



Smothered by Nostalgia

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Politicians yearning for a nostalgic return to glory days are failing modern America, according to a book reviewed by Daniel Wild.

Modern politics in America has a nostalgia problem. Americans and the politicians who represent them yearn for the old days, rendering both sides of politics blind to problems and incapable of finding solutions.

For Yuval Levin, America since the 1950s has been on a steady path to deconsolidation in the private sphere, while government has remained largely unchanged. Almost immediately after World War II, a long process of unwinding and fragmentation began. 'The culture liberalised, the economy was deregulated, and an exceptional mid-century elite consensus in politics gave way to renewed divisions,' Levin writes in *The Fractured Republic*.

The problem for Levin is that both the left and the right fail to understand this basic reality. Instead, both sides of politics take snippets from their golden age and offer policies that return the country



to that time.

For the left, that imagined golden age is the 1960s—a time of social liberalisation and the removal of suppressive cultural norms, set against a backdrop of economic consolidation and job security. For the left, things were blown off course by free marketeers and deregulation, destroying stable economic order while causing joblessness, economic dislocation, and economic inequality.

Meanwhile, the right harks back to the 1950s and 1980s. The 1950s saw unusual national consolidation for businesses, unions, media, and culture. Immigration and political polarisation was low. America was a global hegemon. Religion and families were central to American life.

For the right, the 1960s were a disaster – the first stages of the destruction of family, communities, and religion. Liberation devolved to libertinism. But the right welcomed the economic decentralisation that occurred in the 1980s, epitomised by the Reagan years.

Many on the right want to return to 1951 or 1979, while the left yearns for 1965.

For Levin, a 21st century policy agenda needs to start with a recognition of reality: We can't go back to 1951, 1965, or 1979. It's impossible because of four key changes—globalisation, consumerisation, automation, and immigration. But while these factors have unalterably changed life in America (as elsewhere) in the private sphere, central government remains largely untouched.

America has hyper individualism on one side and big national government on the other, along with a hollowing out of mediating institutions. Levin writes that by embracing 'a view of society as consisting only of individuals and a state', we have 'set loose a scourge of loneliness and isolation' and a federal government that 'engages in more direct intervention in the daily lives of Americans than it ever has in peacetime'.

Levin wants conservatives to stop complaining about government intervention, taxes, and regulation and start talking about what they want more of. As Levin mentioned in an interview about the book with Russell Roberts: 'What a lot of people on the right get wrong is that we are very adamant about what we want to say no to; but we are not at all clear—and this is true in the social issues, it's true in economic policy and social policy—about what we are saying yes to.'

To what should the right say 'yes'? Levin notes that some traditional conservative priorities, such as emphasis on economic growth and opportunity, remain central. But, beyond growth, Levin notes 'a modernised conservative policy agenda would seek to use the very diversity and fragmentation of 21st century America to meet its challenges'.

The two key ways to do this are through a modern ethic of subsidiarity and the formation of traditional 'sub-cultures'.

A modern ethic of subsidiarity is something well known to conservatives. Subsidiarity is the principle that issues should be handled by the smallest, most local authority that is equipped to do so. Subsidiarity would see the mediating institutions that exist—or used to exist—between the

individual and the government empowered to solve problems.

'The work of government more broadly—especially at the state and local levels, where most government happens—should abandon the model of the centralised, technocratic industrial economy in favour of today's decentralised, consumer-driven, post-industrial economy, using public resources to encourage constructive experimentation with public services rather than to impose tired dogmas from above,' Levin writes.

The one-size-fits-all approach to public policy is based on a misplaced understanding that today's social cohesiveness is similar to that of the '50s or '60s. In America, as in Australia, governing institutions like health care, education, and the public service have not moved from the past. They have largely been sheltered from the factors that have affected the rest of the economy—particularly globalisation and consumerisation.

An attractive component of subsidiarity is it is a pragmatic ideology. Subsidiarity doesn't automatically presuppose that federal government is bad and local institutions are good. To be sure, given the centralised nature of our public policy, superior solutions are more likely to be found at local levels than not. But in principle, these solutions could be found at any governing level, public or private. Further, subsidiarity clearly offers a major rhetorical advantage to those on the right as it enables us to argue what we favour (solving problems and making people's lives better) rather than just what we are against (big government). In this way, the right will sound more like pragmatic problem solvers than anti-government ideologues.

The other approach Levin promotes is the formation of traditional and religious 'sub-cultures' or 'lived examples'. Levin believes layers of civil society can be thickened if social and religious conservatives form living models, offering an alternative to our hyper-individualist age. These institutions include families, labour and business groups, churches, and fraternal associations. As Levin notes:

In an increasingly fractured society, moral traditionalists should emphasise building cohesive and attractive sub-cultures, rather than struggling for dominance of the increasingly weakened institutions of the mainstream culture.

Both subsidiarity and the formation of traditional sub-cultures are attractive alternatives to today's highly centralised politics and atomised individuality. But the question remains: How do we get there? To that end, there are a few issues with Levin's suggestions.

Firstly, hyper-individualism doesn't exist everywhere. Many people—particularly those who are wealthier and well educated – get married, stay married, take care of their children, hold down jobs and participate in their community. The problem of social breakdown and atomisation is more a feature of low-income communities. To that extent, it could be argued that the relatively well-off already have formed a type of sub-culture that is worth emulation.

Secondly, most in our society have sufficient financial means to live in relative isolation if they



choose, either from earnings or welfare. This means it is possible for the lowest income earners to not depend on others and therefore not have to interact with them. It could be argued that a life of material comfort but little human interaction would not be fulfilling, but technology now enables a lifetime of distraction from loneliness and isolation. Is there a strong enough yearning, or incentive, for people to re-engage and form communities based on mutual trust, benefit, and caring?

Thirdly, there is a deeper issue with nostalgia. Levin presents it as if the only culprits are our political class. But politicians will only offer nostalgia if there is a political market for it. People in our society are themselves deeply nostalgic for a real or imagined past. This is obvious through our popular culture—vinyls, 60s clothing, prohibition-era bars, communal style dining halls, and coffee shops designed to look like grandma's house. Nostalgia and modernity do not sit well together. Modernity means new is good and old is bad, but nostalgia is a preference for the past, an avoidance of the present and represents anxiety about the future. These consequences of this selfcontradiction are not addressed.

One could go further and argue that nostalgia is an antidote to individual atomisation and loneliness. It gives a sense of belonging and comfort. A fake sense, to be sure, but what else is there in a secular society with substantial family breakdown, welfare instead of responsibility, and big government instead of local communities?

Perhaps Levin's optimistic push for communitarian conservatism and the empowerment of mediating institutions is precisely what is needed to break the stranglehold of nostalgia in our society and politics.