

If you had the feeling that global politics in 2016 operated on something of a fault line, you're not alone. Month after month, the world was rocked by unexpected yet momentous events: [terror attacks in Nice](#) and [Brussels](#), [Brexit](#) and the [rise of Trump](#), to name just a few.

Here in Australia, our [federal election on July 2](#) seemed fairly tame by comparison, despite the fact that it [took more than a week](#) for the result to be known (even then, we didn't know if it would be a minority or majority government).

There was, too, the unmistakable irony of going to a [double-dissolution election](#) because of a fractured and unwieldy Senate, only to find ourselves after the election with a razor-thin majority government and a [fractured and unwieldy Senate](#).

Before all of that, the relatively new Turnbull government was having trouble passing its [industrial relations laws](#), the rejection of which by the Senate was the ostensible reason for the double-dissolution election. Part of this reflected the [changing nature of trade unions](#), which we covered in a series in April.

It wasn't until December that the government finally negotiated the passage of the [enabling bill for the Australian Building and Corruption Commission \(ABCC\)](#), by which time, judging by the response, few Australians seemed to care.

## Tale of two Australias

One of the most striking aspects of the federal election result was the extent to which, as [Dennis Altman wrote](#)

, the “rustled on” vote has diminished. This reflects, albeit in a more understated way, the seismic political shifts happening elsewhere in the world: the shift away from establishment parties and institutions; the boom of right-wing populism.

In Australia, this was reflected by the rise of the “micro” parties at the expense particularly of the two major parties. [One Nation and Pauline Hanson](#) returned seemingly stronger than ever; the moderate populist line offered by the Nick Xenophon team

[also appealed](#)

. Jacqui Lambie, Bob Katter and Cathy McGowan were returned to parliament while the “Human Headline”,

[Derryn Hinch](#)

, joined the Senate.

Since the election, the micro parties and independents have provided much of parliament’s colour – [One Nation has already split](#) with controversial Senator Rod Culleton, while [Family First’s Bob Day quit](#) after his business collapsed.

[Political donations](#) continue to be in the spotlight, with calls for more transparency on exactly what donors expect – and are given – their generous support.

We can only hope for a calmer and more constructive parliament in 2017. We’re unlikely to get it, of course, but we can hope.

## Take a jump to the left? No, a huge step to the right

Our seemingly endless election campaign was sandwiched between two cataclysmic and unexpected politic events.

The first was the stunning success of the Brexit campaign, led by Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, [which was not predicted](#) when Britons went to vote in the referendum. The result caused British Prime Minister [David Cameron to resign](#) ,

and

[Theresa May](#)

to become the UK's second female prime minister.

The Brexit result left many pundits wondering how they didn't see it coming. But if that was a surprise, it was nothing alongside the November 8 election of Donald Trump as the next president of the United States, [so sure were so many](#) that Hillary Clinton would become the first woman elected to what is still arguably the most powerful job in the world. She had, after all, performed clinically in the three [telev](#)  
[ised debates](#)  
, while Trump seemed to stumble from one [disaster](#)  
to another, all the while [using the media](#)  
to his advantage – even though the media were largely critical of him.

Trump's election caused – and continues to cause – a great deal of consternation, with worries about how he will handle [the Asian region](#), [immigration](#) and [the economy](#) among a host of other issues. His presidency promises one thing for sure: it will not be dull.

### **Tale of two Australias, part two: gay marriage, safe schools and free speech**

Politics and policy are often slow to catch up with social change. With that in mind, and with the legalisation on gay marriage poised to go to a plebiscite under a returned Coalition government, we launched [a series in May](#) looking at just how the family has changed.

Still, after heated debate and canvassing both the [pros](#) and [cons](#) of a plebiscite, the notion was eventually [rolled by the](#)  
[Senate](#) out  
of fears of the damage a public campaign could do young LGBTI people and their families.

The same-sex marriage debate has embedded in it a question of freedom of speech, which [ha](#)  
[d a nexus](#)  
with another passionately contested, and still unresolved, debate: whether Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act

[should be changed](#)

. So hotly debated was it that we published [a series](#) on the politics of free speech in September.

Led by powerful conservative voices within the government such as Senator Cory Bernardi, you can expect to hear plenty more about freedom of speech, and in particular 18C, in the year ahead.

That wasn't the only issue that was exercising Bernardi and other conservatives such as George Christensen. The [Safe Schools Coalition](#), and the sex ed program it offers in Australian schools, became one of the most fiercely contested issues inside the parliament and in society more broadly. Of most concern seemed to be discussing issues of gender identity and fluidity with schoolchildren – an issue on which [research](#) is often cast aside in favour of ideology. Again, there is little doubt that this debate will be revisited in the coming year.

The nation was shocked in July after the airing of a Four Corners program [detailing the abuse of children](#) at the Don Dale facility in the Northern Territory. The shocking footage immediately prompted the prime minister to announce a royal commission, as our authors unpacked [the nature of torture](#), the [failure of the state](#) to care for prisoners – especially the very young – and [why so many Indigenous children are incarcerated](#) in the first place.

## Islamic State falters in Iraq and Syria, and terror hits Europe

What may have initially looked like an accident: a truck ploughing into a crowd of people in the French city of Nice, was soon [revealed to be an act of terrorism](#).

This followed the [Brussels bombing](#) in March, for which Islamic State claimed responsibility.

Then, in December, a truck ploughed into a Christmas market in Berlin, in an attack eerily similar to the one in Nice, boding ill for the year ahead and the [ongoing threat of terror](#) .

Meanwhile, the cities of [Mosul](#) and [Aleppo](#) will be forever etched in our minds, for the worst possible reasons. Even though IS is on the back foot in both cities, their futures, and those of their citizens, remain uncertain.

There is no sign this will end any time soon.

### Hot in the cities

Closer to home, [throughout 2016 we explored](#) how our cities are responding to challenges such as climate change and the pressures of simultaneous

[urban expansion](#)

and

[densification](#)

on

[resources](#)

,

[urban infrastructure](#)

and services, including the humble

[public toilet](#)

.

Most competing “[global cities](#)” [aspire](#) to be more [resilient](#) , [sustainable](#) and [liveable](#) .

Yet the problems of

[unaffordable housing](#)

and

[transport congestion](#)

seem a world away from the

[technology-driven](#)

promise of

[smart cities](#)

. Questions of grossly

[unequal access](#)

,

[opportunity](#)

,

[wealth](#)

and

[wellbeing](#)

across cities continued to occupy our authors.

In seeking answers to these questions, we considered how [more coherent](#) , [inclusive](#) and [democratic](#) [urban policymaking](#) might help make city life [better for all](#).

### What will the new year hold?

After all that happened in 2016, 2017 will have to be a quieter, gentler year, right? Well, let's just put it this way: one of the first major international political events on the 2017 calendar is the January 20 inauguration of the next president of the United States and avid tweeter, Donald Trump.

Happy new year.

Authors: John Watson, Editor, The Conversation

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/2016-the-year-that-was-politics-and-society-70186>