

Socialism returns in the guise of sincerity

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It's a fact, says Bill Shorten [leader of the Australian Labor opposition party]. The government's \$7.6 billion cut to foreign aid will hurt the world's most vulnerable people. The money could have delivered basic sanitation to 600,000 people, the Opposition Leader claims. It could have sent 180,000 kids to school, or provided modern healthcare for 300,000 mothers at risk.

It's nonsense, of course. Every sensible observer knows that the first and sometimes only beneficiaries of foreign aid are the people who administer it. The credit for welfare improvements in developing nations belongs to capitalism and free trade.

Yet chasing every Shorten factoid to empirical exhaustion is like fighting a mouse plague by nailing down tails. For every little blighter you pin to the floor another 20 come scurrying from the wheat sack.

Inequality is at a 75-year high; \$22bn has been snatched from schools; \$65bn is being given away to corporate Australia; a modest change to penalty rates means "700,000 of our fellow Australians are having their take-home pay cut". Shorten realises that in the age of Facebook, empirical truth matters less than plausible truth. If something sounds like it ought to be true that's generally good enough, providing it fits the narrative, which it will since Shorten wrote it. It is a morality tale about uncaring conservatives who put budget bottom lines before people. They are in bed with corporations that, far from generating wealth for the country, are intent on taking their profits offshore. If it's harder to get ahead these days, it's because the government isn't listening.

What role will Shorten play in this chronicle of claptrap? The selfless hero, of course, a man of piety roused to anger only by the evil that surrounds him, driven by the golden rule to be "a man for others".

"I have spent my working life ... trying to measure up to this standard of compassion and empathy, to answer the clarion call to care for the vulnerable, to speak up for the powerless, to reject hatred and intolerance, to help the poor and to pursue peace," Shorten said in a speech — or perhaps a sermon — to the Australian Christian Lobby in 2014.

His text for the day was chapter five of the Gospel according to Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount, "arguably the most famous speech in human history", according to Shorten, who wisely avoided the trickier bits about lust and divorce.

It was, said Shorten, all about "fairness ... a fairer, more equal society, a more decent and more generous world ... a caring hand to those felled by the shafts of fate ... a view that rejects the ravages of unfettered mercantilism and empty materialism ... a nation that sees homelessness, poverty, loneliness and exclusions as wrongs to be righted."

Not everyone will buy these unctuous platitudes. Is Shorten displaying the false righteousness of the Pharisees or the forbearance of the meek who inherit the earth? In the absence of final judgment, we are obliged to defer to Newspoll, which suggests Labor's Jesuitical leader has captured enough hearts to make him Australia's next head of government.

What Shorten understands, and his opponents underestimate, are the seismic changes that have occurred since the turn of the century. French political historian Pierre Rosanvallon calls it “the crisis of the representative system”, which, discounting the French political penchant for calling everything *une crise*, pretty much captures the mood.

The idea of voting for a party that can be trusted to serve the aggregated interests of your class is changing. Voters have abandoned representation for identification, says Rosanvallon. Millennials support the causes a leader espouses, not policies.

This is no time for shrinking violets, since the look of sincerity on a leader’s face trumps the force of argument. Leaders don’t need to be authentic, they just need to possess authenticity. They should be the kind of person you’d be happy to wear as a wrist band if they had been unfortunate enough to be born as one.

Such a man is Jeremy Corbyn, who until recently was just a dowdy old Trot who said nice things about communist Cuba and mourned the death of Hugo Chavez by tweeting “he made massive contributions to Venezuela & a very wide world”. Now he’s an idol who gets mobbed at rock festivals.

Corbyn, like Donald Trump, understands the politics of grievance: I may be quirky but I’m listening; if a wrong needs righting, then I’m your man.

His pitch makes perfect sense to a debt-laden, smashed-avocado muncher with first-class honours in victimology from the University of La-La Land trying to get a foot in the Shoreditch property market.

“I’ll be honest, when I first read Labour’s 2017 manifesto, I thought it was an actual f.cking miracle,” a disillusioned graduate wrote in the *New Musical Express*. “Those who thought they’d never be able to afford a flat were given hope. Anyone thinking university would be pointless was given reason to think otherwise.”

Age is the new dividing line in British politics, as it is increasingly becoming here.

Two-thirds of voters aged under 30 voted Labour in last month’s election. For older voters the picture was reversed. Corbyn received less than a quarter of votes from the over-60s, a generation that remembers socialism as it actually was.

Shorten has not declared himself a socialist, but that is what he is, as he revealed in a remarkable speech last Friday. He wants to punish the filthy rich with taxes to service the poor, to improve education and safeguard health. Like Corbyn, he opposes cuts to company taxes, supports the expansion of the state and believes — against the evidence of history — that governments spend money more wisely than people.

Which is marvellous news for the Coalition, which faces a contest of ideas it should know it can win. The gap on political fundamentals has seldom been wider; the Hawke-Keating-Howard consensus has been entirely repudiated by an opposition that has lost all economic reason.

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