
Right-Speech in an Age of Post-Truth

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Not surprisingly I wish to speak about politics tonight but not as we normally do it but rather through the prism of the way we understand questions related to human communication and truth and knowledge and what we assume them to be. What is the right way to speak and listen? What does the way we speak and listen to "the other" tell us about our politics? What is our view of truth and knowledge? Can we speak of a distinction between facts and values? Again, we ask how answers to those questions relate to different approaches to politics.

I'm going to provide a potted history of post-World War 2 democratic politics, particularly in the years in and after the 1960s. My concern is with how the New Left rebellion of the 1960s and the Alt-Right rebellion of today confront mainstream understandings of speech and knowledge and what this tells us a lot about their politics and how it impacts on society.

I'll conclude by urging on policy makers more serious consideration of the use of random selection and facilitated deliberation as additional and value-creating elements of our representative system of government.

But first to taxi-drivers and what we can learn from the way they relate to their passengers and the motoring environment.

TWO TYPES OF TAXI DRIVER

From my experience there are two types of taxi-driver, those who listen to talk-back radio and those who listen to classical music of the relaxing variety. For the former there's never enough rage to satisfy them and they often share this rage with you, the passenger, even if you give no hint as to what you may be thinking at the time. More often than not, they are as aggressive in their driving as they are in their speech and manners. You can only hope it's a short journey!

On the other hand, there are drivers who let the music do the speaking and you the passenger to listen to it. You begin to relax and so much so that you wish the trip was longer than necessity dictated. You notice too how much more bicycle friendly and careful overall is the driver compared to the talk-back aficionado.

There's so much that comes to mind when reflecting on my two types of taxi-drivers. In an important sense we see two ways of living in the world – full of anger, careless and with little concern for "the other" or with care, attention to detail and respect for "the other". It reminds us that there are always different ways of communicating, what the Buddhists call "right" and "wrong" speech, and linked as they are with "right" and "wrong" listening.

RIGHT SPEECH AND RIGHT LISTENING

Think of it this way; there are different ways of presenting ourselves to the world, speech being one of the indicators. Do we, or do we not, abstain from lying and deception? Do we, or do we not, deliberately spread misinformation? Do we, or do we not, slander others or speak in ways that cause disharmony? Do we, or do we not, abstain from rude, impolite or abusive language? Do we, or do we not, indulge in idle talk or gossip? Our speech is, as Buddhist writer, Barbara O'Brien reminds us, "not just our speech. Communication is something that happens between people. We might think of speech as something we give to others".ⁱ

Given that we are by necessity social animals and need to get on together there's lots of wisdom in what the Buddhists say. Stability requires trust and trust requires right speech and listening. The same goes for progress both material and spiritual, and for the individual too. I'm sure you've all felt or observed from time to time that "rage within" and how it distracts understanding and leads to negative consequences, perhaps even violence. In today's world of "communicative abundance" as political theorist John Keane has described it, we see plenty of wrong speech and too little genuine listening.ⁱⁱ Mao's "hundred flowers" may well be blooming, but there's plenty of toxic weeds in there as well, in politics, in the media, and increasingly within religion itself, including among some Buddhists.

So to my talk for tonight. Have we just drifted into this world courtesy of the new instruments of communication where freedom no longer has its gatekeepers or are there deeper forces at play that should raise alarm bells about where we are heading as a human family? There is in our world today, as Ferdinand Mount recently wrote about Brexit in the *London Review of Books*, "a freaky, light-heartedness, an unconsidered confidence that there are no risks to stirring things up, that they can do and say pretty much as they please". It's defended as "buccaneering", Britain at its best! Leaders who are authentic! Speech that is free and, as Mount concludes: "Not for one second do they pause to think how hard-won it has been. They are the feckless children of seventy years of peace".ⁱⁱⁱ

There was, of course, another time in my life-time when such things were said about a movement which was having an impact on politics and society. I refer to the emergence of the student-led New Left the 1960s and 70s. Indeed, I was, like many in my generation, caught up in it for a few years in my undergraduate years in Perth and Oxford.

THE NEW LEFT

Its origins lay in opposition to the Vietnam War, but its brief was much wider and involved a fundamental critique of "advanced industrial society" whether of the capitalist or communist variety. It questioned contemporary science as little more than "ideology" at the service of existing reality and challenged religion as reactionary even though sharing much of the fundamentalist outlook associated with religiosity. For example, it pointed to a time when true unity would come when people were liberated from the chains imposed by contemporary thinking and practice. All would be free and all equal, self and other together and in harmony

with nature. Not surprisingly then, liberation theologians became part of the team, the unity being described by the New Left being seen as the very thing God wished for the world.

What marked it out as a “new” left was its focus, not just on the means of production, distribution and exchange but also on culture and the environment. Vietnam was associated with a war machine and its culture, as well as with imperialism and its racial prejudices. The oppression of women, discrimination against homosexuals, destruction of indigenous cultures and spoliation of the environment were all seen as brushed over or covered up in the interests of false needs associated with the growth economy. Only through a “great refusal” and “negative thinking” was progress possible in a culture of “false consciousness” and a system of “social control”. Not surprisingly the word “critique” was often used. So said Herbert Marcuse in his best-seller *One Dimensional Man* (1964).

Right speech and listening found themselves on the backfoot in a world where the New Left saw tolerance as repressive and disruption as liberating. It wasn't a pretty sight - outlandish stunts, vulgar language, Nazi analogies, and disrupted lectures, certainly not the sort of things that we could characterise as right speech.^{iv} A small minority even became advocates for and carried out violence. None of this helped the cause including for some in the ranks of the New Left and they drifted away – but not from politics!

INTO A WORLD OF POLITICS

The way out was mainstream politics, mainly not only in the Centre-Left. There was a small number who took up the radical libertarian cause, finding more bedfellows on the right than on the left. For them it was all about the freedom to live, work and play as they desired and not as dictated to by right or left. Most went to the Centre-Left and what had been matters for fundamentalist critique became matters for public policy and all of the negotiation that went with it. Progress followed in areas like the rights of women, gays and lesbians, indigenous peoples and people of non-English speaking background. Environmentalism was taken to the table of decision as well, along with a whole range of reforms designed to extend the accountability of governments beyond previous limits that had been set in the interests of effective government. I refer here to issues like Freedom of Information, Official Corruption and Due Process.

Understandably there was plenty of disagreement about all of these matters and hard-liners from the 1960s and 70s may very well retort - and they do from within the Green and Left parties within which they maintain their rage - that the changes were inadequate in breadth, conception and delivery. They've held the line in the face of what has been a systematic co-option of most student radicals into the mainstream in the 1980s and 90s. Indeed, rather than revolution, what happened followed a pattern we might have expected.

Firstly we see new ideas and issues come to the surface. They are carried by radicals and revolutionaries who form social movements to support their new agenda. Secondly, as support for change mounts we see these ideas being taken up by the mainstream parties. Issue by issue and step by step, laws and policies change to reflect the new understanding of gender, race, sexuality and modes of living. Still no revolution, still no perfect unity, but lots of reform.

SCIENCE AND PRAGMATISM

What the New Left came up against wasn't a closed shop as Marcuse had written, but nor was it an empty vessel from which a new humanity could develop, finding its realisation in a truly free and equal society. It was a system and culture of politics, part repressive and part liberating and with a sound theory of the world to back it. After all it was a world view that had inspired many to defeat Fascism and hold the line against Communism. To work it required pragmatism rather than fundamentalism; a lesson not properly learnt as I will try to demonstrate later. But to the theory first.

At its heart was the belief that there is a world "out there" and not totally captured by our subjectivity or by the beliefs that flow from it as expressed through language. Two things follow from this; firstly a respect for the things that we can discover from scientific endeavour, be it in the natural or the social sciences. We may not be able to know everything but there are things we can learn from critical and empirical inquiry. Not without some hesitancy the results of these endeavours we call "facts" and distinguish them from "mere opinion".

Secondly, the view that the differences within and between human societies can be wished away either through revolutionary or utopian strategies was questioned. Yes, compromise and peaceful co-existence is achievable by way of creative politics but to believe a perfect unity can be found inevitably leads to what the French philosopher Jean-Francois Revel called "the totalitarian temptation". As Machiavelli might have said, it's often the purest of minds that leads to the impurest of actions.

What's created here is the expectation that improvement is possible but not transformative of the sort that obliterates the tensions that naturally exist between a person and his or her biochemical interior, between an individual and the society in which they live and between humanity and the natural environment. To assist us to find a way forward in these three spheres of life we've developed the psychological, the social and the ecological sciences.

When Soviet Communism itself collapsed in 1989 and the New Left was largely, if not completely incorporated into the system and culture, the questions were posed: What's left to be done? Haven't we reached an "end of history" within which governments are properly accountable and progress is continuous without the need for the messy revolutions of the past?

For those who saw the democratic world in these terms it was as if we'd perfected the art of dealing with the imperfections of the human condition.^v What was appealing about this historical narrative was this very point - it wasn't utopian and it didn't see an end in which self/other/environment all merged together as a unity and beyond all contradictions. What's happened, however, has been a surprise to many, and that is the emergence of a New Right that challenges not just to Left and Centre-Left thinking, but also to that associated with Liberal Conservatism. Hardly do we see an end to history!

A NEW RIGHT

Three terms have been used to describe it - Post-Truth, Alt-Right and Populist.

1. Post-Truth – “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.^{vi}
2. Alt-Right – socio/political movement comprising of a loose amalgam of rightist groups and causes who shun egalitarianism, socialism, feminism, multiculturalism, free trade, globalization and all forms of gun control.^{vii}
3. Populism – a range of political stories that emphasise the idea of “the people” juxtaposed against “the elite” who are portrayed as corrupt and self-serving.^{viii}

What we see is a set of causes, a movement to back them up and a paradigm concerning knowledge to justify the rebellion that is involved. First and foremost, it resents interrogation from those schooled in critical thinking and scientific endeavour. The evidence of belief (and feeling) trumps evidence for and against particular beliefs or to put it another way opinion is fact and intellectual attempts to separate the two is doomed to fail. This leads to a world of winner take all, a world where power is everything. If “what each of us thinks is simply what each of us thinks...there is no point in assuming that anyone can ever be mistaken. In that case, the only means of persuasion left for us would be force or threat, propaganda or advertisement”.^{ix}

Out the door goes science and its verification principle – and the discipline this imposes on us as thinking beings. Not surprisingly fundamentalist religion plays an important role in all of this with its “leap of faith” and its particular and illiberal understanding of issues around gender, sexuality and culture. A post-truth world provides space within which fundamentalist beliefs are given status which seemed all but lost in a science-enriched world. Important too is the status given to vested interests connected with technologies and practices deemed problematical in a world challenged by climate change and enlightened by respect for all as human beings whatever their race, gender or sexuality.

Whereas science brings care and caution, post-truthism brings belief and anger; forces not to be underestimated in the world of power and influence. Its first thought is to attack and bully rather than to listen and deliberate along the lines recommended by those seeking reconciliation rather than a “war of all against all”. As Barbara O’Brien has put it about communication between people today: “It’s not so easy to find speech that leads to peace and group harmony”.^x

This movement is potent not just in the world of popular culture but also in politics. It has a base within the community, its emphasis on class as an issue is disingenuous but effective and its focus on contesting elections is putting it in the heart of things. It has funders, leaders, strategists and organization, far beyond anything that centrists of imagined to be possible at the end of history.

Their base lies in the fundamentalist churches under challenge from the evidence of science and the passion of human rights advocates; so too in those sections of capital and labour disrupted by globalisation, migration, freer trade and moves to de-carbonise the economy. What this tells us is that the leadership provided by Liberal-Conservatism (Centre-Right) and Social Democracy

(Centre-left) in the post-communist era has been less than adequate despite the overall advances that can be pointed to. Put simply, they have been unable to sustain support from a clear majority of the electorate, votes being lost first to the Green Left and more recently - and more significantly, from the Alt-Right.

Interestingly the liberal philosopher Richard Rorty had predicted all of this as far back as 1998 in his book *Achieving our Country*. Let me paraphrase his argument. It starts with organised and unorganised workers determining that their governments weren't doing enough with regard to jobs and wages. At the same time, the suburban white-collar workers resist efforts at paying more tax, fearful themselves that they might be next on the list for downsizing. At some point "something will crack" and the non-suburban electorate will look to a strongman to protect them against "smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesman, and post-modernist professors". How's that for prescience!

He explains this as a failure of left side of politics, in particular the reformist left who were dominant from 1900 to the 1960s as leaders who get things done on behalf of their working-class constituency. There was a big tent united by support for pragmatism and reform. No totalising calls for revolution there! Then came the New Left in the 1960s who saw no hope for change within the current system. Reformists were seen as the enemies not the friends of progress. Rorty's position on this has been put this way:

Persuasion was replaced by self-expression; policy reform by recrimination.^{xi}

It wasn't the appropriateness of the objectives that Rorty criticises, indeed he supports what was attempted by way of movements such as those for civil rights and multiculturalism. His problem was that the way it developed reinforced sectarian impulses and detracted from coalition-building.

As I read him, what Rorty is saying is that the emergence of a new culture-based politics on the New Left, may very well have entered the mainstream space and from there achieved much that was positive but in the absence of a properly worked through alliance with the Centre-Left, whom they detested as agents of imperialism and capitalism it didn't work that way. This, he says, was happening as economic inequality and anxiety grew and not just under the watch of the Centre-Right but of the Centre-Left too. Indeed, we can now add, given what happened in the economy in 2008, that the Centre-Left was too ignorant of or complacent about the consequences of its programs for microeconomic reform. It too was falling victim to market fundamentalism, one aspect of what Francis Wheen called contemporary "Mumbo-Jumbo".^{xii} In came the Alt-Right galvanising support among the white working class by exploiting racial resentment and economic anxiety.

Politics is a ruthless business that has its own logic. By being insufficiently focused on, and interested in class and economics, both the reformist and cultural left (as Rorty has labelled them) created space for reactionary elements to create momentum for themselves. The lessons of pragmatism and its requirement that we dig deep in order to understand how the world is operating was forgotten. Too many opinionated individuals and not enough wisdom!

That there's such hostility to right speech, science and multiculturalism coming from this new populism is most disturbing. It's more reactionary than it is conservative and more negative than it is positive. That such an approach has imbedded itself is good reason for all of us to engage in re-thinking about what we have been doing and what strategies and policies we should urge upon ourselves, our governments and our parliaments.

WHAT TO DO?

There is an enormous amount of highly valuable commentary on what mix of policies, social, economic and environmental are needed to withstand the populist onslaught and bring some civility back to our political communication. At the same time, it can't just sweep under the carpet the big issues like climate change and Artificial Intelligence; issues that have widespread implications across both class and nation and the present and the future. One thing is for certain and that is ignoring economics and focusing on "other things" just won't be adequate. Nor will the promotion of an economics that ignores issues around nation, region and class be adequate.

Everyone seeking to drag us back from the dog-eat-dog world currently in creation needs to become serious about politics and the policy agenda we need to capture a majority of support. Thinking within the bubble defined by ideology won't be enough and nor will a focus on a top-down approach if we are to break the back of Post-Truth politics. We need to remind ourselves that part of the rebellion going on today relates not just to policy positions, as important as they

In his book *Against Politics* published in 2013, Belgian historian David Van Reybrouck points to research that uncovers an important difference between post-World War II politics and politics now:

Then there was apathy and trust while now there is passion and distrust.

As a result of this mistrust our representative system is struggling under the strain of increased volatility and reduced effectiveness. His argument is underpinned by a recognition of the all-important distinction and between authority and power, strength in the first being needed for results for the latter.

What's on the agenda today isn't simply a range of issues requiring policy interventions but also a highly passionate and distrusting electorate demanding more say. It's that unruly mob again who caused so much trouble for democratic theorists. Just think J.S. Mill and his "tyranny of the majority".

If this issue isn't dealt with the chances of centrist success will be less than we may hope for. With this in mind, let's be reminded of an insight from Aristotle:

...the appointment by lot of magistrates is democratical, and the election of them oligarchical.^{xiii}

It's the latter we have - a system of representative democracy - where some compete for the vote of others, and do so today with an "anything goes" philosophy that breeds wrong speech and

appeals to prejudice rather than reason. As Nicholas Gruen has observed “First, democracy is government by conversation. A political conversation should often be competitive - to sharpen ideas and measure their support. Yet, to remain a conversation rather than a parody of one, it must also be a co-operative search, if not for agreement, then at least for mutual understanding of where positions differ. However, this co-operative foundation for our politics has been largely extinguished by the weaponisation of political communication by professionals operating on the mass media, and, more recently by “trolling” on social media”.^{xiv}

There is a potential solution to all of this to be found in the addition of random selection and facilitated deliberation to our system of representative democracy. Currently elections, consultation exercises and occasionally direct action are the means available to bring accountability to government. Increasingly used to good effect throughout the democratic world are “mini-publics” such as citizens’ juries, citizens’ assemblies and deliberative polls, the purpose being to create a microcosm of the public, with each citizen having a chance to be selected. As Aristotle put it:

“If liberty and equality are directly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in government”.^{xv}

There are many occasions and issues for which such selection by lot and proper deliberation are suitable^{xvi} and plenty of evidence too of their effectiveness as trust builders and decision-makers. Indeed, they are well placed to tackle the poor quality of much interaction and communication today: As Oliver Escobar and Stephen Etsub^{xvii} have put it:” In mini-publics expert process design and facilitation are instrumental to avoid the usual problems of many public meetings and forums: dominant voices, silenced views, confrontational dynamics, lack of thinking time (reflex responses), shallow exchanges, rehearsed monologues, pre-packaged arguments, lack of opportunities to learn about diverse views and so on”. It’s also been shown that the better policy conversation that is created leads to “sensible, actionable, defensible recommendations”.^{xviii}

Not a bad mix that – inclusiveness, informed deliberation and good outcomes! Isn’t this the right thinking, speaking and action we really want from our democracy and shouldn’t we be trying harder to achieve it?

ⁱ “Right Speech from the Buddhist Eight Fold Path” in learnreligions.com

ⁱⁱ “Eleven Theses on Communicative Abundance” in johnkeane.net

ⁱⁱⁱ “Why we go to War” in LRB.com.

^{iv} David Greenberg, “Here’s What Happened the Last Time the Left got Nasty”, *Politico*, 7/5/2018.

^v See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992)

^{vi} “Post-Truth” in dictionary. Cambridge.org.

^{vii} “Alt-Right” in Wikipedia.com.

^{viii} “Populism” in Wikipedia.com.

^{ix} “The temptation of absolute truth”, *Twentieth Century*, Vol. 16, Autumn 1962.

^x “Right Speech” in Wikipedia.com.

^{xi} Sean Illing, “Richard Rorty’s prescient warnings for the American Left”, *Vox*, 2/2/19.

^{xii} *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World* (2004)

^{xiii} Quoted in Against Elections, p. 66.

^{xiv} “When a conversation is not a conversation: Party political discourse in the early 21st century”, The Mandarin, 19/02/2019.

^{xv} Quoted in “When a conversation is not a conversation...”

^{xvi} See my paper “Helping our democracy to work better” in Meanjin Quarterly, Volume 74, Number 3, Spring 2015.

^{xvii} newDemocracy, Research and Development Note, 8 May 2017.

^{xviii} newDemocray, Research and Development Note by David Schechter, 8 August 2017.