Could Accidental Politicians Help Limit Trumpification of Government?

Edmund Burke was certainly correct when he said "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion." But the success of Trump, Hanson, Farage, Le Pen and their ilk through their preparedness to seek political support by sacrificing good public policy to popular opinion suggests that Burke would have trouble defending his statement today. This is because he would be seen as one of the elite and seen as saying "We, the elite, know better what is good for you, ordinary folk, than you do yourselves." In *What So Many People Don't Get About the U.S. Working Class* (Harvard Business Review, November 10, 2016) Joan C Williams suggests that Trump's appeal to the workers of the USA is that he is not seen as of the elite (Note 1), but rather someone like them who has worked hard like them and got lucky and got rich. Williams says "Hillary Clinton, by contrast, epitomizes the dorky arrogance and smugness of the professional elite." She cites several scholars' observations that amongst the "white working class" of the USA there is admiration of the rich but resentment of professionals—doctors, lawyers, teachers and managers. A common view of managers in particular seems to be that they are college kids "who don't know shit about how to do anything but are full of ideas about how I have to do my job," (from *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*—Alfred Lubrano, John Wiley & Sons, 2004). Both Clinton and Trump made claims about improving the lives of workers in the US left behind by globalisation and automation. Clinton won more votes, but it seems Trump won them where it counted because of the way he was perceived - "politics is perception" (from the movie "The American President")

For much of human history it has been the elite in society who have been the lawmakers. For a bit more than one hundred years though, with the rise of labour movements, a significant proportion of lawmakers have been elected who would have been seen as from the ranks of the working class. Some working-class people have entered politics on the right of the centre too. But this has changed in the last few decades. More and more labour-movement politicians would not be perceived by most working-class people as of their class. Gone are the days when a Ben Chifley, an engine driver, was likely to become a prime minister of Australia. There are now few labour-movement politicians who have not moved directly from graduating from university to a political job of some sort and thus a career in politics. Indeed, these careers are often much more about politics than public policy. This is true of the right of politics too. And there are very, very few politicians in western democracies who have not had the privilege of a university education.

While in past years both left and right, or at least centre-right, parties have been able to garner support from working-class voters, increasing numbers are voting away from those parties. It seems that this is at least in part because some non-major party politicians are seen as not belonging to the political elite. This would not be such a bad thing – indeed other things being equal it could have a valuable refreshing effect on public policy making – except that a number of these minor party politicians achieve success by populist means and by making offers to voters that are not based in sound public policy. This is not to say that major party politicians have never strayed from sound

public policy, but they have been less likely to, as standard party processes have usually (though by no means always) meant that better-informed positions prevailed. I am using the past tense here because the rise of populism emanating from small parties has pushed major parties toward populism. The US Republican Party had to go populist and nominate Trump.

So what can be done? Obviously major party politicians, and especially those of the left, should shun populism and redouble their efforts to regain the confidence of the working class. But perhaps there is a limit to what this can achieve. Perhaps the horse has bolted and something different is needed. It is not arguable that good government needs highly educated, informed and skilled public policy practitioners. Yet if government is only done by such people and if they are not seen by working-class people as able to understand the needs and wants and concerns and views of the working class, good government will not be possible.

Can we have ordinary working-class people who are perceived as such, and in whom working class people can repose confidence, involved in government other than by having less than competent populists elected to office? We can. We can by using something like the system of the first democracy. In ancient Athens decisions were made by a group of citizens who were randomly selected from those who happened to be in the agora (the market place) at the time. Now, there is a rather large difference between ancient Athens and today—only free men, not women and not slaves, were citizens. So, indeed, in Athens it was the elite who made the laws.

But an Athens-like system involving the general public has been proven in today's world. The gatherings of citizens are called citizens' assemblies or citizen's juries. Used mainly for specific purposes at the local or regional government level, they have proven they can contribute to better government in Australia and other countries, notably Canada.

The bushfires of Black Saturday February 2009 will be seared into the memories of all Australians. But the very same days saw the making of a good piece of history. 150 Australians, randomly selected from every electorate across the land (I had the privilege of being selected from the electorate of Canberra), from all walks of life, all ages from 18 to 90, from first Australians to the very newest, met as the first Australian Citizens' Parliament. The question they agreed to tackle was "How can Australia's political system be strengthened to serve us better?"

The 150 each brought and shared their unique experiences as Australian citizens and left their social status at home. Those amongst them who had knowledge of how we govern ourselves shared it with those who had not so much and a number of scholars of governance and politics gave generously of their time so that all could come to grips with the issues.

The 'parliament' was also itself an experiment in using this kind of deliberative process on a national scale to contribute to governance. I think we all came away thinking it a success. Some of us thought it a great success. These 150 people were strangers to each other apart from meeting at some preliminary regional gatherings and came with a range of philosophies, opinions and attitudes. Remarkably, over the period of four days, they came to a high level of agreement on many issues, some of which were quite contentious. Importantly, many, if not most, had never previously had to come to grips with some quite sophisticated ideas on national constitutions, voting systems and public administration. And quite a few had not a great deal of formal education. Even so, after some effective learning sessions, all were able to make strong contributions to the deliberations. Many

changed their views quite dramatically. Critical to its success was that, apart from the broad task of improving governance, the agenda was in the control of the participants.

Although I've done a lot in the area of citizen participation in government, what the Citizens' Parliament did was to greatly increase my confidence that all citizens (perhaps apart from a very small intellectually challenged few) have the capacity to learn to participate and then to do so effectively. In the last Australian Parliament we had one senator who could be seen as a good example of an accidental politician, Ricky Muir, and one who was not quite such a good example, Jacqui Lamby. Ms Lamby, now re-elected, can no longer be seen as such. Rather like the members of the first Australian Citizens' Parliament, Ricky Muir spent some time learning about government before he got heavily involved and then made a strong contribution. Ms Lamby perhaps jumped into the fray a little prematurely, but she too educated herself well on many public policy issues over time.

So why would government using this sort of assembly help to limit Trumpification? There are three reasons:

1 Such 'accidental politicians' would not be seen as elite. They would talk to the population as ordinary citizens and ordinary citizens would identify with them and have confidence in them.

2 Being accidentally in the role they would not have made populist promises to be elected and would not have the obligation of such promises.

3 They would have only the power of the persuasiveness of their arguments and not the power of electoral supporters.

How might this system be employed? Krystian Seibert (*We have a Productivity Commission, but we need a citizens' commission*, Sydney Morning Herald, 9 January 2017) suggests a standing citizens' commission which would convene citizens' assemblies for particular purposes at the government's request and report their findings. This would be useful, but probably more so if the commission had statutory independence and an adequate budget to convene assemblies on its own motion.

I think that a much more effective, and probably more economical, contribution to public policy would be made by a standing assembly with members appointed for once-only fixed terms. Such an assembly might meet for a week or so several times a year but perhaps not as often as often as parliament meets. Half of its meetings could usefully be held away from Canberra. There would be practical, but surmountable problems similar to those experienced with court juries.

Perhaps the ideal would be for such a body of randomly selected, rather than elected, citizens to replace the senate. But this would though require a change to the constitution which is almost inconceivable. So it is more realistic that a standing citizens' assembly operate alongside the two houses of parliament. It would be entirely autonomous and decide which issues it would deal with. Of course, it is likely that it would debate the same issues the elected houses were debating. But the character of debate would probably be quite different—much more policy than politics. Surely such a body, not beholden to certain political power holders, would not reject the well-researched advice of the chief scientist on climate change abatement as dismissively as has the Turnbull government. Similarly, because it could set aside party politics, the report of the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers would have persuaded it in favour of more humane actions than those we have seen. I believe a

citizens' assembly would understand that a nation's budget is not the same as a household budget, as politicians currently try to argue, and that deficits are not bad when sound capital (including human capital) investments are being funded.

The first year of such an assembly would probably be an establishment year and effectiveness would not be so great. With a system of staggered terms, though, ensuing years would not be limited by the learning needs of members. Over time, I suggest such an assembly would be likely to have at least as much impact on the wider public debate of issues as the elected houses and, for the reasons set out above, its conclusions would be likely to be better accepted by the public. Often enough, it would come to the same conclusions as the elected politicians and the ensuing public policy and laws would thus be much better accepted by the people than otherwise might be the case. Because the existence of the citizens' assembly would progressively lift the quality of the work of the elected politicians, agreement between them and the accidental politicians would be likely to increase much to the benefit of good and stable public policymaking. The assembly's conclusions could be tabled in Parliament and a formal process for Executive consideration might be useful.

Would a bill to establish and fund such a citizens' parliament succeed, or would an Australian government decide itself to set up and fund such a body on a non-statutory basis? I don't think either is likely any time soon, but a citizens' parliament could be set up by citizens. The crowd-funded Climate Council (Note 2) suggests this is possible. A large number of organisations (community, businesses, trade and professional, religious and academic) and most citizens want to see the quality of public policymaking lifted and do not want to see the Trumpification of Australian government. With a relatively small amount of funding proportionately from such organisations and with each promoting a crowd funding campaign, a proposal for a citizens' parliament could very well fly.

Note 1

'Eliteness' seems to be not easily defined and to be in the eye of the beholder. I use the label 'working class' though appreciate that it is equally problematical. In OECD countries, there would now be very few typists and filing clerks nowadays and thus few office workers who would be seen or see themselves as working class. Telephone customer service people could be in or out. All professionals and anyone else with a university degree would probably not be seen as working class. Some small business owners might be working class, others might not. Tradespeople probably generally fall into the category, but those who have built larger businesses and made some money might not. Hospitality workers would generally be in, but a sommelier and a chef in an up-market restaurant would not. Factory assembly line workers, labourers and shop assistants would generally be in.

Note 2

After the conservative government abolished Australia's Climate Commission in 2013 thousands of Australians donated in the country's biggest crowd-funding campaign to fund an independent Climate Council which in effect continues the work of the commission.