

Can democracy cope?

Written by The Conversation

Even by recent standards, the last few weeks have seen new levels of dysfunction, volatility and even chaos within federal and state governments. As the voters of Queensland demonstrated, there is little tolerance of – much less loyalty toward – political parties that are judged to be incompetent or dishonest.

Captains of industry are queueing up to complain about the deleterious effects of all this on business confidence. The Abbott government is urged to impose fiscal discipline and steady the still-barnacled ship of state.

Even if we put to one side the possibility that the tax minimisation strategies of big business are actually one of the causes of the government's woes, the first question to ask is whether Australia's situation is especially dire.

Whether this counts as good news or bad, the reality is that dysfunctional democracies are the new political normal across much of the world. It is not only the home of democracy – Greece – that is in trouble. So too is the nation that sees itself as the champion of, and role model for, democratic virtue. The rather sad and sobering reality is that the United States has become a byword for political gridlock and partisanship, not a beacon of political progress.

The second question to ask is what is why what was until recently seen as an unstoppable wave of democratic reform has lost momentum. Not only have the expectations of the Arab Spring been all too rapidly snuffed out – predictably enough, perhaps, given that region's history and problems – but even where democracies are firmly entrenched, citizens are either apathetic or enraged. For admirers of democratic principles it is hard to say which is worse.

The causes of the crisis of democracy are both common and contingent. At the broadest level, the many forces associated with “globalisation” are posing challenges that national governments are simply ill-equipped to meet. Tax-dodging, footloose multinationals with no loyalties to anyone but their shareholders are but one of a growing list of problems, and often far from the worst.

History suggests that political stability is a difficult thing to achieve and maintain. A quick look

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around the world today confirms this possibility all too readily. But without political stability, economic growth becomes more difficult. Without continually rising living standards, electorates rapidly become unhappy and governments lose legitimacy.

Whether such voter expectations are feasible or even desirable in a world of finite resources and growing environmental problems is beside the point. Growth remains one of the “key performance indicators” of governments everywhere. Without it, they lose authority and possibly power. This is problem enough for democrats; it’s a potential existential crisis for their authoritarian counterparts.

In this regard, at least, democracies have one big advantage. The continual replacement of political elites allows voters to vent their collective spleen, but it’s not a recipe for continuity, coherence or long-term strategic thinking.

Long-term thinking is pointless and unrewarded in a country like Australia at present. Governments are preoccupied primarily with their own survival until the next electoral contest, which is never more than a couple of years away. The long-term future of the country is something the next generation can worry about.

These would be formidable challenges at the best of times. Unfortunately these are not the best of times. True, living standards have never been higher, individual longevity and health are (potentially) at unparalleled levels, and we are still most unlikely to die in a war. None of these are things that even our grandparents’ generation could take for granted.

And yet – rightly or wrongly – there is widespread perception that the world is becoming ungovernable. If even the most capable and competent governments cannot address the challenges of climate change, international terrorism, the possibility of global pandemics, not to mention just running the economy, what hope is there?

Many of the Abbott government’s problems are plainly self-inflicted, but it’s also important to recognise how much has changed and how difficult good governance actually is these days. It’s important to remember that the retrospectively lauded Hawke government was responsible for inaugurating many reforms that have actually intensified the impact of global forces, making life difficult for governments of any persuasion.

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It's also important to remember that, in the 1980s, the Cold War was still in full swing. The "structural" constraints imposed by bipolar geopolitics gave a paradoxical certainty to events – one that has withered in the face of rising powers, newly powerful non-state actors and a remarkable efflorescence of ideological contestation.

Whether democracies are any better or worse at coping with times that are more like the Middle Ages than we might possibly have expected is still a moot point. The importance of religion as a force of social and political mobilisation, especially when coupled with the fracturing and erosion of state sovereignty, makes for a combustible and unpredictable mixture. It is not clear whether any form of government has the capacity to insulate the domestic sphere from such turbulent external currents.

Mark Beeson does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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