

Social Democratic Consensus is Dead



“A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

— Walter Benjamin, 1940

The social democratic consensus that has been the moral foundation of much of our world since the 1960s is dead. In public discourse we can no longer assume that values such as democracy, egalitarianism, justice, fairness or even the doctrine of loving one's neighbour are foundational values which bind us. Some might argue that we could never assume such things were shared values, so let me go further and say that the US Supreme Court ruling that Presidents are immune from prosecution – whether official or private – signals that all of these values are not only not shared, they are under attack.

The populist rise of authoritarian, supremacist regimes in Europe and North America clearly shows that many working class and middle class people not only feel left out of the social democratic consensus they feel that it is corrupt, hollow and self interested.

Facts and reason have little to do with the bitterness that relatively affluent people feel when things get tough and 'others' whether they be immigrants, Indigenous peoples, coloured people seem to be favoured by the social democratic consensus.

The perception is that the values of social democracy are corrupt and must be torn apart and reconstructed by tough, authoritarian figures who will restore justice and economy to a hard working, discriminated against predominantly white majority who have earned everything they possess and not merely been given them.

For those of us who believe in social democratic values there is an up and a down side to the political shift to the right. The up side is that we must go back to the bare basics in making arguments for changes like recognition of Aboriginal peoples in our constitution or the need for our respective governors and governor generals to be self sufficient Australians with no reference to the British Royal Family. Rather than assume people are for us, perhaps we now have to make the assumption that they are against us from the start. After the 2023 Australian referendum on the Voice many Aboriginal leaders say that they have always lived with a consensus of “No”. Nothing has changed except that for the first time in Australian history we know that there are six million Australians supportive of Aboriginal rights and nine million who are against or sceptical. The positive from all this is that it puts the impetus back on to social democratic leaders and thinkers to really make the case for change in clear and unequivocal ways.

The downside of the current environment is that for many feelings, passions and political views have gone beyond reason. In the past when groups are so much at loggerheads without the capacity to listen or hear opposing arguments, war results. As Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr once wrote of the American civil war “it is the sacred right of a warrior to kill an opponent who will not concede or agree to disagree”. Are we yet again at such a position? If the chatter on X and other social media forms is any indication then yes we are. Violence, violent protests and the right to bear arms for one’s causes is always, already present and valid. Our intelligence agencies, the much vilified “deep state”, are now as much tuned to internal dissension as they are to foreign subversion and perhaps there is a link between the two.

What can be done? My feeling is that social democrats must leave their comfortable audiences behind and go into the communities who now hate, or at least do not share, the values which we once assumed bound all of us.

Let us start by recognizing that at the heart of the contemporary new right consensus are some indisputable facts:

- Our recently departed Queen was one of the greatest leaders of the 20th century, devoted in an unparalleled way to her “subjects” and the Commonwealth nations for seventy years and 214 days..
- The question is: What do we have that is as good or better for the Australian people?

- Population movements around the world due to war, economic imbalances and climate misfortunes are extremely challenging and having secure borders is an important guarantee of national stability.
- What do we have that is pragmatically better than a closed restricted border for immigrants?
- Indigenous rights are prone to governmental corruption and imperfect outcomes no matter how responsible or well governed Aboriginal agencies may be.
- What arguments can we make that show the superior outcomes of Indigenous self determination and autonomy is important for all Australians and most particularly Aboriginal Australians in all of their diverse settings around the nation.
- Individuals should have indissoluble rights over governments particularly when it comes to their own bodies and health
- Under what circumstances can governments supercede individual rights?

There are core, unchanging values on both sides of the major national debates and these issues; but moving back to more basic positions on politics and having no assumptions about what the consensus may be on these matters may result in a better national polity and hopefully may prevent us going to war.