

“Word Salad”



“when humanity loses the heavens it loses itself”

In a world of misinformation, when everybody seems to be lying, “realness” is the most precious commodity.

I

“Word salad” was how MAGA supporters described Democrat speeches in the 2024 USA Presidential election. It was short hand for bureaucratic, “woke” and ultimately, in plain old parlance, “bullshit”. It meant not just “weasel words” but a kind of speech that was the province of a privileged class that was doing well while others, ordinary folks, suffered. It meant lots of rhetorical flourish with no substance.

“Nonsense” was the counter reply to MAGA. The Republican campaign had no written policies and there was wolf whistles to an undercurrent of social media theories and conspiracies that never underwent scrutiny or debate because most often they were underground. “Citizen journalists” were free to indulge in ideas as fanciful as the idea that Hurricane Helene was engineered to strike Florida. Now the Republicans have been elected in America hopefully many of the ideas that have driven the MAGA movement will become more tangible and will be able to be debated. It is notable that figures such as RFK jr were censored in mainstream forums and now have the opportunity to present their ideas in the daylight.

In all of this it used to be that the left was the most conspiratorial, now arguably the idea that the system is inherently corrupt has become mainstream. So much so that whoever acts as if they are holier than thou, or principled, or apparently honest, is the most distrusted. I am not sure if many people agree with the comedian Dave Chapelle that the Republican candidate was “the most honest liar”, but you may be forgiven for

thinking that way. If you catch a cab in the USA its likely you will hear the most profound and heartfelt story of how the system is bad and everything is not as it seems.

Are Western democracies becoming like the old East Germany – where nothing can be trusted. Perhaps. Hanging on to known authentic truths means everything, or maybe nothing, in the face of an avalanche of social media.

A majority of Americans who voted believed in the “realness” of the Republican candidate, a lesser but nevertheless significant number believed in the virtuous story of Kamala Harris. A significant number of others, over 16 million citizens, chose not to enrol or to vote in the election. It seems the pejorative term “word salad” held sway.

II

It is the duty of a conscientious person to examine the arguments of those who one opposes if they command a significant majority or even if they command a significant amount of public opinion. It may be that the educated elites who have learned to use “word salads” as part of their education, over-looked the basic fundamental of all politics, it always comes down to the hip pocket and all of us know that prices are up significantly to the extent that it is harder to survive and there is a real depression to every day life. It does not matter if the stock market is up, or the economy is improving or that inflation is on the way down, the price of eggs, that is people’s sense of their own capacity to survive, matters most.

The archetypal campaign on this front was run by Bill Clinton in 1991 against George W. Bush. Democrats now remember James Carville’s slogan “it’s the economy stupid”. The argument was ‘America first’ after the mad US invasion of Iraq and this neatly flows into the 2024 election arguments by Republicans against the Ukraine war. It matters not if an “overseas war” is just or unjust, it diverts resources away from ordinary Americans that is the perception. The Democrat policies of middle class tax cuts, more affordable child care, family payments and small business grants, amongst other things, were on target but perhaps they were buried in a word salad too many. Perhaps Kamala Harris should have spent three hours talking with Joe Rogan. Perhaps other more moralising arguments about why Kamala Harris should be in the White House were over-played, painful as that is, for many of us.

“Word salad” as an abusive phrase needs careful exposition. Arguably those who have benefited most and are most secure in the post-industrial American economy are those who have learned the art of speaking, writing, calculating at a high level. The first instinct is to give a speech, write a report, develop a chart, present a table and provide a certain kind of evidence for courts, for public dissemination, for commerce etc. But such skills are precisely those which alienated workers and non-college educated people have come to distrust in political forums. Tik tok posts last 30-60 seconds, twitter posts are 280 characters, Joe Rogan interviews can last 3 hours but you may as

well tape a discussion between friends having a beer.. nevertheless if you want to research an issue google it or trawl social media or ask your peer group. It matters little that citizen journalism is the province of scoundrels, if more serious folks downgrade it they lose a huge audience. Furthermore if these social media forms are used to just reiterate more formal “word salads” then they are flicked.

III

But there is more to this, it is not about misunderstanding or ignorance. When non-college educated folks hear “word salads” they believe they are about to be conned as completely as Democrats feel that the Republican candidate should be in jail and is the agent of Putin and other felons. They are opposed to word salads so much they want to tear down the pillars of democracy and even the environment and throw caution to the wind.

IV

In the United States the 2024 election was defined most by those who did not vote. 15 million eligible voters equal to the size of the entire Australian national electorate did not vote. It is astonishing that only 65 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot down from the 67 per cent in 2020. In Australia 92 per cent of eligible voters voted in the last Federal election. Compulsory voting does not guarantee that one political party wins it creates a sense of belonging and attachment to the polity that is much needed in the USA.

To be truly democratic, the United States needs compulsory preferential voting. If it is to be truly democratic and more unified it needs to have compulsory proportional voting especially for multi-candidate Congressional or parliamentary elections. If a compulsory proportional voting method was applied to the 2024 Presidential election and a quota of votes were to replace the archaic electoral college system, Donald Trump would have won the election with a quota of 2.5 quotas against Kamala Harris who would have obtained 2.4 quotas. A quota is obtained by dividing the total votes by the number of candidates plus one. If Stein and Kennedy are excluded from the calculation then Trump would have won with 1.52 quotas versus Harris 1.45. If a proportional voting system was used and the electoral college was dumped then every Americans vote would have equal value and probably more candidates would present themselves to run for President. People in “swing states” would be spared the disproportional circus of events and hysterical intensity.

Even if the American electoral system was retained but compulsory voting was introduced, it would dramatically transform US democracy. In addition the United States should depoliticise the electoral system by creating an independent statutory authority like Australia’s Electoral Commission that is responsible for ensuring the

fairness, quality and integrity of elections and most importantly ensuring that every citizen's right to vote is delivered and honoured.

V

Authenticity has to be the new watch word for politics. There must be a liveliness, authenticity and trust that is searingly honest. Listening to those who have contrary views, and addressing wild ideas in a respectful way, and if necessary agreeing to disagree is part of this. There should be less word salads and bureaucratic moralising or pivoting to greater lights in the sky. Words and policies have to be understood by the least educated, as well as those who have benefited from education and occupy relatively privileged places in our society. It is most often 'the economy stupid'; at the moment in the world's most advanced countries it is a struggle for those without secure well paying jobs to put food on the table and to finance a roof over their heads. It should not be this way but it is demoralising when the true nature of human beings is to survive and thrive.

But well may we remember Dave Chapelle.. "the most honest liar" in the room wins. Celebrities, professional advertising agencies, snappy slogans and polished electoral platforms do not bring authenticity they seem to bring distrust.

For "true believers" the waves of misinformation are thoroughly disheartening, but perhaps that too focuses us on the need for authenticity and enlivens our ideas.

Finally we need to think of ourselves as world citizens. Australians need more serious analysis of United States politics and particularly conservative ideas. The average Australian and most certainly progressive Labor thinkers clearly underestimate the complexity of America and the practicality and hard headed utility of Americans. The new role of social media means that anyone who has a half decent internet connection can plug into the USA streams of the so-called legacy media as well as the underground citizen forums from Joe Rogan to Steve Bannon. The Americans have infiltrated our sub-conscious to the point that even when Australians ridicule the American spectacle, they are captured by it. As well as speaking and thinking more authentically, we need to have a more original and independent position on what is happening in the world. Watching Australian political and media commentary feels a bit like we are watching the world through a 1950s black and white television set, and it leaves us helpless and blind. When criticising America for ignorance, bias or racism etc we should remember people in glass houses should not throw stones and keep our own house in order.

I remember the late Gough Whitlam espousing SBS World News as his preferred news forum when it first emerged. It seemed revolutionary at the time. Now there is a whole new world of social media which deserves an equally serious analysis from podcasts to what may be called the instantaneous reactive forums of twitter and tik tok. One of the aspects of these forums is they are free. In remote Arnhem land, where the average

income of people is \$15,000 per annum, tik tok and facebook are much used for communications because they are easy, free and can be structured to accommodate family networks. This not an accident and it is instructive about how even the poorest in our community embrace new techniques of communication indeed sometimes they starve for it.

I agree that mobile devices should not be able to be used in school. The fact that there is a marked improvement in behaviour and classroom learning in schools where the ban of mobile phones is in place is something to think about. Ideally parents should exercise a similar level of discipline with their kids by limiting screen time etc. But laptops and even phones are a part of our world. Social media is part of our politics. Podcasts etc are the way people in non-formal education settings learn about the world. Books and ideas can be more easily consumed by verbal means than by written media. There is no reason why these many social media forms cannot be used to convey authentic, living and honest ideas and thoughts. To restrict them is not the answer. Authentic, living, honest words and thoughts are the way forward.