

Loathing of the political elite

By Nic Cater, The Australian, 16 February 2016

The spluttering is getting louder around cafe tables in Manuka and Fitzroy as insiders express their disappointment with Australia's 29th prime minister.

That's encouraging news for the rest of us, suggesting Malcolm Turnbull may have more important things to do than soothe the anxieties of the *bien pensants*.

The conversations they insist we should have about "the kind of Australia we would like to live in" — by which they mean the kind of Australia they would like to live in — must be put to one side while we tackle the immediate challenge of future prosperity.

Barely five months ago one Fairfax Media columnist proclaimed Turnbull the new Gough Whitlam, something apparently intended as a compliment. Last week the same writer sounded distinctly jaded, complaining that the decision to leave the GST rate untouched "has punctured the overblown expectation created around his ascension".

"Like the refusal to put same-sex marriage equality to a free parliamentary vote, or even to lend qualified support to a new republican push, the government's political interests come before the oft-invoked national interest," he wrote.

It was a telling comment revealing the impossible demands of the progressive elite. Turnbull must put aside his "political interests" — that is to say the chances of winning the next election — to rush through a vote overturning the Marriage Act, denying the rest of us the opportunity to have our say at a plebiscite. Further, Turnbull should have endorsed a fanciful push for a bandanna republic led by a bumptious former lock forward from luvvie land.

It won't stop there

Politics for the insiders is a succession of causes rather than a practical application of principles to deal with shared challenges. They live in a closed world of moral absolutes: equality, rights, fairness, secularism and sustainability. There is no room for compromise. Turnbull is with them or against them.

Responding to the insiders' extortionate demands is a high-stake game for any prime minister, even one who understands the inner-urban zeitgeist as well as the member for Wentworth does. Were Turnbull to adopt the Fairfax line on climate change or border control, for example, the rest of the country would think he had gone completely bonkers. His political capital would evaporate and he would be in serious danger of becoming the fourth prime minister in a row not to complete a full term.

Straddling the widening chasm between the insiders and outsiders is the most demanding task faced by any political leader these days. Leaning towards the inside, as Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard did on carbon tax and asylum-seekers, can be a career-ending move.

The insiders hound dissident leaders mercilessly

Yet to thumb one's nose at the conventional wisdom of the political class is equally dangerous, as Tony Abbott discovered. The insiders hound dissident leaders mercilessly until they — or their partyrooms — crack.

Navigating this treacherous cultural landscape will test Turnbull's agility to the limits. It is a challenge that proved too great for his three immediate predecessors, who found themselves wedged across the pre-eminent dividing line in contemporary public life.

If he is to succeed, Turnbull must pitch his message to the outsiders who form the majority in the majority of seats without offending the insiders who establish the tone of the debate.

The gap between the assumptions and expectations of insiders and outsiders is not confined to Australia. The rage against the political class that makes Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders viable candidates for US president is present in Australia too, albeit deeper below the surface.

It creates a political dynamic that is neither Left nor Right in the conventional sense. As Brian Loughnane noted on these pages on Saturday, a surprising number of Trump supporters list Sanders as their second choice and vice versa. It is not ideology that drives them but the populist appeal of unfunded handouts and their loathing of the political elite.

Their loathing of the political elite

They question its authority, motives and competence. They distrust the experts the insiders wheel out to make their case and regard much of the media as prejudiced and, at times, downright dishonest.

The insiders, meanwhile, are becoming ever more remote, living geographically and cognitively separate lives. Political scientist Charles Murray describes their equivalents in the US as the new upper class.

They are seldom attracted to the films, television shows and music that are popular in mainstream America, Murray wrote in an article republished in yesterday's *The Australian*. "They have a distinctive culture in the food they eat, the way they take care of their health, their child-rearing practices, the vacations they take, the books they read, the websites they visit and their taste in beer. You name it, the new upper class has its own way of doing it."

When Murray described this new stratification in his 2012 Bonython Lecture in Sydney, he observed that the same trends were happening here. We hardly needed reminding. The perplexing decision to make former army chief David Morrison Australian of the Year was an illustration of the insider mindset at work.

We see it too in the decision by the Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Commission to press a case against the Catholic Church for publishing a pamphlet opposing same sex marriage.

These pronouncements are an affront to common sense

To those outside the bubble these pronouncements are an affront to common sense. Yet they are powerless to do anything about them, since they are made by officials outside the democratic process.

Rising above this fractious debate is arguably the biggest challenge facing the Prime Minister. He must avoid finding himself caught between an insider class that makes impossible demands and outsiders who are fast losing patience with them.

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