

Authenticity, the answer to PC pundits

By Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, 17 February 2016

It's not just that they both have first-name recognition. The government's new leadership team may be one heck of a good mix for more important reasons.

Progressive types have been intoxicated by Malcolm Turnbull ever since he became Prime Minister.

Enter Barnaby Joyce. He's the tonic to Malcolm's gin. He sobers up the Coalition and the country. He reminds Malcolm that another constituency matters, too, and that this more social conservative exists not just on the backblocks of Cunnamulla. He's also a tonic to the increasingly sterile world of modern politics where foibles and quirks are not just ironed out; they're starched so heavily, politicians look like cardboard cut-outs.

Joyce has something rare in politics. It's call authenticity. Just as the US Supreme Court once said of obscenity that it's hard to define but easy to spot, it's the same with authenticity. You know it when you see it. And it's never been more alluring to voters awash in the torrent of highly scripted, tightly disciplined political chatter.

Sure, we hear the yakety-yak of politicians, but who really remembers any of it? Three-word slogans wash over us. Tony Abbott suffered the consequences of that verbal disease. Loquacious outpourings of nothingness are equally brain-numbing. Bill Shorten talks a lot but what is he actually trying to say?

No wonder we're craving something more. Something real. The US presidential election is a lesson in how the missing ingredient can lift the most unlikely characters. Donald Trump is blitzing the Republican race because he's authentic: annoying, offensive, bombastic, occasionally crude, he insults women, Mexicans, even the disabled. But he speaks free from the multi-layers of political correctness that have numbed our ability and our desire to listen to politicians.

Like him or loathe him, when Trump talks, people listen. When he promised to build a wall to keep out Mexicans, his critics laughed. When he promised to ban Muslim immigration, his critics screamed. When he said he could walk down Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and still attract voters, his critics were stunned.

But Trump's polls keep heading north. He's confounding critics whatever their political stripes because, as one pundit said, you can't write the Trump story because he's writing it. Whether you agree with him or not, at least he's talking about issues that have the establishment crowd tiptoeing on the eggshells of political correctness. Trump doesn't so much ignore the PC rules, he stomps on them, and even that crunching sound is music to the ears of millions of Americans who are done with Washington's waffle.

It's the same with Democrat Bernie Sanders. Six months ago, who would have thought an old bloke, a self-described socialist, could unnerve the mighty Hillary Clinton and her well-oiled, formidable political machine? Bernie's done that by speaking without the constraints of establishment politics.

As Brian Loughnane reported back to us from New Hampshire last weekend, a significant number of voters support Trump first and Sanders second, and vice versa. Who'd have thought?

This is not about ideology, or even just anger over stagnant wages and a sluggish economic recovery that has left the middle class behind. Sanders has something that the slippery, smooth-talking Clinton can never harness: authenticity.

The smartypants pundits who say Trump and Sanders won't make it to the White House are missing the point. Be it in politics, sport, business or whatever, people are attracted to those who are the real deal: people who don't pretend to be anyone except themselves, are comfortable in their own skin, have real convictions and don't treat us like dolts.

The 1970s era Australian cricket team — the Chappell brothers, Bill Lawry, Kim Hughes, Dougie Walters, Dennis Lillee and Rod Marsh — had it all over the primp and polish of the new-era Michael Clarkes. In business, the Gerry Harveys, Dick Smiths and John Singletons count for more than the mealy-mouthed, public relations-primed CEOs.

It's the same in politics. It has been a long time between wickets on the authenticity front. Bob Hawke. John Howard. And then nothing for seven years. Howard's replacement turned out to be the greatest political chameleon the country has seen. Kevin Rudd won an election and then lost us. Global warming, the great moral issue of our time, was dumped when politics made it less moral. The Labor chameleon's language changed 180 degrees depending on his audience and even Wayne Swan could take no more, telling us Rudd had no Labor values. Then we had to endure the "real Julia". What higher humiliation or greater indictment can there be when you have to admit that voters have no idea who you are? Alas, nothing real came from that 2010 election strategy because it was just that: a strategy. When the real Julia fronted a Christian conference saying she was a staunch defender of traditional marriage, most people went: "Yeah, right. Pull other one."

Fakery had slain two Labor prime ministers because, as Graham Richardson famously said, the mob will always work you out.

As new Liberal leader, Tony Abbott was full of promise in the authenticity stakes. For years he had spoken freely, made a few blunders along the way and refused to wear the straitjacket of modern politics. And then something happened. Whether it was his decision or that of his minder Peta Credlin or both, Abbott seemed to drain himself of the very qualities that made him different from the Canberra cut-outs. That almost overnight cleansing of character helped kill off the early promise of Abbott's prime ministership.

That said, not all authenticity gets a tick of approval. When the real Abbott knighted Prince Philip, it was too late and too bizarre. People will forgive you making a gaffe but being weird is an altogether different thing. Those who will inevitably jump on the new Deputy PM when he drops a clanger don't understand what most of us do. We distrust those who have a pretence of perfection or claim a mortgage over morality. People aren't perfect. We have foibles and we make mistakes. When we see someone who reflects the reality of human nature, it's refreshing. And maybe Barnaby is just a bit like many of us.

The authenticity drought can't be broken soon enough. We need more old-fashioned grit and less gobbledygook.

The budget is a mess, economic growth is under the gun and tax reform is critical. In short, the country is crying out for economically sensible policies.

Authenticity alone doesn't make a successful leader. But it's a good start in politics if people listen when you talk. Just ask Rudd, Gillard and Abbott about that. Oh, and Shorten too.