



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR  
**CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE**

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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

## **State of the Nation: Politics, Ethics and Democracy in Australia**

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In October 1940, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave a chilling description of the consequences of succumbing to a Nazi view of the world. In such a world, he said,

[t]here is no future and no past. There remains only the present moment rescued from nothingness and the desire to grasp the next moment. Already yesterday's concerns are consigned to forgetfulness, and tomorrow's are too far away to obligate us today. . . . Nothing is fixed, and nothing holds on. . . . Events of world-historical significance, along with the most terrible crimes, leave no trace behind in the forgetful soul. . . . What is quiet, lasting, and essential is discarded as worthless. . . . [T]he foundation of historical life—trust in all its forms—is destroyed. Because truth is not trusted, specious propaganda takes over. Because justice is not trusted, whatever is useful is declared to be just.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of this appalling “nothingness,” people are ready to surrender everything: “their own judgment, their humanity, their neighbours. Where this fear is exploited without scruple, there are no limits to what can be achieved.”<sup>2</sup>

These observations have a still disturbing resonance and power. They speak clearly to our present condition—not (yet) by virtue of a fully resurgent fascism anywhere in the West, but because the insular, unreflective habits of mind that allowed “national socialism” and other partisan expressions of bigotry and brutality to succeed in Europe eighty years ago are always possible for us; and because those habits of mind are again assuming a certain prominence today. We see them, in the United States and Europe, in the populist nationalism which feeds on the resentment of those who have come to see themselves as victims of globalisation and of the displacement fuelled by other peoples' wars. We see them here, too, most obviously in the unhappy history of our treatment of asylum seekers and in our readiness to hold carelessly assumed communities (“Africans” and “Muslims”) responsible for the actions of a few.

It is not, however, the purpose of this paper to examine these or other specific matters of policy or conduct. Its objective is rather to explore the enabling environment—the atmosphere—which has given rise to an increasingly narrow view of what it means to protect and advance the Australian national interest. This peculiar perception of the national interest is underwritten by a supporting narrative which is held to reflect (unbending) community expectations. The fact that these expectations are themselves largely and necessarily a product of the narrative is not generally acknowledged.

We begin with some broadly familiar assumptions. Australians live, for the most part, in a peaceful, free, and relatively prosperous country. Most of us have jobs and the chance of a good

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), DBWE 6: 128–30.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 131.

education, as well as access to affordable health care and other social services. Our governing institutions are robust, democratic, and accountable. We enjoy freedom of speech, assembly, and religion. Our rights as human beings and citizens of Australia are fully protected by law. There is a negative slope to this, of course. Dispossession, racism, intolerance, cruelty, injustice, and inequality have all played significant parts in our history, and continue to damage Australian, and other, lives today. Most of us, though, may still reasonably be said to think kindly of our country and believe it to compare very favourably with others.

But we could, perhaps, be guilty of taking the undoubted strength of Australia's democratic institutions too much for granted. They are neither self-subsistent nor self-healing. They need our constant care and attention and can be irreparably damaged by abuse and neglect. A properly functioning democracy requires more than a strong institutional foundation. It also requires a rich and challenging national discourse, and a shared sense of responsibility for the character of the nation—for the face it presents to its citizens and to the world.

We have always been inclined to think of ourselves, with some pride, as sceptical of authority, and are quick to criticise those who, in our view, take themselves too seriously. Politicians feature prominently in this category. In recent years, though, public cynicism has reached new and possibly unprecedented heights.<sup>3</sup> Respect for government—never especially high in Australia—has been further undermined by a succession of leadership spills and bloody internal ideological feuds which have served only to confirm, in the minds of many Australians, the already popular view that politics are essentially a means of self-promotion, having generally little to do with anything that might truly be called the public interest. Hugh Mackay quotes a 2017 poll conducted for the newDemocracy Foundation which found that 54 percent of respondents agreed with the proposition: 'the system is broken,'

while only 39 percent agreed that our current system of parliamentary democracy is 'the best there is.' When asked to pick the three least-trusted categories of people in society, a whopping 69 percent put politicians on their list (compared with 36 percent who included journalists, 34 percent lawyers and 32 percent bankers, the next three least-trusted categories).<sup>4</sup>

In such a climate as this, the question for politicians has become: how do we get the electorate to take us seriously; and, if we can't do that, how at least do we get its attention?

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<sup>3</sup> Hugh Mackay observes: "One of the things most commonly said about the state of contemporary federal politics is this: 'I've never known it to be this bad.'" He is quick to remind us, though, that people have been saying this for quite a long time: "In 1999 I wrote in a research report: 'Esteem for politicians has sunk to a new low. . .'" Hugh Mackay, *Australia Reimagined* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2018), 246.

<sup>4</sup> Mackay, 226.

The answer, apparently, is by appealing exclusively to our insecurities. Politicians hold fast to the belief that elections are won by those who promise to keep us safe and to put (or to leave) money in our pockets. They are lost by those who fail to convince us that they will do one or both these things, often because their opponents have successfully misrepresented their intentions. Whether the promises are meant, or the risks real, is of no lasting importance. The tactic is deliberately short-term. It mirrors the electoral cycle and is highly effective.

We are thus assumed to be fixated on jobs, growth, personal wealth, and related statistics; to have little sense of responsibility for other people; and to be largely indifferent to the fate of the global commons. In one of his letters from prison, Bonhoeffer speaks again of the “forgetfulness” which he so clearly sees now in his fellow prisoners. It is not, he says, just the passing thought that fails to take hold. So much else, of profound importance, is also either lost or abandoned.

Everything is short term. . . . But the good things like justice, truth, beauty, all great achievements, need time and steadfastness, “memory,” or else they degenerate. Anyone who doesn’t have the sense of a past to answer for and a future to plan for is “forgetful” . . . Everything one can say, even if it makes an impression at the moment, is lost to forgetfulness.<sup>5</sup>

Is this, perhaps, how our politicians see us? They refer constantly to Australia’s proud history of sacrifice in war. They flatter us with assurances of our humanity, generosity, and tolerance. But they clearly have no sense of these qualities at work in the everyday world of their experience, and no confidence in the ability of their constituents to prioritise longer-term needs over immediate desires. Idealistic schoolchildren may do this occasionally, but serious voters don’t.

It is sadly possible that we are now inclined to accept, at least for domestic political purposes, this impoverished version of ourselves, not least because we have come to believe our political representatives incapable of a more challenging conversation. As Mackay says, Australian democracy has reached a point

where we *expect* ruthless, self-protective pragmatism from our politicians . . . ; where noble sentiments are likely to be dismissed as ‘the vision thing’; where winning is everything . . . and the lack of respect between political opponents . . . only serves to reinforce voters’ cynicism about all of them.<sup>6</sup>

We are thus more or less ready to agree that governments exist simply to keep us reasonably safe and creditworthy, and that they should do this, for the most part, unobtrusively.

Robert Putnam, in his study of civic traditions in modern Italy, asks whether “the quality of a democracy depend[s] on the quality of its citizens,” so that people living in a democracy can truly

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<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), DBWE 8: 284.

<sup>6</sup> Mackay, 228.

be said to get “the government they deserve.”<sup>7</sup> For Putnam, the answer to this question would seem to be a qualified yes. A country’s history will inevitably affect its social character (“where you can get to depends on where you’re coming from”<sup>8</sup>) but an abundance of social capital, in the form of norms and patterns of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement,<sup>9</sup> is “the key to making democracy work.”<sup>10</sup> In this context, the conclusion drawn by Alexis de Tocqueville in his influential nineteenth-century study of democracy in America is still valid today: “Democratic government is strengthened, not weakened, when it faces a vigorous civil society.”<sup>11</sup>

It is of course quite possible, and by no means unreasonable, to see things differently. As Putnam points out:

In *the tragedy of the commons*, no herder can limit grazing by anyone else’s flock. If he limits his own use of the common meadow, he alone loses. Yet unlimited grazing destroys the common resource on which the livelihood of all depends.

A *public good*, such as clean air or safe neighbourhoods, can be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of whether he contributes to its provision. Under ordinary circumstances, therefore, no one has an incentive to contribute to providing the public good, and too little is produced, causing all to suffer.<sup>12</sup>

While, however, most of us will be able to think of practical examples of this kind of failure to cooperate—our failure so far to come together to force an effective response to climate change, for example—it is not this that defines us. In large and small ways, Australians regularly cooperate for the public good, most obviously by providing support to those in need. It would thus be wrong to suggest that we do not understand either the importance of accumulating social capital or the merits of cooperating to secure a common objective. We understand these things very well, and we are quite good at them—but we may still be inclined to forget that the health and success of any democracy depends on its citizens’ accepting a significant, ongoing measure of responsibility for making it work.

It is easy to see how this happens. We are so busy, so unquiet—so thoroughly networked, and yet so profoundly isolated—that nothing holds our attention for long. We may sometimes feel that (other) Australians are doing things which should not be done (detaining asylum seekers indefinitely is a good example) or not doing things that badly need to be done (implementing a climate-sensitive national energy policy, for example) but we have no time and no effective means of righting these wrongs. We are hard-pressed to hold our own highly fragmented lives together,

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<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Putnam, 179.

<sup>9</sup> Putnam, 167.

<sup>10</sup> Putnam, 185.

<sup>11</sup> Putnam, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Putnam, 163.

and find commitment difficult, if not impossible, to sustain. Democracy, though, will always be weak and at risk when we are careless of its integrity—when we accept uncritically the assurances of those who have most to gain by witnessing positively to its character. It will be weak when we focus too narrowly on our rights as free individuals and neglect our shared responsibilities—when, by default, we encourage politicians to appeal to the most selfish versions of ourselves rather than to our common humanity.

It is possible to overstate the case for a compassionate society. People may reasonably be expected always to give some priority to their private interests; to the narrow and the now over the broad and the later. As Putnam says, “[i]n a world of saints, perhaps, dilemmas of collective action would not arise, but universal altruism is a quixotic premise for either social action or social theory.”<sup>13</sup> Even in a society such as ours, which understands the norm of generalised reciprocity to be a most effective means of reconciling “self-interest and solidarity,”<sup>14</sup> altruism is predicated on the (possibly vague) expectation of some future benefit.

There is nonetheless clearly scope for changing the tone and substance of the contemporary political narrative in Australia which, effectively since the turn of the century (since “the Tampa crisis” and “9/11”), has been driven by a border security mentality whose bleak view of the world has diminished us in important ways, and locked us into assumptions of sovereignty, threat, and attenuated self-interest which make it increasingly hard for us to recognise the people we were before the world became such a “dangerous place.” There are many problems with this kind of narrative, but one of the most pernicious is its durability. It is surprisingly simple to defend. Anyone, for example, who challenges the wisdom of offshore detention or stronger anti-terrorism laws is accused of failing to take Australia’s national security seriously. Anyone who proposes a tax on carbon or serious greenhouse gas emission reduction targets threatens jobs and puts at risk promised reductions in the price of power. We can and must demand a richer and more challenging analysis of the options at our disposal, and of the likely costs of stasis or inertia. Mindless slogans and piecemeal financial inducements should not be anything like enough for us. Jeffrey Stout rightly argues that

[c]entral to democratic thought . . . is the idea of a body of citizens who reason with one another about the ethical issues that divide them, especially when deliberating on the justice or decency of political arrangements. . . . The democratic practice of giving and asking for *ethical reasons* . . . is where the life of democracy principally resides.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Putnam, 164.

<sup>14</sup> Putnam, 172.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 6.

Australians cannot, of course, all be expected to sign up for the same things; to embrace, with equal passion, the same values; or to acknowledge the same threats. We may, though, reasonably be expected to grasp more than one side of an argument and to be capable of taking more than our own immediate interests into account. Most of us know, too, that we must take some responsibility for the way our governments behave. Citizens in a functioning democracy are never simply hapless victims of circumstance. History doesn't happen without us. We cannot be indifferent—as successive Australian governments have been—to the moral dimensions of public policy. What Stout says of American political culture is also true of our own: it “traffics heavily in appeals to explicitly stated norms.” This, he suggests, “is the most obvious way in which we hold our leaders . . . accountable to the people.”<sup>16</sup> We might thus perhaps spare a thought for the beleaguered Australian values which are so often claimed for us by our political representatives. Must “mateship” and a “fair go for all” now simply be assumed to include such things as the indefinite detention of asylum seekers, indifference to a rapidly warming world,<sup>17</sup> and—after more than twenty-five years of uninterrupted economic growth—one of the lowest aid to GNP ratios in the OECD? We are hostage to a political narrative based on fear and shameless self-interest. It won't be easy to change this, but we can at least begin to do so by demanding a more coherent, connected and responsible account of Australia's interests—one that appeals to the best rather than to the worst in us—and by not punishing at the ballot box those who try genuinely to provide such an account.<sup>18</sup>

We may choose to approach this, from an ethical perspective, as essentially a matter of responding more thoughtfully and more fittingly to the complex demands of the moral life. In a Christian context, as Allen Verhey points out, this will entail a response which fits the character and cause of God made known in Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup> We may agree with Bonhoeffer that responsible action is complicated by the fact that it takes place “in the twilight that the historical situation casts upon good and evil,”<sup>20</sup> but this gives us no reason to assume that a Christian view of the world will

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<sup>16</sup> Stout, 12.

<sup>17</sup> It is possible that politicians are beginning to understand that most Australians now find the idea of climate change both plausible and worrying. We can thus expect them, from now on, to try harder to convince us that one side takes the issue *very seriously indeed* and is doing something about it, while the other doesn't and isn't. (This is not, of course, to overlook the good work of those, including some MPs, who have laboured long to persuade Australians of the reality of climate change and of the existential nature of the threat it presents.)

<sup>18</sup> Mackay rightly urges us to take every opportunity “to make our views known.” We might perhaps “wait until an election to express our displeasure with whomever is in government. But if we expect no better from their replacement, those low expectations are likely to be met and our cynicism to deepen. To fall silent between elections is to acquiesce.” Mackay, 245, 247.

<sup>19</sup> Allen Verhey, “The gospels and Christian ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (Second Edition), ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 50–51. Verhey here draws on the work of H. Richard Niebuhr.

<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 284.

finally accommodate just about anything we may deem the situation to “require.” We have rather to remember that the story of God’s becoming human in Jesus Christ is the story of God’s love for *all* human beings, and that responsible action is thus most unlikely to coincide with a largely unprincipled convenience. As Verhey says:

Communities of Christian faith read the gospels to remember the story. They would set all the stories of their life alongside the story of Jesus that they may be illumined by that story, judged and made new by that story, until their lives and their common life are somehow ‘fitting’ or ‘worthy’ of the gospel.

The test of authenticity, which is here given a specifically Christian identity, is really the same for everyone. It is the measure of our consistency. We cannot honestly claim to be a certain kind of people—fair-minded, egalitarian, tolerant, inclusive, responsible, forward-thinking—and yet allow ourselves to be defined by policies and behaviours which have a very different origin. The fact that a British fascist was moved to call a former Australian prime minister “heroic” and that our treatment of asylum-seekers is much admired by Europe’s far right<sup>21</sup> should be more than enough to set us on a different path.

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<sup>21</sup> Sasha Polakow-Suransky, “How Europe’s far right fell in love with Australia’s immigration policy.” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/12/how-europes-far> . . .