettysburg Address of 1863 that is in the box being cross-examined by its prosecutors or is it a particular version of that idea, whose origins we usually place in ancient Greece but whose modern forms we associate with the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Enlightenment and the revolutions that followed.

In North America, Europe and Australasia the system about which we speak is representative democracy and it has two characteristics which sit uneasily alongside each other – free and fair elections to find our governments and a range of accountability agencies to ensure those governments act in the public interest. In thematic terms it involves the co-existence of majoritarianism and liberalism.

It’s important to note that there was a particular context to the arrival and prosecution of these ideas. First it was monarchism (rule by one) and then aristocracy (rule by the few) in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Then unregulated and politically powerful capitalism and imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; followed by communism and fascism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mobilisation in response to each of these forms of oppression and in support of representative democracy took shape not just as a demand for universal suffrage and political liberty but also for goals beyond those limited to the realm of political institutions. On this point a division emerged between revolutionaries seeking a higher form of “proletarian democracy” and reformists seeking “social democracy”.

For the centre-left representative democracy and the checks and balances needed to support its working in the public interest became a major point of principle; the patron saint here being John Stuart Mill who had recognised the potentiality for a “tyranny of the majority”.

So it is that developed a system based not only on free and fair elections and the rule of law, but also backed up by the separation of powers and the creation of powerful agencies like the Ombudsman, Audit Offices, Anti-Corruption Agencies, Freedom of Information and Privacy Commissions and Public Service Commissions. Add to this laws and

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regulations to ensure that triple-bottom line considerations came to the policy making process; the idea of a strong economy, fair society and sustainable environment. Legislation to these ends became another factor in checking power – in this case economic power – so that it worked in the public interest; mixed government for a mixed economy if you will.

This, then, is the system of democracy that is said to be in crisis – well described by John Keane as “monitory democracy”. Its strength has laid in the fact that it provides for the peaceful transfer of power and space for both parties of the centre-left and centre-right to battle it out for the support of the electors. Compromise and conciliation as well as engagement and negotiation are at the centre of its operations. Extremists it’s always had – some utopian, others political and potentially dangerous – but at the margins and seemingly powerless to have any impact. At one point it even looked like the end of history in which conflicts remain but not contradictions of the sort that lead to revolution (Fukuyama, 1992).

### **What is the Crisis?**

Why, then, a crisis? Who are the critics and what is it they say?

On the right are those who say there’s too little of “the people” and too much of “the checks and balances”. They say the will of the people is being thwarted.

On the left are those who say there’s “too much of the people” and too little of the “checks and balances”. They say the public interest is being drowned out.

Both want new forms of political leadership – the right wanting authoritarian populists holding the line against lawyers and experts and the left principled revolutionaries holding the line in the interests of a new economy and society.

Centre-right and centre-left politicians are not well suited to dealing with these new tendencies which are sucking away at what they believed was an unshakable support base. Theirs is the world of give-and-take, two steps back in order to take one step

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forward. It's a world not suited to pressures generated by long-term wage stagnation, growing inequalities in wealth and income, an international refugee crisis, a re-birth of religious fundamentalism and the wickedest problem of all, climate change.

In response to all of this there is movement on the left side. We saw "Occupy" and now we see "Extinction Rebellion". It's radical and it counterposes a direct democracy of its ethical activists to a representative democracy of compromising politicians. Its urgings are based on the strength of climate science and rightful concerns about the role of money and vested interests in politics but its approach is of the fundamentalist variety and incapable of winning over significant support from the electorate. As our history has shown it's up the parties like Labor not only to seek change but to make it possible in a democratic setting.

The authoritarian populists on the other hand are on the march, within civil society and within government and parliaments all throughout the democratic world. Their message is as clear as crystal in its attacks on cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, liberalism and the politics of climate science. Their world is a world of "us" versus "them", the "people" versus "the elites" and "the evidence **of** belief" versus "the evidence **for** belief. It's increasingly a post-truth world in which manipulation and brute power rather than dialogue around principles and evidence determines outcomes (Gallop, 2018).

What's going on is a battle of ideas within the parties of the centre and between them and the fundamentalists to their left and right. Once upon a time the centre-left could rely upon a significant base amongst blue and white collar and unionised employees to spread their message about politics and reform. Not so today – and complicated further as a result of differences between industries based on "old" (fossil-fuel) and "new" (renewables) technologies. Indeed, the workforce generally is a much more complicated beast these days, particularly when it comes to finding a policy formula that unites rather than divides not only the workforce more generally considered but also them and the middle-class backers of Labor for whom social and environmental reform is seen as necessary and important. Bringing support for innovation and jobs as they relate to tackling inequality and climate change back into a more central position is a first step, and one already on

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the Federal Leader's agenda. It won't be easy and more research and thinking will be necessary, of the sort promoted by the Fabian Society over many years.

Finding these linkages can be done – as we saw in 2007 at the federal level and as we've seen in plenty of state and territory elections in contemporary Australia. In the required mix of elements needed so that policy is aligned with politics I'm sure there will be progress but not without its compromises along the way. We're reformists when it comes to law and policy but we do understand the need to set priorities; one step at a time is our political inheritance. We do believe in the triple bottom-line and the importance of tackling climate change but not without proper transitional arrangements for those impacted. We do believe in the republic, an indigenous Voice and a society built on the basis of rights and responsibilities but understand the need to take the community with us in their pursuit. So too do we believe in ensuring the agencies of accountability are alive and well, noting of course that many of them are the product of Labor initiative.

What's happening currently is what can be described as a nation-wide bullying exercise aimed at dividing Labor and throwing it off-course. From the left it's the urging of fundamentalism and on the right, it's driven by a deep-seated hostility to the many liberal and egalitarian reforms which have improved our society since the 1960s on. As always Labor sits in the middle looking to unite rather than divide the conservatives and radicals in its ranks. In relation to all of this Labor needs to hold its nerve against the temptations of alt right and left, do more to improve its own internal culture, structures and processes and work hard to find that mix of policy elements mentioned above and which pass both the "politics" and "evidence" tests we set as a centre left party.

### **The Case for Deliberation**

In saying all of this I'm still left asking the question – will it be enough in the radically populist environment that has developed? Good leaders can bring "reason" and "evidence" to the table of decision – as they should – but all too often they are incapable of defeating the elephant in the room, "public opinion". It's a force not to be underestimated or ignored.

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This takes me to the range of institutions based on the principle of deliberative democracy such as citizens' juries, consensus conferences, planning cells, deliberative polls, and citizen's assemblies. Might it be the case that they can add significant value to our representative system by opening it up to genuine involvement? Are they one part of the puzzle that can renew our system and its politics?

These initiatives vary in scope and operation but all share a commitment to the random (usually stratified) selection of participants and properly facilitated deliberation. They create what are in effect mini-publics "demographically representative of the larger population, brought together to learn and deliberate on a topic in order to inform public opinion and decision-making" (Escobar and Elstub, 2017). Thus, the first two of three key elements for a properly deliberative democracy – inclusion and deliberation. The third is influence or "the capacity to influence policy and decision-making". To be effective it's important that any recommendations of participants in a jury or assembly are agreed to, or at the very least taken very seriously. Indeed, it's the criticism of much so-called "consultation" today not only that it is insufficiently deliberative and inclusive but also that it's not conducted in good faith. This undermines trust and denies the consultation exercise the authority it needs to make a political difference (Hartz-Karp, 2005).

What emerges isn't a case study in "angry populism" but nor is it a case study in top-down policy-making by distrusted elites. Not all issues are suited to its embrace but many are, time and circumstance allowing. It might be a small but seemingly intractable local issue related to a particular health service or planning proposal, wicked problems that inevitably involved trade-offs around competing objectives, a challenge from new technologies whose consequences are uncertain, or major society-wide issues such as constitutional reform, a city-plan or a local authority budget (Gallop, 2015). Initiating this might be the executive or legislative part of government, noting of course that juries are already a part of our justice system. Parliamentary committees are certainly well placed to engage people in this more democratic way given their requirement to consult, as indeed are local governments with their annual budgets and inevitable squabbles over planning matters.

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There are plenty who criticise deliberative democracy as too middle-class in conception and insufficiently authoritative to give strength to leaders standing up for evidence. In respect of the claim that only the well-educated can access “the language and procedures of deliberation” the empirical evidence is otherwise. Indeed, deliberative democracy curtails rather than perpetuates elite domination “by creating space for ordinary political actors to create, contest, and reflect upon ideas, options, and discourses” (Curato, Dryzek, Ercan, Hendriks and Niemeyer, 2017). In fact, there is plenty of evidence available today to indicate that not only does a better policy conversation come with deliberative democracy but also that more “sensible, actionable, defensible” recommendations follow, even when there is significant controversy and complexity surrounding the issue (Schechter, 2017). This speaks well of the capacity of ordinary people to listen to others, discuss a matter respectfully, change their minds if that’s where the evidence takes them, and then reach a decision. It’s an impressive record that has added energy to our democracies.

On the question of authority, we come to the most important finding of all and that is “increased public trust in the decision, the decision-making process, and – over time – in government in general” (Schechter, 2017). It is the case that the “whole community” feels represented by the “mini-public” and as a result looks upon recommendations so determined with more acceptance. After all it’s a case of “people like me” making the decision and capable of seeing through any spin by experts, manipulation by vested interests or obfuscation by politicians. Just as important is the finding that deliberative practices can help bridge the deep conflicts – religious, racial, ethnic or national – that undermine trust and social unity in many communities, the evidence for this “coming from formats ranging from mixed-identity discussion groups located in civil society to more structured citizen forums with participants from different sides” (Curato, Dryzek, Ercan, Hendriks and Niemeyer, 2017). Trust across the boundaries is a means as well as an end and often it is these sorts of divisions, as well as those related to class and status, that undermine efforts to find solutions to complex and wicked problems.

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There is a logic to this further development of our democratic system; firstly, elections to find law-makers and governments, then monitors to ensure government works properly and now the deliberative public to add value to the decision-making processes. As Fishkin and Mansbridge (2017) put it: “If the many versions of a more deliberative democracy live up to their aspirations, they could help revive democratic legitimacy, provide for more authentic public will formation, provide a middle ground between widely mistrusted elites and the angry voices of populism, and help fulfil some of our common normative expectations about democracy”. After all we don’t just seek a fairer society and a sustainable environment but also trusted and democratic government to make it possible!



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## **Appendix**

The Gallop Government was active in the deliberative space. The biggest and boldest initiative was the Dialogue with the City project which involved 1100 participants charting a future for the Perth metropolitan area. One-third of those participating were randomly selected, one-third stakeholders and the other third self-nominated following advertisements. The government initiated six consensus forums, two inquiry by design conferences, three citizen juries, a deliberative survey, three multi-criteria analysis conferences, and other more traditional consultations most notably the Drug Summit and the Water Summit, both of which were used to guide our work.

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