

Stop sneering, it's high time to take trump seriously

By [Janet Albrechtsen](#), The Australian, 1 June 2016

Donald Trump's next book should be called *The Art of Under-Estimation*. Ever since the businessman announced his candidacy as Republican nominee for the US presidency on June 16 last year, political and media elites treated him, with few exceptions, as a joke.

That same day, Democratic National Committee press secretary Holly Shulman released this statement: "Donald Trump ... adds some much-needed seriousness that has previously been lacking from the GOP field, and we look forward to hearing more about his ideas for the nation." *Vanity Fair* enjoyed the mockery, applauding Shulman: "You shot, and you scored."

The punchline came last week when [Trump clinched 1239 delegates](#) to secure the Republican nomination. The dimwitted reaction from America's so-called best and brightest in the media and politics has barely shifted. It's just become more manic and more doggedly ill-informed.

Trump has gone from strength to strength, ripping up the political rule book, except the rule that winning is a numbers game, picking off primaries in the south, in the northeast, in the mid-west, right across the nation, slaying a field of Republican presidential contenders, some impressive, some not, drawing even with Democrat doyenne Hillary Clinton in the polls. With pants-on-fire Clinton in trouble for lying about her use of a personal email server, Trump is riding high.

Yet, from Capitol Hill to Hollywood to hallowed conservative newspaper columns, from Bill Shorten to Kim Beazley and our own ABC, it's been stock-standard outrage at the prospect of Trump as president. And stock-standard ignorance about the only outrage that matters: the anger of millions of Americans left behind by the US economy and that country's political establishment.

It's fine for George Clooney to muster his red-carpet acumen to denounce Trump as "ugly". The real ugliness resides in America's economic stagnation. It's all well and good for conservative commentators such as George Will to punch out earnest columns calling for a "time for prudence", demanding Republicans purge Trump to "preserve the identity of their 162-year-old party". To Trump supporters, prudence means status quo Washington politics. And what precisely is the identity of the 162-year-old GOP in 2016?

It's easy politics for Shorten to take a potshot at Trump by calling him "barking mad". It plays well to Labor's perpetually outraged green-left flank but it reveals the alternative prime minister's refusal to acknowledge the reasons for Trump's success. And by claiming that mainstream Australians wouldn't agree with Trump's views, Shorten also refuses to understand many among Labor's traditional but dwindling working class base.

Our taxpayer-funded ABC streams the same dogged head-in-the-sand ignorance. On Radio National, *PM* recently homed in on Trump as a ratings boon for television networks, the appeal of Trump's braggadocio, Trump's \$2 billion in free airtime, Trump's celebrity factor, Trump as the lead player in political reality TV and so on. With an annual budget of more than \$1bn, is this really the best analysis the ABC can offer Australians?

Rather than depicting Trump supporters as angry channel surfing reality TV deadbeats, what about explaining to Australians the genuine concerns of millions of American voters? And when will the regular Sunday morning snickering about Trump on *Insiders* give way to thoughtful analysis?

When Trump announced his candidacy, he said the American dream was dead. He promised to “make America great again ... the old-fashioned way”. Any vox pop of Trump supporters echoes these eight words: make America great again, the old fashioned way. The beauty of Trump’s early refrain — and his campaign — is that it has come to mean different things to different people and it harks back to decades ago when the concerns of working-class Americans were taken seriously.

While some regard Trump as the bastard child of the Tea Party movement, his supporters have little in common with Tea Party backers, save for the common desire to raise the middle finger to the political establishment.

Ted Cruz’s small government, lower taxes, less spending ideology didn’t create an opening for Trump. Instead, Cruz’s pioneering savage antics lay the foundation for Trump’s crash or crash-through campaign. The Texas Republican torched the Senate, calling Republican leader Mitch McConnell a liar and pushing House conservatives into shutting down the government in 2013 despite objections from GOP leaders in the House and the Senate. Trump has closed the deal because he’s far more in touch with mainstream voters than the oddball Cruz.

Asked by Bloomberg’s Joshua Green what the Republican Party would look like in five years, Trump said: “Love the question. Five, 10 years from now — different party. You’re going to have a workers’ party. A party of people that haven’t had a real wage rise in 18 years.”

It pays to remember that American voters flocked to Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan in 1980 after growing disillusioned with America’s economic stagnation under Jimmy Carter. These so-called Reagan Democrats stuck with the Republican president in 1984 when Reagan promised “morning again in America”. Speaking directly to the concerns of these working-class voters, Reagan asked them why they would risk returning to the moribund policies of his opponent, Walter Mondale who served as Carter’s vice-president.

Reagan Democrats deserted the Democratic Party because it stopped being the natural home of working-class Americans, instead earning a reputation as the party of welfare recipients, feminists, African-Americans, Latinos, and other minority groups.

Hardworking blue-collar workers asked themselves: who’s fighting for us? Twenty years later, Reagan Democrats can’t find a home in the Republican Party either. As Eugene Robinson at *The Washington Post* identified last month, while leading Republicans slog it out among themselves (remember John Boehner calling Ted Cruz “Lucifer in the flesh”) the GOP has ignored the concerns of millions of these working-class voters who turned away from the Democratic Party.

They are not small government or free-trade or fiscally conservative. Enduring stagnant wages, jobs moving overseas, growing job insecurity, falling house prices and steep university fees for their children, these “orphaned voters” have thrown their lot in with Trump and his promise to make America great again.

It helps too that Trump doesn’t give a toss about political correctness. When Trump calls Democrat senator Elizabeth Warren “Pocahontas”, alluding to her unverified claim to Native-

American heritage, Trump supporters chuckle while the Left confects outrage about “casual racism”.

To focus only on Trump’s ugly side, and there is plenty there, is to miss the real point of his triumph last week. Trump may be the backlash presidential candidate and his supporters may be angry, but they also feel entirely abandoned by both political parties. As we comfort ourselves that Australian politics could surely never produce a Trump, the double dissolution election on July 2 may well produce a small army of backlash senators dropped into Canberra by voters who feel equally neglected by the Coalition and Labor. Sadly, if that happens, there will be more, not less, political paralysis and that will fuel greater disenchantment among voters. So it pays not to get too cocky because who knows where that will end.