

Hobart U3A

Roy and Maureen Davies Memorial Lecture 2024

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*How to Defend Democracy and Declining Quality of Governance*

An edited transcript

I feel very strongly about the importance of civic awareness and civic knowledge - knowledge of the key challenges we all face today. In the spirit of Roy and Maureen Davies I would like to argue that we are not absolved from knowing what is going on in the world, and the University of the Third Age plays a particularly important role in spreading civic awareness and knowledge. This civic awareness and knowledge is necessary to be a good citizen, especially today, and becomes a necessary condition of sustainable, that is, strong and lasting, democracy.

Why is civic awareness and civic knowledge so important? Because today we are facing an unprecedented combination of calamities, that is, developments that threaten not only our democratic social order, but also our very existence. Our political, social, and cultural institutions are crumbling under the enormous pressure of these calamitous developments. It's not for the first time. I will show you that challenges to the social order, democracy and good governance come in waves of democratisation and stabilisation, followed by waves of disruption and, as we call, authoritarianisation.

The best-known theorist of democracy is French aristocrat Alexis De Tocqueville, the author of *Democracy in America*, regarded as the classical textbook of democracy. He warned his readers, especially toward the end of his life (he died in 1859 in France, persecuted by Napoleon III, one of the popular despots against whom he spoke) that democracy combined with liberty - liberal democracy - was very fragile. It was a new system. He observed, where rulers respected laws, opposition was tolerated, citizens enjoyed equal rights, public opinion became very important, and ruling became more and more based on voluntary consent. It was fragile because it depended on the capacity of the democratically formed political class to solve the main problems facing society. At the same time, Tocqueville warned us of a new version of democracy labelled 'despotic democracy', democracy without freedom, which he saw as developing in France in the 19th century under the very popular despot, Napoleon III. However, he thought that all European countries and even the United States, which he considered as a strong 'republican democracy', are not free from those despotic-democratic tendencies.

So, mindful of that, we won't be surprised that his prophetic words were very quickly confirmed by historical developments. In particular Tocqueville suggested that the system of democracy should be based on rule of law; the principal of pluralism in the political system; ruling with the opposition; an ideologically neutral state of administration and, in particular, regular elections keeping political leaders accountable to the voting publics. When popular elections that 'mandate' the political leaders are based on promises, as was

the case with popular despots, such public accountability is impossible. It is also impossible if there is no 'civil society', that is, active citizenship acting as an important guardian of accountable elections.

While the franchise was widening and more and more people enjoyed the right to vote in an election (and the right to stand for political office), civic awareness and knowledge underlying effective democracy were facing increasing restrictions and constraints, in particular, due to widely used demagoguery, the latter facilitated by new 'media of mass communication', which were frequently used by demagogues as media of mass persuasion, manipulation and deception. Skilful demagogues could mobilise mass anxieties and fears, and transform them into hate and prejudice, and channel them into irrational mass action that undermines political order and derails democracy.

What are the main challenges to democracy today? One can chart periods of social stability and democratisation and the periods of social upheaval and accompanied autocratization. Periods when popular autocrats rule in an unconstrained way, subordinate parliaments and the judiciary, eliminate the democratic 'checks and balances' while enjoying broad public support seems to come regularly every 80-90 years. The new generation of such 'democratically mandated despots' has been ascending to power, even in established liberal-democratic regimes since the first decades of the 21st century. We label them 'populists' or 'populist nationalists' because of their pursuit of popularity combined with nationalistic appeals, the latter in opposition to what they portray as 'dangers of globalisation'. Like their historical predecessors - the Bolsheviks, fascists, Nazis, Peronists - contemporary populists thrive on crises, or more accurately, on unresolved social-political problems and challenges. They are dangerous not because the diagnoses of crises are incorrect - they are often quite accurate - but because the 'solutions' they offer are ineffective and socially destructive. Before we explain that, a brief digression is necessary on the nature of the current, unresolved and festering problems and challenges.

Today five major challenges threaten political stability, democracy, and fuel populist mobilisations worldwide.

The first challenge is the environmental crisis and especially climate change, which makes an enormous difference. In the 1970s we became aware of the fact that we risk a major calamity, that pollution and the increasing generation of energy, threatens climate. Climate change, especially global warming, progresses in a very fast way proportionately to our use of fossil fuel and our farming practices, which generates an enormous amount of the dangerous greenhouse gas, methane.

The second potentially calamitous challenge we are becoming aware of is the security threat. The post-World War Two system based on international regulation has started to crumble. We have the emergence of big powers, superpowers, which are starting to displace the United States, a major and liberal-democratic empire. China and Russia became a threat to political stability because both are run by a very autocratic leadership of people who not only ignore international rules and arrangements but break them. They also conduct massive propaganda campaigns and gain enormous popularity. Putin is immensely popular in Russia, although he murders political opponents and persecutes people. If you say in Russia that, 'Russia is invading Ukraine', you are facing five years of imprisonment. There is no war or invasion only 'limited military interventions.' In China, in Xinjiang

province, is an internment camp to subjugate non-Han Chinese, Tibetans, Mongols, and Uyghurs. It is a small province but used to be an independent country. The political threats are real and contribute to insecurity because we have no effective ways of dealing with them.

Thirdly, even more importantly, is the threat of regular pandemics. Until Covid-19 pandemic came, we lived in a 'cuckoo land' of unjustified certainty. We believed that modern medicine could deal with major mass diseases, that our lives would not be threatened. Now it appears that pandemics are not only possible, but very likely. Viral pandemics are particularly dangerous because of frequent viral mutations and the scarcity of antiviral medicines. We have developed effective vaccinations, but fifteen million people were wiped out by the Covid virus. Even in highly advanced democracies with effective public administration the number of victims was high.

The fourth calamity we face is a rapid 'demographic shift' and the accompanying very rapid aging of the population. Why do I see this as a threat? It's not the shift itself but it's speed and its consequences which is threatening social order and our capacity to keep a productive society progressing economically and socially. The shift is a result of increasing longevity, which we welcome as a sign of very effective social measures extending our lives, but also rapidly dropping birth rates. The problem comes from combining the two; the fact that we live longer; that we have fewer children, and, consequently, that we have an aging population, especially in the most developed countries.

What is wrong with an aging population? Well, seemingly nothing until you start thinking about the consequences. The ageing reduces the number of people who are actively involved in building up the national wealth. There are more retired people and at the other end, more people who are dependant, because schooling extends and now more people are attending universities until their early twenties, before they start working. If productivity increased proportionately, this trend of shrinking the producing part of the population and growing the number of dependant people, would be OK. The progress of technology has not led to this. Productivity remains mostly stable. It increases slightly due to new technologies. However, we have to deal with a shrinking number of a proportional productive population and worse, with skyrocketing costs of age and health care. Why? We touch on a sensitive subject here.

When the life expectancy is about in the late sixties, as it was in most developed countries about 20 to 30 years ago, people die 'in a very economical way', typically of circulation diseases. We were used to this 'way of exit', and it did not pose social problems. With life expectancy in the seventies, we now start to die of cancer, and this is more problematic and socially expensive. Cancer cuts productive lives, and it is expensive to treat. We are still struggling to find good medicines against cancer and affordable treatments. The tragedy increases when we start to live over eighty. As most of us statistically expect to live to our 90s, we will experience a significant time at the end of our lives struck by a dangerous set of deteriorating conditions called dementia.

Dementia is a generic term for all sorts of degenerative states which is not a disease but a chronic, normal, and expected state requiring long, expensive treatment. Japan, no longer with the economic vigour of the past due to its aging population, has one of the most aging societies and spends 24% of its GDP on various forms of medical services and old age care.

Countries like Australia have responded extremely well giving cause for some optimism. We deal with the aging population and diminishing workforce and skyrocketing cost of age care in a very good way by combining youthful skilled migration and facilitate training ('brain train' as opposed to 'brain drain'). We also emphasise that the growth of wages and salary should follow the growth of productivity by increasing investment in high technologies, especially digital technologies. We insist on a high participation rate by women. Most women today are engaged in work that provides them not only fulfilment of their aspirations, but it also has a significant impact on our productivity. We also encourage and extend the possibility of elderly people working over their age of retirement. We also have a very good superannuation system that 'softens the blow' of ageing.

The fifth enormous challenge to democracy and stability is uncontrolled migration. It's related to all four previous challenges, especially ecological climate change because of the growing proportion of uncontrolled immigrants wanting to escape unliveable conditions in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. So, there will be more people wishing to immigrate. With climate change we face not only the desertification of large parts of the world; shift in zones where production and survival would be possible but also rising water levels. In Bangladesh even a one metre rise in sea level will displace about ten million people. Where will they escape to? Who will take them? Overpopulated India? Impossible. So, we face those threats in the absence of an effective way of dealing with them, partly because they are unprecedented - and because the populist leaders propose 'pseudo-solutions'.

In the past, political leaders, public intellectuals, and the ruling governing bodies had some tested ways of dealing with new challenges. Today we are facing a sense of uncertainty and fear, a sense of anxiety about the future. And this anxiety is exploited by populist politicians who propose 'snake oil' solutions, pseudo-solutions. What is worse, these 'pseudo-solutions' are destabilising and destructive of liberal democracy. They promise 'strong and decisive' rulers who remove from power the 'perpetrators of crises', usually portrayed as 'foreign immigrants', 'global plutocrats', 'decadent elites' and/or other hidden 'power cabals'. Needless to add, these diagnoses are illusory and the solutions derived from them inevitably fail. In most cases, the proposed medicines prove worse than the diagnosed disease.

It's not new. We know that we had previously three ways of identifying of 'snake oil' sellers, popular autocrats, who either denied threats or invented ways of dealing with them which was even worse. It involved mass propaganda, whipping up nationalism, and saying, 'We'll save the country, others can go to hell.' They are symptoms of familiar 'beggar thy neighbour' nationalism.

Populism is a way of conducting political activities, generating support, and nationalism is the ideology underpinning of it. Why is populist nationalism today completely impossible? Think about the four challenges, environmental, uncontrolled migration, pandemics, aging of populations. How can you solve these issues within one country? The common feature of major existential challenges is that they cannot be solved in one country! Even if Australia stopped all emissions, it would only effect half of one percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. The only way of dealing with this issue is through international agreement and coordination. It's the same with uncontrolled migration. Controlled migration, like in Australia, can be dealt with but uncontrolled migration is a terrible threat

to political stability. It derails countries because they only have a limited capacity to absorb immigrants, especially unskilled immigrants who do not have the skills to function in advanced, post-industrial societies. You must integrate immigrants to make them an asset instead of being a weight, a threat to local populations. This is expensive and very difficult. The alternative is to find a niche for them and spend a lot of money to keep them living without degrading poverty, isolation, forming unstable ghettos, and being involved in activities which delegitimises their lives. So, nationalism does not work anymore and those that promise you to, 'Make American great again', do not offer any solutions to the major calamities. They can only deceive you by saying this is a solution; it's not. It's a pseudo solution.

It is time to address a key question: What is populism, especially in its contemporary guise? It's a term often evaluated with condemnation. People we don't like are called populists. It needs to be more objectively defined. What are the features of political leaders who come to power, who often entrench themselves in power, who are populists, especially right-wing nationalistic populists? There are left wing populists as well. Bernie Sanders in America and the leaders on Venezuela are left wing leaders who also have the features of populists.

So, what are the defining features of populist political style? How do we recognise populist political leaders?

First of all, populists are militarily antiestablishment, they condemn the elite for being imposters and acting against public interest. Which suggests there are types of society without an elite leadership. Mr Trump would say, 'I'm a true leader'. The first deception is that they suggest we can live with stateless, disorganised or eliteless societies. All societies have to have a power elite leadership because all modern societies develop states, large business organisations, etc. in the process of historical evolution. Secondly, populists say we, non-elite representatives are the most democratic representatives of the people. We represent 'the real people' uniquely. Others are imposters, usurpers, and you must reject them. Thirdly, and most importantly, they use technology to generate power through demagoguery. Demagoguery is always present in politics, but they use particularly effective forms of demagoguery which consists of whipping up resentment. They nominate who is the main enemy and they blame them for all the current problems and so generate hatred and resentment. It's particularly effective. In the past the National Socialists parties and Bolsheviks used this strategy of whipping up, what the founding fathers of American democracy called, *toxic emotion*. Very dangerous public toxic emotions. It works, unfortunately. Nominating 'the guilty' and whipping up hatred toward them, partly by circulating various forms of conspiracy theory, unfortunately works! We see in Washington, where the paedophiles are trying to take over America or blaming leaders for stealing the election results. Small groups of conspiratorial elites claim Mr Trump won the election by a landslide and American is deprived of his continued leadership. Demagoguery of this type is extremely dangerous, and it thrives in the new type of media, the social media.

Now a small digression is necessary in order to explain this important point. The media of mass communication can easily become the media of mass persuasion and deception. We know historically of many accounts of previous waves of disruption in social order and autocratisation by the new media. They often resulted in violent conflicts and bloody wars. Some claim the Bolsheviks would not have gained power in Russia had they not used

revolutionary posters. Russia had mostly an illiterate population during the revolution, so they used posters and demagoguery in their communication with the masses very effectively. Hitler used radio even more effectively. He convinced the makers of popular radios, Telefunken in Germany, to produce very cheap radio sets. More importantly he encouraged the population to listen to the news and to his speeches in groups. This collective reception helped to restrict dissent and reinforced propaganda. Without radio Hitler would have been less effective in gaining power. Television made an enormous impact which initially looked less effective as it coincided with an increase of democracies. There was a third wave of democratisation. This domination of image helped democratic leaders, but it also helped undemocratic leaders. However, it is social media, Facebook, Twitter, etc., that reinforce further the group-conforming impact. Two features of these new social media are particularly important. Firstly, they create an impression that those who transmit through the media speak to you personally. You get the email, you get the tweet, you get the message individually. So, you have the illusion that you are a privileged receiver in communication with the leaders and so the effectiveness grows massively. Secondly, and even worse, they create so called homophiliac groups of people who receive information and are isolated from the flow of information from other sources. So very many QAnon Shaman supporters of conspiratory theories in America and Europe and elsewhere, started to form groups which were isolated from any tested, critical information. They were locked in 'homophiliac' (people sharing certain views) circles of only those people who shared their exotic views. This increases the effectiveness of various propaganda campaigns.

Social media can link people, which can be good in increasing social integration. But it can also restrict social contacts and support the pathological flow of misleading information. It is very difficult to reach people locked in closed 'homophiliac' media groups with critical or corrective information. It is also difficult to trace the sources of such information. Even Mr Zuckerberg, when interviewed by the Senate and the House Committees in America, said 'We are unable to control who is sending this information. We tried to introduce some degree of control on misleading information and mobilising information but it's very difficult.' The nature of social media is such that it does not lend itself to effective regulation. Control being ineffective, social media becomes a media for organising populist supporters.

Many people under the conditions of uncertainty, threats and anxiety, caused by the major calamities, would like to hear soothing messages of populists: 'Trust me; bring me to power; give me your support, give me your vote and I'll fix it in no time'. Alas, they do not. They destroy public trust, spread cynicism, damage political culture, and distort policies. They weaken the democratic institutions, rule of law, civil citizenship and other rights, the neutrality of the State, freedom of expression and election commitments. They transform elections into auctions of empty promises and disable democratic accountability.

These are already well-known costs of populism. I would like to add to the list another category of costs: damage to effective governance. The promises of populists require dismantling of meritocratic recruitment to all parts of decisional elite. Instead of highly qualified decision makers, those with talent, knowledge, skills, and accomplishments, populist leaders appoint party loyalists. This nepotism has deleterious effects on the quality and effectiveness of ruling - as indicated by the key indicators of effective governance (e.g. The Worldwide Governance Indicators published by the World Bank). To put it simply: populists are not only corrosive of democracy - the key democratic institutions - but are also incompetent, unable to recognise the challenges we face, incapable of proposing

effective solutions to the problems we encounter. While they promise solutions, they inevitably deliver disappointments. Their snake-oil solutions deepen and widen the problems.

So, what does good governance or effective ruling mean? How do we assess and measure them? We are assessing whether the country is ruled effectively by the degree to which the ruling governing elite (decision-making groups) fulfill five popular expectations.

Firstly, we want progressive growth increasing the standard of living, prosperity for many, we would like to believe our children will live in a more prosperous way than we do. Good governing leaders have to deliver on that or at least prevent the rapid decline of the standard of living.

Secondly, we want security. A very important condition of good governance is that it provides the people with security. Security from invasion, security in the sense of countering the threats that come from outside, but also security from degrading poverty, economic security. Governments that do not provide security are removed - or become irremovable dictatorships.

Thirdly, we all expect social and political stability. Good governance means maintaining social order. So much of our high standard of living and security depends on stability in our daily routine. We long for a stable social environment without threats from unexpected explosions. We want domestic and foreign investments. Very few countries, especially Australia, can live without such significant domestic and foreign investments.

Fourthly, we all expect governments to enhance a sense of pride in being citizens of a given country. Not nationalistic pride, not pride based on the sense of superiority pride, we call it 'civic nationalism'. In Australia, Canada and New Zealand we are very proud of being what we are, not because of a particular race or ethnicity, but because we instituted a very effective set of protective rights. We are proud of our citizenship rights. Mt Putin and Mr Xi Jinping use a different strategy for generating pride, ethnic superiority combined with disparaging remarks about others. 'Ukrainians are not a nationality, not a real nation', this makes Russia a superior civilisation with superior policies! So, you can have nationalism of this type which is one theoreticians say, 'rely on misconceptions of your own origins, combined with hatred of all neighbours.'

Last of the *big five* is a sense of justice. Justice exists when we can be certain that our court system is independent, that they deliver verdicts based on a consideration of law, without political interference and where Judges feel obliged to reflect the norms and values of society at large. That gives us the sense that there is justice even though we observe some deviation from justice in certain areas, nevertheless we are certain of a progressive movement to more justice.

The *big five* promote prosperity for many, promote security, promote economic and political stability, a sense of pride, dignity in being a citizen, and a sense of justice. These are the big five expectations of good governance. When looking at the indicators of good governance, invariably, in countries dominated by populists, where they entrench themselves in power, I have discovered these indicators decline. There is a big price to pay, not only for undermining the key institutions of democracy but also the deterioration of

social order. That's a very high price to pay for the triumph of nationalistic populism. Can we do anything about it?

The historians say that whatever you do as citizens, you don't have much power. Citizens do have power in a robust democracy where public opinion counts, where there is no influence of propaganda and demagoguery is limited. In three European countries populism either rules or are part of the ruling coalition (in Europe there are 165 populist parties and leaders and nearly one third of votes over the last twenty years in European elections went to populist parties and leaders). Populism is a real threat in Europe, USA and South America.

To conclude, democracy is fragile at the times of uncertainty and multiplying crises. There is no panacea to this inherent weakness. But we have some good theoretical and historical pointers on how to make democracy more sustainable, more robust. We have to value and cultivate reliable sources of knowledge, including unbiased media, universities and professional expert groups. Second, we can cultivate political interest and engagement - and prevent political alienation, often mixed with ignorance. People who are critically interested in political developments are very good guardians of a robust democracy. Third, we have to select good political leaders, leaders who are not only broadly representative, but also competent in the art hand craft) of politics. The ruling elite not only includes the small numbers of governing leaders and elites, which are subject to electoral checks every three or four years, but also includes a large number of ruling groups and elites which we indirectly control through public opinion. These include the corporate leaders, leaders of mass media organisations, parts of the core ruling group which are outside of the system of democratic control but not outside the system of public opinion. As you know, many corporate leaders, especially in financial institutions, did much damage during the great financial crisis in 2008-9.

Will all that assure sustainable liberal democracy? Probably not. But it should make all terrible alternatives - including populist 'despotic democracy' less likely to develop. Institutions like universities, including the University of the Third Age, play an extremely important role in aiding and reinforcing civic activism based on knowledge rather than prejudice.

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