



ANDREW BUSHNELL
Research Fellow at the
Institute of Public Affairs

Before it finally announced its intention to amend section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act* in March this year, the Turnbull government professed a very strong view on where section 18C ranked in its list of political priorities.

Eliminating this threat to freedom of speech—one of the most fundamental democratic liberties—by scrapping 18C ‘wouldn’t create one job’, according to Treasurer Scott Morrison. It ‘won’t build a road’, declared Malcolm Turnbull.

There are many things the government does that won’t create jobs or build roads, but its throw-away dismissal of freedom of speech shows that it understands very little about the forces behind Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump. For the last few decades, an entrenched political class has chipped away at the key institutions of liberal democracy: the rule of law, free speech and tolerance, impartial justice, and a limited state. At long last, conservatives have lost patience.

> PERHAPS IT IS NOT THE VOTERS WHO HAVE CHANGED, BUT THEIR POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES.

In 1992, Bill Clinton’s election strategist James Carville coined the campaign slogan: ‘It’s the economy, stupid.’ Economics matters, of course. Understanding the moribund economic growth since the Global Financial Crisis is a big part of understanding the

IT'S THE VALUES, STUPID

Australia’s political class must take heed. Politics is not just about economics, it’s about values, writes **Andrew Bushnell**.

politics of 2017. Morrison and Turnbull are therefore right to be concerned about jobs and roads, but democracy is more than a mechanism to agree on the best company tax rate. More than anything, when we vote, we vote our values.

A VOTE FOR VALUES

The primacy of values over economics is now visible right across politics. In Australia, the proportion of voters choosing minor parties is historically high. At the 2016 Federal Election, 26 per cent of first preference votes in the Senate went to minor parties. One Nation polls are around 10 per cent. Hillary Clinton ran her campaign for the presidency on the basis of the economy she would inherit from Barack Obama. Donald Trump declared that he would make America great again, and won. The British Government campaigned against the UK leaving the European Union because of the economic benefits of EU membership. Brexiters campaigned on the assertion of British sovereignty, and won.

This conceptual divide between values and economics pervades all the major issues of our time. Consider immigration. Viewed through a purely economic lens, immigration increases competition for jobs—particularly low and semi-skilled jobs—reducing opportunities for low paid workers and increasing anxiety. Viewed through a lens of values, immigration is challenging because it asks for a redefinition of community identity. There is a similar divide in understandings of what free trade symbolises in populist politics. The economics-first analysts think the issue is simple and obvious: free trade sends

jobs overseas. But seen through a values lens, the concern with free trade is a lot more complex. Free trade—particularly as manifested through byzantine free trade agreements—is as much an issue of loss of control as it is about job losses.

For all the existential confusion in Australia's political class about what the election of Donald Trump means, seeing it through a values framework makes the Trump agenda look strikingly coherent: disdain for political correctness and a fear that freedom of expression is endangered; insistence on respect for religion and conscience in the public sphere; rejection of military adventurism even while demanding a stronger military capability and increased national security; and a revived nationalism that demands respect for the symbols and substance of national unity.

VALUES IN AN ERA OF FACT CHECKERS

One of the greatest achievements of Western Civilisation has been the importance that it has placed on science and rationality. But one of the unfortunate consequences of this belief is that the ethos of dispassionate reason—so powerful when applied to questions of science and technology—has bled into questions about how we should shape our society. Thinkers like Karl Marx claimed to have discovered immutable laws of history that would restructure social relations, and this way of thinking has become pervasive. In the minds of many of our best policy thinkers, public debate is presented as a matter of logic and consistency. How often do we hear commentators—and self-proclaimed apolitical journalists—declare that they pay no attention

to ideology in public policy, but just 'what works'?

Every debate from gender ideology in schools to the introduction of a sugar tax is commanded by reason itself. This means that if you disagree, you are objectively wrong. Rationalism displaces all other values from the public sphere. The fact checking movement implicitly claims that politics is simply a question of evidence and reason. Public policy is either correct or incorrect.

Against this, many voters are fighting for their right to hold non-progressive beliefs. The centre-right does not accept that just because you value some liberal institutions you are obliged to accept the progressive agenda. Institutions such as the binding of the monarch by parliament and the recognition of inalienable individual rights are artefacts of our tradition of liberalism, rather than policy positions subject to continued revision as the evidence changes. Economist John Maynard Keynes famously claimed to change his mind when the facts changed. But where does that leave values such as freedom? Must we, in the words of the conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott, be compelled to live 'the dreams of others'?

THE NEW POPULISM AND THE OLD LIBERALISM

The champions of the new centre-right and their followers are clearly not committed to a consistent libertarianism. British Prime Minister Theresa May has taken the vote for Brexit as a sign that voters are rejecting both 'the socialist left and the libertarian right'. Trump seeks to raise barriers to both migration and trade.

But it would not be correct to conclude from this that the new



■ Pro-Brexit fishing trawlers sailed up the River Thames, London. | AAP Images

populism is a simply illiberal populism. Instead, it is clear that voters are rallying to defend long held rights that they now consider to be under threat, such as freedom of speech, freedom of conscience and freedom of association. They defy the encroachment of the state into areas which have traditionally been separate.

Equality before the law is also being eroded. For example, Federal Court Judge Matthew Myers proposed last month to reduce the incarceration of Indigenous Australians by introducing different laws for them. This idea necessarily conflicts with our tradition of fairness, which is based on everyone being treated the same way. But even this idea of universality is now considered to be an argument only made by those in power to reinforce their social advantages.

Values the people are now rushing to defend mirror the traditional distinction between public and private. They want a state strong

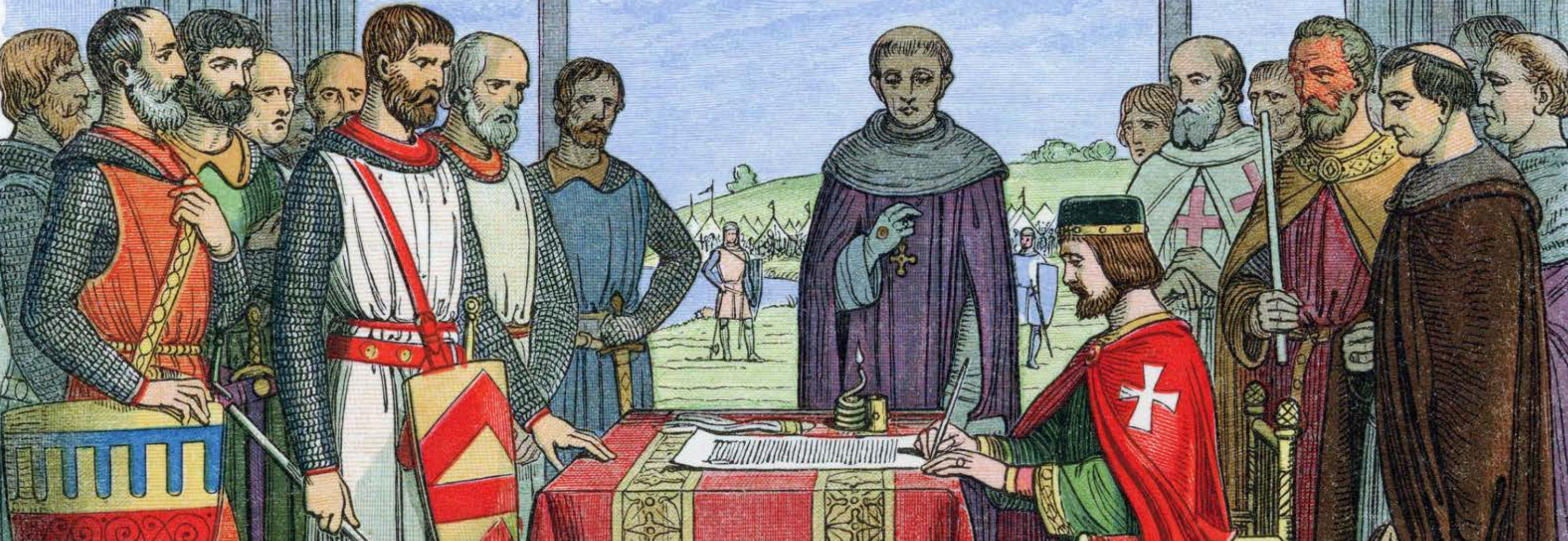
enough to police its borders and provide services but they reject the use of public institutions to manipulate, rather than reinforce, their private customs and beliefs. In this sense, the values that are being defended by the new populism are not those of abstract liberal theory, derived from academic philosophers like Adam Smith and John Locke. Rather they are being defended as parts of our specific history and heritage.

➤ **THE PATTERN IS CLEAR: THIS BATTLE MUST BE WAGED IN TERMS OF VALUES, NOT ECONOMICS.**

Liberalism is more than a school of philosophy. It's also a long series of reforms over a long period of time. The original liberals claimed ancient rights which come not from theory, but from history. Rights came from the Magna Carta, not nature, as the IPA's Chris Berg and John Roskam pointed out in *Magna*

Carta: The Tax Revolt That Gave Us Liberty. This makes for a liberalism with distinctively conservative characteristics. It is not a utopian liberalism. Conservatives believe society emerges organically from the compromises that groups of people make over time to secure order, peace and prosperity. These compromises include liberal-democratic institutions like the devolution of legislative power to representatives of the people, the establishment of civil rights and a belief in the moral equality of humans. Freedom today is a product of this long process of constitutional establishment.

Since the emergence of Trump and the vote for Brexit, commentators have struggled to find a name for the movement these changes herald. With deliberate pejorative intent, it has been called populism, or worse, nationalism. To them, it is somehow unseemly that politics should make room for the people or their national identity.



King John sealing the Magna Carta, 1215. | AAP Images

The true name, however, is the name we have always used: conservatism.

The conservatism at the heart of the centre-right uprising has been largely overlooked by commentators, who instead see a dangerous radicalism. Writing in American leftist magazine *The New Republic*, Jeet Heer described Trump's inauguration address as evidence that the President was a 'radical extremist'. In *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik called Trump 'radically anti-American'. Zack Beauchamp in *Vox* attributed Brexit to 'xenophobia', while Michael Bradley in the ABC's *The Drum* called it 'radicalism writ large'. Keri Phillips on *Radio National* lumped Trump, Brexit and Pauline Hanson together as part of the 'global rise of the extreme right'.

But 63 million Americans voted

for Trump, and 17 million Brits voted for Brexit. Here in Australia, 1.8 million first preference Senate votes went to minor parties of the right. It is extremely unlikely that all of these voters have been overcome by reactionary fervour, or that they have suddenly rejected the great institutions of our civilisation and the values they represent.

Perhaps it is not the voters who have changed, but their political representatives. The nominally-conservative centre-right establishment stands charged with abject failure. Conservatives want what they have always wanted, but they are sick of being lied to, and tired of losing. This opposition between the emergent new centre-right and the failed establishment

has obscured the fact that disgruntled conservatives are simply seeking out alternative representation for their values.

If defending traditional values and institutions means abandoning the conservative moniker or following leaders who are stridently unorthodox, or even self-styled as radicals, then right-leaning voters seem willing to make that deal. As Trump said in one of the Republican debates: 'I'm a conservative but at this point who cares? We've got to straighten out the country.'

It is true that occasionally the leaders of the conservative insurgency have, like their opponents, misunderstood the values they are supposed to be defending. When they have, their support has dropped.

One Nation failed to meet expectations in the recent Western Australian election because Pauline Hanson strayed from traditional values to foolish speculation about vaccination and praise for Russian tyrant Vladimir Putin. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders saw his support decline after embracing a more illiberal approach to Islam, including banning the Quran, eventually leading to a disappointing result in the national election.

The flirtation of conservatives with the failed idea of protectionism will likely lead to similar trouble. The Cato Institute's Brink Lindsey has urged conservatives to distinguish between globalism and globalisation, and not to 'throw the free trade baby out with the internationalist bath water'.

➤ THOSE SHAKING THE ESTABLISHMENT MUST BEAR THIS IN MIND: CONSERVATISM FINDS ITS SUPPORT IN THE PUBLIC'S DESIRE TO SAFEGUARD OUR HERITAGE, NOT DESTROY IT.

The pattern is clear: this battle must be waged in terms of values, not economics.

The conservative resurgence has found success when it has seized control of the existing centre-right political apparatus, rather than going it alone. Trump won as a Republican. The Conservative Party, not UKIP, will implement Brexit. Wilders' message was blunted by the established centre-right, just as

John Howard blunted the original incarnation of One Nation. This is not to say that conservatives or liberals owe the major parties of the centre-right any loyalty. If they do not change, they must be abandoned. But the goal for conservatives must be to win and to see their values returned to the public sphere. The vehicle is, by itself, unimportant.

The values that inspired our social and political institutions have been displaced from the public sphere by an activist, out-of-touch political class. However, the solution to this is not to abandon the principles that made us great. Those shaking the establishment must bear this in mind: conservatism finds its support in the public's desire to safeguard its heritage, not destroy it. **■**