
Going deeper than party and faction - fundamentalism, populism and pragmatism in modern government

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Speech

Medical Faculty Dinner

University of Sydney

1 April 2014

It's with some trepidation that anyone takes on the responsibility of an after dinner speech, particularly a politician or ex-politician. The atmosphere is congenial and often merry as drinking starts to take over from thinking. The political instincts that have built a barrier to recklessness become dulled and silly and even stupid things can be said. Inevitably a journalist or two or three will be there and for them the so-called Chatham House rules rarely if ever apply. As the great Lennie Lower put it: "Journalists are born. Why, nobody knows". However, for some politicians the merriness occasioned by drink isn't needed for mind-boggling statements to emerge. Let's take William McMahon former Prime Minister and graduate of this University for example. In 1971 he was asked about his government's achievements. He replied: "Admittedly, I can't go too far and tell you explicitly what we have done because I think if I did it would undo all the good that has been achieved already". When asked if he was considering an early election he said "it depends what you mean by an early election. What I've never done is fix a date until I've made up my mind what the date is likely to be". Enough said about that; tonight I want to take you into the heart (or is it the bowels?) of government to describe an important aspect of what is going on and why it is important to all of us.

For citizens keen to understand politics and choose who is to govern them it looks easy. Our system is based on political parties each of which has its own ideas and a policy platform to back them up. Just as importantly the parties produce candidates for election, and in the case of the two major parties, leaders who seek the top job.

During Question Time we can actually see this system being played out before our eyes - a Prime Minister and his or her troops on one side and a Leader of The Opposition and his or her troops on the other. They attack and they defend - and we the citizens are left to choose.

What we very rarely see is what is going on behind the scenes within each side. Firstly there are factions, some based on ideas and others on personality and/or particular circumstances. Labor has had its left, right and centre and the Liberals its wets and dries. Both sides also have their "ins" and "outs" and all the dependencies and jealousies that result. Sometimes the divisions created by this factionalism, particularly those created around personalities; spill over into the public arena. It's never a pleasant sight - just think Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard and all that was said and done!

However, there are differences that go deeper than party and faction and which are played out within the parties and factions themselves and indeed within the hearts and minds of the leaders

and their political offices. The battle I am referring to here is a battle of philosophies - between fundamentalism, populism and pragmatism.

Go to any political office and the three forces will be there - those who believe there are certain "core values" that can never be compromised, those who see the power of public opinion as everything and those for whom evidence about what works and doesn't work is paramount, even if it means holding the line against public opinion and/or compromising core principles.

It's a case of the ideologues versus the pollsters versus the policy wonks.

In this mix the policy wonks are at a distinct disadvantage. The ideologues can appeal to deeply held feelings about what is right and wrong and what is party tradition. They have emotional pulling power and theirs is a world of true believers versus rats and traitors. The pollsters can hold out the prospect of political power, a not insignificant motivator given the role of status and pride in human affairs. Theirs is the world as it is rather than as we would like it to be.

Policy wonks aren't without their principles and nor do they dismiss the political dimension. However, their appeal is to the better and more reasonable side of human nature which challenges a value when its strict implementation leads to more harm than benefit and which stands up to public opinion when it presents itself as ill-informed prejudice. They seek solutions in a world assumed to be pluralistic and complicated rather than monistic and straightforward. "Take a good idea", they say, "then remove it from the context in which it is to be applied and ignore all other good ideas - and you have a bad idea". They urge us to dig deeper to the real-life consequences of what we do or don't do. They stand up against ideologues that take one principle like freedom and push it so far that it enters the province of "unintended and undesirable consequences". Just think public health and its collectivist requirements. Think too of how "order" and "community", both good ideas, can become the ideological basis for tyranny.

They also stand up for minorities, who may in fact be marginalised or vulnerable in the face of public opinion. John Stuart Mill called it "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling" and its power to humiliate and discriminate can never be underestimated.

To succeed pragmatists need a philosophy of politics as well as a method of analysis. They need a foothold in the system of power. It all starts of course with the argument that public policy well thought through and "grounded is the responsible course for any jurisdiction. Limited the scientific method may be, but still it is central to progress and civilised life. Values, emotions and the lust for power matter, but reason and evidence aren't without a base in our society, particularly amongst the professions who build bridges, monitor industrial processes, save lives, and plan cities. A good public service can help the cause too. However, the very idea of creating an apolitical, evidence-based public service is itself a matter for contention within the political parties. It is, then, to the parties- and all of them - that attention needs to be given. Indeed when good solutions are a matter for bipartisan support we find that the chances of successful implementation are significantly improved. We saw this so clearly with Australia's response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 90s but haven't seen it with respect to climate change or the contemporary politics of productivity.

I'm pretty sure what I am saying is fully understood by the medical profession whose daily work involves the search for solutions to problems, some more complex than others. Biological and

chemical processes as well as personal, social and environmental influences are now all part of the health equation. Indeed it is this aim to go deeper (psychology, biology and chemistry) and to expand wider (the economy, society and the environment) that makes the modern medical model a good one for politics to emulate. The values we hold do matter and so too does political judgment in an opinionated world but just leaving it with values and opinions isn't - and has never been - enough. We need knowledge too and the battle to protect and defend the province within which we develop and apply it should never be avoided by those who care and have been entrusted with academic freedom.