

## Unchecked rise of democracy deniers

By Chris Kenny, *The Australian*, 1 December 2019

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They simply will not learn. They refuse to admit error, concede defeat or offer the crucial loser's consent on which democracy hinges. Political opposition and public protest are fundamental in democracy. But there is a balance to be struck between such rights and the will of the majority as exercised through the ballot box.

That balance is out of kilter now. There are phonies in parliament, on campuses, all over social media and spewing erroneous groupthink from our public broadcasters. When facts don't suit or reality confounds them, they console each other in the carefully constructed safe zones of university seminars or public radio forums. This cohort, for all its errors and mis-judgments, dominates the public discussion; largely because of the heft of the taxpayer-funded media, university and quango sectors. They dominate now just as they did before this year's election, before Donald Trump won and before Brexit.

On the ABC's *Insiders* last week all three panellists agreed with the assertion Malcolm Turnbull had put forward that he would have won the election. Could they make such assessments if they understood what had transpired at the polls?

Having misjudged the electoral dynamic, you would expect a recalibration of perspectives might be unavoidable. Perhaps there would be a realisation from the media/political class that they had over-estimated the public appetite for climate action, underestimated resistance to increased taxation or missed anxiety about a return to ambivalent border security.

But no. There are no lessons. The ideological and policy settings of the media/political class remain unadjusted. They wander right up to the cheese again, take another bite, and get jolted again by the electoral shock.

They are the democracy deniers. Their version of public debate is one of virtual reality; their views are constantly reaffirmed, it is only the voters who get it wrong. For VR goggles, they can blinker themselves by watching the ABC, perhaps SBS for variety, reading *Guardian Australia* and discussing events at the Wheeler Centre or on Q&A.

The real world is kept at bay. When elections confound them, as conservative victories invariably do, they can blame strangers from the suburbs and the regions, demonise the barbarians at the commercial end of the broadcast spectrum or invoke that hardy perennial of the defeated leftist, the Murdoch conspiracy theory (as we have heard from Turnbull, Kevin Rudd and others). Anything but confront the truth. Ultimately this is futile, as Winston Churchill suggested: "The truth is incontrovertible. Malice may attack it, ignorance may deride it, but in the end, there it is."

So, at the May election the Coalition picked up an extra seat, won more than 41 per cent of the primary vote and generated a 1 per cent swing towards it on a two-party-preferred basis, crushing Labor's 33 per cent primary vote and snaring another term of government. Given the damage the government had inflicted on itself over the term, and the fracturing of the right-of-centre vote by One Nation and Clive Palmer, this result is full of foreboding for Labor. It is understandable that this would disappoint and dismay many people. But it is fundamental that they accept it.

Denial started on day one. The Ten Network's Lisa Wilkinson wrote a strained open letter to Scott Morrison, apparently not comprehending that many people, most in fact, felt the country had dodged a bullet.

"Prime Minister, you may have noticed we're all feeling just a little broken right now — broken-hearted in fact, at how toxic the Australian body politic has become — and a return to basic civility in public discourse would be a great start to that healing," she wrote, apparently not sensing that the Prime Minister's mainstream views and the way he had weathered attacks based on his religion might have been seen as a repudiation of the green-left, Twitter-fuelled politics of abuse.

After a fiercely contested "climate election" Wilkinson seemed to want the losing party's policies to prevail: "We know, too, that the climate is sick and tired. And things are getting worse."

The campaigning to ignore the election result and adopt the defeated green-left agenda has only escalated. Politicians, activists and journalists have exaggerated, embellished and fabricated climate hysteria to justify the kinds of extreme climate policies rejected at the election.

Extinction Rebellion protesters have superglued themselves to roadways in Brisbane, children have skipped school, and local and state government workers have been given time off to "strike" for the sorts of climate policies federal voters avoided.

The Senate has rejected union integrity measures taken to the election, and medivac laws, passed against the government's wishes by a coalition of Greens, independents and Labor before the election, still may not be repealed despite the government's renewed mandate and strong border security record. What would voters know?

Undeniably, Energy Minister Angus Taylor used grossly erroneous figures in a charged letter to Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore. But given the letter was inconsequential and the figures were a misquote of the mayor's own figures back to her, it is difficult to interpret the hysterical reaction from Labor and the media except as an exercise in retaliation: Taylor must be punished for winning a climate election.

Anthony Albanese, Greens leader Richard Di Natale, Turnbull and Australian Republic Movement chairman Peter FitzSimons pushed this week to rid our Constitution of the monarchy — as if voters had not just passed judgment on Labor, and its election promise of another republic referendum within three years.

Labor went to the election criticising the Coalition's economic plans and promising remedies that included almost \$400bn in additional tax revenue. Yet to abandon those tax grabs, it still critiques the Coalition's economic management but proposes additional fiscal stimulus now.

It all smacks of an election result denied. It replicates the politics of the US and Britain, where not for a single moment have members of the media/political class accepted the will of the people as expressed through the election of Trump or the referendum vote for Brexit.

In this manifestation of democracy denial by the green left, elections are reduced to markers that deliver no lessons and in which the losers refuse to concede a point. Opposition merely morphs, through electoral rejection, into resistance.

Sure, we recognise the checks and balances. In Australia we have a bicameral system in which the government, typically, does not carry a majority in the Senate.

A narrow election win does not mean a government rules unencumbered. But for democracy to operate effectively, people such as Wilkinson and her fellow travellers must comprehend some sense of mandate. There must be some element of loser's consent. Instead we see loser's bitterness and loser's revenge.

No party or individual should be expected to surrender their entire agenda because of electoral admonishment. But somewhere a lesson must be learned; the will of the voters must endorse or reject something.

Otherwise what is an election other than a well-funded and formulaic phase in a perpetual saga of toxic politicking? Besides, mainstream voters will not change their minds based on the bloody-mindedness of Senate crossbenchers or Extinction Rebellion stunt masters, the agendas run by media or tub-thumping of protest parties such as the Greens.

For Labor, a party of government, there is a crucial balance to be struck between causing mischief and learning lessons, between accepting democracy and standing on principle, between advocating an agenda and listening to constituents. Because if the will of the people is thwarted, disregarded and ignored between elections, voters might be more emphatic next time.

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