The George Briscoe Kerferd Oration

The Invisible People

In 1942, Sir Robert Menzies took to the airwaves to broadcast the first in a long series of weekly 'fireside chats' in which he sought to set out the philosophical principles that might justify Australia's participation in the second great war that his generation had been called to fight. Menzies spoke to the nation from Opposition – something extraordinary in itself. He did not resort to jingoism or three-word slogans. He did not appeal to jingoistic motifs such as 'loyalty to empire'. Instead, he sketched the boundaries of a different kind of territory – one defined by ideas, even ideals, worth fighting for. He did not speak down to his audience; he did not presume that they were beyond understanding. Rather, he spoke as a fellow citizen and in language that was simple but not simplistic.

The series of broadcasts were, to a considerable degree, Menzies' public declaration of the principles on which the Liberal Party of Australia was to be founded. And in those days, and for Sir Robert, the Liberal Party was genuinely liberal – founded on traditions of liberty that generations of our forebears had shed copious blood to secure.

Only the first of the thirty-seven broadcasts was given under the specific title of 'the forgotten people'. Yet, when published as a whole, this was the title given to the collection. The potent idea that Menzies tapped into was that the middle class (what he called the 'salt of the earth') made up of the self-employed, shopkeepers and the like was at risk of being set aside by the other great political movements. Labor had been established to protect and promote the interests of the working folk – often exploited terribly by those with the means to do so. Australia's 'squattocracy', the Antipodean landed gentry and their wealthy commercial cousins in the metropolitan centres of power, were still able to control the levers of power – and were assuredly able to look after themselves. Which left those in the middle – their interests unrepresented.

As much as anything else, Menzies' success was assured by his brilliance in giving these people a name – the 'forgotten people' – an identity to which they might relate and an organising principle for establishing a new political party to give them voice.

My task today is to do something similar – to give a name to the people who are not merely forgotten – but rendered invisible by a political system that has learned not to see many of its own citizens and that has perfected the art of hiding away the uncomfortable truths of contemporary life. Today, I wish to speak of the 'invisible people' – not with the intention of laying the foundation for a new political party but, perhaps, in order to rouse the rebellious spirit of a nation that has allowed a small and self-perpetuating political class to hijack our democracy.

I wish to propose three categories of invisibility within which we might be shrouded. They are:

- The Hidden: being those whom the powerful see but will not show, those who are hidden from the public gaze
- The Ignored: being those whom the powerful see but will not recognise, and
- The Unseen: being those whom the powerful look at but cannot see.

Before going on to explore each category, let me say something about what I mean by 'the powerful'. In this case, I certainly mean those who wield public power – most notably politicians in general and especially those in government. However, I am also referring to those who run major institutions in the private and public sectors – including the mainstream media in its various forms. Finally, I have in mind certain dominant ideas – so familiar to us that they are routinely expressed without ever being challenged for veracity or coherence. With luck, what I have in mind here will become more clear as each section unfolds.

The Hidden

Which leads me to the first of three categories, The Hidden.

There is something especially poignant about my making these observations here in Beechworth, on this particular site – a one-time asylum, a one-time gaol; where so many have been held in plain sight; whether for their own good or for the good of others. For here we are, sitting atop a hill – perhaps the most prominent point in the town. I do not know what actually led George Kerferd to support the civic initiatives associated with this community – but I like to imagine that he felt that those needing asylum should neither be forgotten nor rendered invisible. Rather, I like to imagine that he hoped that the less fortunate might be held in mind, might be seen in the mind's eye of the public.

Not so for those who cross other types of boundaries in the modern world. Secrecy and obfuscation have become common currency. For example, consider the case of those in need of asylum and who seek refuge, in Australia, by boat. This is a contentious issue and I know that there are people of good will on both sides of this issue – including those who are genuinely motivated by a compassionate impulse to prevent avoidable deaths at sea[1]. However, compassion is not evident in a process that begins with refugees being 'cloaked' in language that describes them as "illegal" asylum seekers. The means they employ to reach safety may be illegal, the people they pay to assist them may be criminals (notably of a kind who might allegedly enjoy Australian Government patronage from time to time). However,

[1] I would observe that although there are some people who pretend to be asylum seekers (but are actually seeking improved economic opportunity) there are others who, by any reasonable assessment, are genuine refugees. One problem with current government policy is that it fails to distinguish between the two types of person – at least if they come by boat. A second issue concerns the conditions under which people are held in detention. If the index of our obligations is the safety (but not prosperity) of asylum seekers, then we need to ensure that we do not hold these people in conditions that one could reasonably foresee as being detrimental to their safety and well-being.

genuine asylum seekers are not themselves "illegal". The use of such language is merely a device employed by politicians to hide the truth of the refugees' plight. And hide the truth they do. The operations to intercept asylum seekers are carried out in secret; the conditions in which they are detained are secret. Most recently, Parliament has enacted the *Australian Border Force Act* that, amongst other things, makes it an offence for a range of conscientious people, including medical practitioners, to disclose conduct that any reasonable person would deem to be wrong.[2]

Indeed, Australian governments are becoming obsessed with the need to hide away anything that might be, for them, either unpleasant or embarrassing. With increasing frequency, the need to preserve national security is invoked as justification – a genuinely good argument, if applied with restraint. Unfortunately, governments of all political hues have no apparent inclination to exercise restraint. Instead they now tend to make ambit claims for an extension of their powers (often to be exercised in secret) and then leave it to parliament to claw back territory that should be reserved for the liberty of citizens.

As noted above, not everyone who is 'hidden' disappears behind physical walls. Sometimes, they are rendered invisible by the application of rules and regulations, or by verbal 'sleights of hand' that, like a conjurer's trick, misdirect the public's attention – so much so as to cause us not to see what is right before our eyes. For example, a classic trick is to make the victims of misfortune seem to be the calculating authors of their own downfall. When done successfully, the true plight of people is hidden behind a veneer of 'blameworthiness'.

In other cases, the suffering of our fellow citizens can be shrouded by institutional arrangements. For example, the general deference accorded to priests (along with an assumption of their moral superiority) counted against those who claimed to have been sexually abused by members of the clergy. The victims were often rendered silent and invisible by a powerful and prestigious church hierarchy that could count on the community to discount the victim's claims – even when objectively true. Although different in the detail of their operation, similar forms of institutional 'shrouding' have been applied by others: by the military, university colleges, etc. (covering up cases of 'bastardisation'), by aged care facilities where the complaints of the elderly have been dismissed as 'unreliable', and so on.

Now it may be that governments (and some private institutions) will respond by saying that their efforts to hide the distasteful and troubling aspects of our imperfect society are less a matter of choice than a pragmatic response to the public's demand that they do so. They might claim that the community has little appetite for inconvenient or uncomfortable truths; that we are grand masters of the art of 'outsourcing' our personal obligations to deal

[2] In other writings, I argue that i) no person has a right to seek prosperity in Australia, ii) refugees only have a right to be made safe, iii) turning back boats (in conditions of safety) is justifiable - providing that it is genuinely done to save lives at risk from drowning. The principal areas where I disagree with the current government is in terms of a) that the conditions under which refugees are held should be conducive to their safety and basic welfare – conditions that are evidently not being met in a number of reported cases and b) to the greatest extent possible these processes should be open to public scrutiny. Secrecy provisions applied for genuine operational reasons (not giving away information to smugglers) should be accepted. However, managing the information flow because of the way issues are handled in the media and/or by the political process is, I think, inconsistent with our liberal democratic traditions.

with the messier aspects of our shared humanity. In short, they might say that we are happier not knowing.

As it happens, I think that there is some justice to this response. As citizens, do we really wish to know what is done in our name; do we really wish to be exposed to the whole spectrum of issues that make up the fabric of our society? Or, is there some consolation to be found in the maintenance of an environment of plausible deniability? If so, then do we collude with governments that keep hidden what might otherwise disturb our collective peace of mind?

My hunch is that both forces are at work. On the one hand, governments enjoy a fair measure of shelter from public scrutiny as too much transparency might expose areas of weakness that might count against their re-election. Additionally, having contended for power, many government ministers chafe at the limitations imposed on their freedom of action – limitations often linked to regimes of accountability and transparency.

Likewise, I think that the community is all-too-often happy enough to live in conditions of 'strategic ignorance' – so that we can awake to moments of righteous indignation when there is no more hiding from the darker secrets of our society.

We have seen this happen time and time again – not least in relation to the treatment of Indigenous people, or of children abused by Christian clerics, or of the men and women of the Australian Defence Force who, having been exposed to humanity's greatest horrors, have in the past been abandoned to cope alone with post traumatic stress disorders[3]. There is an unfortunately long list of such cases.

All of this leads me to ask if we have the stomach to know the truth, the whole truth – both good and bad – about the condition of our society? Do we have the courage to insist on knowing; to insist that we be able to see what is done in our name?

More controversially, does government have an obligation to ensure that we do know such truth – even if we do not wish to do so? Should politicians accept the political risk of holding up a mirror to society – even if we condemn them for doing so?

The Ignored

The second category of invisible people of whom I wish to speak are the 'ignored'. These are people who are 'seen' – that is, who are evidently 'present' to government and the larger public mind – but who count for so little as to be ignored.

[3] I have in mind here, most notably, what happened to those members of the ADF who witnessed the massacre that took place at Kibeho, in Rwanda. They were dispatched back to their units without any support. To this day, they suffer terribly (*via* suicide, etc.) in the aftermath of that experience. I think it right and proper that they be listed amongst those whose suffering has been hidden by institutions that have sought to protect themselves from scandal.

Unfortunately, this has become part and parcel of the world of professional politics where the 'political gaze' has become increasingly partial. Rather than looking for and seeing every citizen as a person of intrinsic value, the logic of political calculation draws the politician's eye towards those most able to affect their political fortunes. Perhaps it was ever so. However, the refinement of the techniques used to identify voter preferences (polls, focus groups, etc.) have allowed politicians to achieve a laser-like focus on key constituents on whom their power ultimately relies. This tendency is not restricted in its application to the wider Australian electorate. The experience of vulnerable political leaders, in both major parties, has led their successors to spend a considerable amount of time managing their personal power base within their respective party rooms – often adopting policies that are clearly at odds with the majority opinion of the Australian community.

The latest example of this phenomenon can be seen in the experience of the Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, who, having survived a 'near-death' experience in the party room is working hard to keep close to the conservative base on which his premiership depends. When the threat looms so large and at such close quarters it takes a truly remarkable leader to look beyond the parapets and see the larger community that is standing, quietly hopeful, outside the castle gates.

That the 'partial gaze' of politicians is inexorably drawn to the bright spots of political opportunity means that those living in political black spots are often overlooked.

Ironically, this means that those based in safe seats can be at a relative disadvantage – at least when compared to those based in marginal seats. Likewise, the relatively low population density that is typical of rural and regional electorates means that the interests of their citizens can be discounted in comparison to those of people living in the dense, contiguous electorates located in metropolitan areas. Indeed, it is an extraordinary achievement of country people that they have managed to amplify their voice, often through an appeal to emotion, history and culture, so as to have a disproportionately large influence on national politics. In some senses this is despite the alliance between the National and Liberal Parties – the effect of which is (more often than not) to limit the scope of the National Party to give full-throated voice to the concerns of country people.

We have seen this process at work in the recent outpouring from the people of the Liverpool Plains who feel betrayed by politicians whom they judge to be either unwilling or unable to place the community's interests ahead of those of the miners. It is beyond me to know whether or not the economic utility derived from mining the coal adjacent to the Liverpool Plain's rich farmland and vital aquifers is sufficient to justify the risks. What I do know is the hard truth that the farmers and their allies are not believed to carry a large enough political stick. Only time will tell if this belief is well founded.

Finally, there is the tendency in the midst of deeply partisan politics to divide the world into 'friend' and 'foe'. It troubles me that the current political environment is one in which it is all too easy to fall into the category of 'foe' – simply for failing to give wholehearted allegiance to one party or another. In that sense, I suppose that the vast majority of us are considered to be the 'foes' of at least one political leader or another. The fact that even the slightest expression of doubt or criticism can cast you into an 'enemy camp' should trouble

us all because it is becoming clear that modern government is ready to dismiss their opponents as irrelevant, 'un-Australian' or worse. The dismissal of critics is often done with disdain.

Unfortunately, the 'all-or-nothing' approach of our political leaders has conditioned the tone of debate in the wider community. It seems to me that reason has given way to invective and that the champions of 'political correctness' are now matched by the foot soldiers of 'conservative correctness'. Both groups claim to champion freedom of speech – and both groups will rush to shut down anyone who dissents from their prevailing orthodoxy. They will boycott and bully their ideological opponents to a point when each side's partisans (and the increasingly disengaged public) simply 'tune out' and ignore the participants. Each becomes invisible to the other.

If you accept my proposition that the political gaze is essentially partial – and that it falls only where opportunity lies, then what are we to do?

I want to propose that, the solution lies in a re-appraisal of the role of the public service – especially in terms of its duty to the community as a whole. It used to be that the public service conceived of itself as being bound by obligations that exist apart from those that are derived from the obligations of government ministers.

This is not an especially radical concept. For example, all sworn police officers exercise what is known as the 'original authority of the constable'.

This 'original authority' exists in order to ensure that the police enforce the law in relation to all persons – irrespective of their wealth and power. That is, the 'constable' upholds the 'rule of law' – even if government ministers direct them to behave otherwise.

The change in the culture of Australian public service organisations was driven by reforms introduced from the Whitlam Government onwards – with significant structural changes to being introduced by Labor and Coalition governments, with especially notable reforms being introduced by the Howard government – building on work instituted under Hawke and Keating. One of the dominant themes, underpinning reform, was the need to ensure that the Australian Public Service is "responsive" to the agenda of the elected government of the day. To that end, significant reforms were designed to ensure that the public service will "serve the government of the day". Although this direction was accompanied by formal pronouncements intended to reinforce the need for political neutrality across the public service, the practical effect of the reforms was, in the eyes of many, to 'politicise' the public service – thus moving it away from the traditions embodied in the British 'Westminster' system and towards those of the United States of America – where senior public servants are traditionally replaced with each change of administration. For example, six Departmental Secretaries were replaced with the election of the Howard Government in 1996 – with at least two of them being replaced as a result of being judged 'too close' to the political interests of the former government.

As noted above, I do not think that the authors of these reforms intended that the Australian Public Service should become politicised – at least not to the extent that has

occurred in some jurisdictions. The problem is that the emphasis on the need to "serve the government of the day" was not 'balanced' by a discussion of any residual obligation that might be owed directly to citizens.

With this in mind, I want to make the potentially controversial suggestion that the duty owed to the government of the day is qualified by a more fundamental obligation to the citizens of a democracy. It is often forgotten that democracy is distinguished from other political systems by the fact that the ultimate source of political authority is located in the persons of 'the governed' (sometimes simply called 'the people'). Other political systems locate ultimate authority in other places. A 'theocracy' accords God ultimate authority. A 'plutocracy' vests authority in the wealthy; a 'meritocracy' in the able. Only a democracy accords such a critical role to citizens.

As Sir Robert Menzies observed in 1942;

> Of all laws, that of the Constitution is at once the most fundamental and the most sacred. Parliaments may tell us from day to day what we are to do or not to do. The Parliaments themselves are controlled by the Constitution, which is not their servant but, on the contrary, their master.
> …
> Neither Parliament nor Government can alter it. Only the people can do that. They were its creators forty years ago. They are its masters still.

The implications of this are far-reaching. For example, it follows from this that no government may deny its citizens the means by which they might actively participate in democratic life. With this in mind, there are minimal levels of health, education, security and other basic goods that are required by citizens if they are to be able to exercise their basic rights as citizens. As such, any government that denies such basic goods to some, or all, of its citizens will fail in its most basic duty to those who are the source of its authority. It is my argument that the public service must not become complicit in the denial of such goods – even when demanded of it by a government claiming the legitimacy of a democratic mandate. That is, I want to propose that public servants have an 'original authority' that mirrors that of the constable.

This is not meant to suggest that the public service can impose its own view of what makes for a 'good life'. It must be generally responsive to every elected government – whatever its political orientation. However, the one thing that the public service may <u>not</u> do is adopt the 'partial gaze' of its political masters. Rather, the public service must look for and see every citizen in an equal light – irrespective of who they are or where they live. There can be no 'dark corners' or 'zones of irrelevance' – no citizen should ever be ignored simply because they are not thought to 'count' for much in the calculation of party politics.

The Unseen

This brings me to the final category of 'invisible' people – those who are unseen. In many respects this is the most troubling category of all. While it is galling to be hidden away or seen but ignored, it is an assault on our basic dignity to be not seen at all.

This is a serious point. The concept of 'intrinsic dignity' is central to the development of Western Ethics. It has both religious and secular roots. The religious tradition accords fundamental dignity to all as made equally in 'the image of God'. The old Hebrew idea is not that humanity is made in the 'physical' image – but instead the 'moral' image, as beings endowed with free will (an essential property of God).

The secular story has various trajectories – perhaps best captured in the work of Immanuel Kant who argued that the human capacity for reason places all persons within the 'Kingdom of Ends'. Translated into ordinary language, the 'Kingdom of Ends' is a category of beings (typically human beings) that may never be used simply as another person's tool. They may not be considered just another 'resource' to be deployed for the benefit of another – thus the discomfort of many with the term 'human resources'.

Given this, it is a profound insult not to be 'seen'.

In many respects this has been the plight of Indigenous people in the period since European settlement of Australia. The worst of what was done to them involved a denial of their equal humanity – leading to the development of policies that were consciously indifferent to their survival as a distinct people. In language that is hard to credit in the modern age, colonial administrators were entirely candid about their hope that Indigenous people would one day not be a discernible part of the Australian environment.

Indeed, it is telling that in a number of States, Aboriginal people were dealt with under legislation about flora and fauna. One of the most important things about the apology, delivered by Kevin Rudd, is that it finally established Indigenous people as equal to all others – with the recognition of that reality being expressed in the idea that they were deserving of an apology. One does not apologise to a wombat or a 'roo – no matter how wronged they may be. We reserve apologies for other persons – our ethical equals.

The fact that we might recognise the wrongs of the past (or the present for that matter) does not mean that we must also conclude that the perpetrators are in any sense 'bad people'. As it happens, the more that I see of the world, the more I become convinced that most 'bad' things are done by 'good' people. I extend this concession to our political leaders – indeed to the vast majority of people who, from time to time, cause harm within the world. The trouble is that they genuinely do not see that what they do is wrong. In that sense they suffer from a kind of 'ethical blindness' that can extend so far as to their not seeing the people whose interests are most affected by their conduct.

This idea of 'not seeing' is central to the Ethics Centre's work with the Australian Defence Force – especially the pre-deployment of Australian forces being posted overseas to Iraq and Afghanistan. This is not the place to go into the reasons for this work being done –

except to note, in the most general terms, that the ADF has developed a doctrine that conceives of leadership as an ethical practice – something that is essential when operating in conditions of asymmetric warfare. But, returning to the issue of 'not seeing' – our work with the ADF has given rise to the concept of the 'tiger in the room'. We are all familiar with the image of the 'elephant in the room' – a visible risk that is not named. The 'tiger in the room' is far more dangerous. It is the risk that remains unseen because everyone has been conditioned by training, habit and experience to see only the greens of the jungle environment – and nothing of the orange that defines the tiger's presence. The trouble is that if you cannot see all of the colours of the spectrum, then tigers become almost invisible.

People who have learned not to see 'orange' suffer a terrible fate when the tiger springs – as do all others who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Unfortunately, we live in a world where large numbers of people learn only to see within that part of the spectrum with which they are familiar. So it is that when you ask people why they have done something that they now clearly see to be wrong, they will tell you honestly that they just "didn't see it at the time". And why did they not see it? Because, "everyone was doing it". Because, "that's just the way things were done".

Conditioned blindness of this kind can affect anyone. It is remarkably easy to become locked within your own limited view of the world – especially when that view of the world is being reinforced by a larger group. It is in these circumstances that people who do not fit into our world-view can disappear from view. And before we know it, they have become a kind of 'social road kill' – run down by a society that is full of regrets once the body is found; but excuses the accident on the basis that the victim was unseen.

As noted above, it is easy enough to not see people if they fall outside our definitions of worth or merit. Let me give an example of how we only see what we value. As I speak, there is a fixed number of lights illuminating this place. They could be counted – and someone who did would be in possession of an objective fact about the world. However, I hope that nobody has made that count – because the fact just does not matter. The fact about the number of lights is there – but unseen.

Now imagine that you are a person who matters so little as to be there – but unseen. Imagine that your predicament is not an accident but the product of a deliberate decision to put you out of view. I noted, at an earlier point today, when speaking of asylum seekers, that language can be key to this process. The famous author and essayist, George Orwell, made a particular study of the way in which politicians can divert us from seeing what is really there. At its most cynical, political language can be used to subvert the basic meaning of things (such as when legislation is given a title that implies the opposite of what is being enacted).

Let me make this point with the first of two quotations that I wish to draw from the poetry of William Blake. I resort to poetry in recollection of what I was once told by an American who routinely attended poetry readings. He said to me, "You know Simon, it's the only time you ever hear the truth". So, to Blake:

'Compel the poor to live upon a crust of bread, by soft mild arts.
Smile when they frown, frown when they smile; and when a man looks pale
With labour and abstinence, say he looks healthy and happy;
And when his children sicken, let them die; there are enough
Born, even too many, and our earth will be overrun
Without these arts. If you would make the poor live with temper,
With pomp give every crust of bread you give; with gracious cunning
Magnify small gifts; reduce the man to want a gift, and then give with pomp.
Say he smiles if you hear him sigh. If pale, say he is ruddy.
Preach temperance: say he is overgorg'd and drowns his wit
In strong drink, though you know that bread and water are all
He can afford. Flatter his wife, pity his children, till we can
Reduce all to our will, as spaniels are taught with art.'

Beware the language of the powerful – it can blind us (and them) to what really matters. I would offer as one example a recent conversation I had with a government minister. This gentleman was genuinely proud when he told me that he (and the Government within which he served) were committed to treating me as a 'customer'. I think that he expected me to be pleased by this attribution. Instead, I reacted badly – telling him that I was not a 'customer'. I was, I am … a citizen.

The Minister challenged me with the response, "but there's no difference". As you might imagine, this was like waving a red rag at a bull. And I was off! I pointed out that my relationship with him was not defined by the transactions I performed.

Instead, he needed to understand that as a citizen in a democracy I joined with others in being the authors of every shred of authority he exercised. As a citizen, I mattered irrespective of whether or not I bought or received a single government service.

I hope you can see in this exchange how easy it is to become invisible to government. All you need to do is stop being a 'customer'. However, this is not really about the failings of government. Again, we need to look closer to home. We need to ask ourselves what other descriptions lead people to disappear – not only from the view of government but also from that of the community as a whole. For example, do we disappear when we fall outside the ranks of the 'deserving poor'? Do we disappear when our affliction is of a kind that is too frightening to be recognised – as was the case for those suffering mental illness in the past (and to a lesser degree the present). Are there some types of human failing that we find it impossible to comprehend or cope with – so we block out those unfortunates who find themselves in this predicament?

Conclusion

So, where does this leave us? What kind of polity might we aspire to be?

I believe that we need to re-examine and recall the philosophical foundations of our great liberal democracy. It is only if we truly understand the roots of the democratic tree that we

can ensure that it flourishes. That is why the ideas of men like Sir Robert Menzies were so important. His democratic vision was grounded in the ideas of philosophers like John Locke who took seriously the idea that there are certain inalienable freedoms that place the citizen (and not the government) at the centre of democratic life.

Menzies was not alone in mastering ideas and a form of democratic politics that spoke to the better aspirations of the people. There was a whole generation of politicians, from across the political spectrum, who knew – from hard-won experience – that some values and principles transcend political differences and who shared a general ideal of what a good life in a good society might be. Where they differed was in relation to the means by which such a society might be attained. That is the ground on which they fought their political battles – promoting positive programs with conviction and arguments drawn from principle.

However, let us not be driven by nostalgia for an Australia that was, no doubt, both better and worse than we might remember. Australia, today, has its own unique challenges. One of those is to share an ideal of the good society that embraces every citizen – irrespective of their religious or cultural orientation. This is the genius embedded in the idea of the secular state – an idea that is at risk of being whittled away by those who are both driving and opposing the forces of extremism.

The secular state is not hostile to religion; and secular does not mean 'atheist'. Rather, the secular state neither condemns nor promotes religion. Ideally, it is entirely indifferent to private, religious belief. Instead, the secular state seeks to promote a form of 'civic virtue' derived from secular, philosophical foundations.

Such a framework will often have elements found within most religious moralities. However, it will not (and must not) be derived from them.

So, a secular state will afford a safe and respectful place for people of all faiths – and of none. Indeed, it is only a secular state that can offer a coherent response to the problem of extremism – especially extremism of the kind grounded in religious belief. Any response that draws explicitly, to any degree, on a religious foundation will be taken as 'anathema' by those to whom it is directed. That is why it is entirely counter-productive when politicians and pundits bang on about how Western Liberal Democracy is rooted in its Judaeo-Christian heritage (somewhat overlooking the contribution of pagan Greeks and Romans – let alone the great thinkers from the Islamic world). If Australia is to counter the allure of the radicals, then it needs an open, coherent and secular ethical framework with which young people can engage. In doing so, those at risk of radicalisation might avoid the nihilism and disaffection that fundamentalists (religious, political, etc.) so easily exploit with their siren songs of simple certainty, surrender and obedience – and do so without disturbing less destructive religious sensibilities.

There are some people who rail against the Enlightenment and its enthronement of reason over belief. They trace all that is bad in society back to the loss of religious authority. They are wrong – as are their assertions that ethics are 'impossible' without a religious foundation. This is simply not true. It is quite possible to derive a fully functional ethical system, in support of liberal democracy, from entirely uncontroversial 'this worldly'

foundations. Such a system need not be hostile to religious belief. It simply does not depend on it and is, like the secular state itself, open to people of all faiths or none.

So, my first proposal for a positive way forward is that we relearn and reengage with the lessons of the past – embracing and refreshing core ideas that should ground our modern, political culture. But this will not be enough to solve the problem of the 'invisible people'. For that to happen, we will need a different kind of politics – that is as much about us as it is about the politicians who come from our ranks.

I would like to set the challenge by returning to William Blake:

> 'What is the price of Experience? Do men buy it for a song?
> Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with the price
> Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children.
> Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy,
> And in the wither'd field where the farmer plows for bread in vain.
>
> It is an easy thing to triumph in the summer's sun
> And in the vintage and to sing on the waggon loaded with corn.
> It is an easy thing to talk of patience to the afflicted,
> To speak the laws of prudence to the houseless wanderer,
> To listen to the hungry raven's cry in wintry season
> When the red blood is fill'd with wine and with the marrow of lambs.
>
> It is an easy thing to laugh at wrathful elements,
> To hear the dog howl at the wintry door, the ox in the slaughter house moan;
> To see a god on every wind and a blessing on every blast;
> To hear sounds of love in the thunder storm that destroys our enemies' house;
> To rejoice in the blight that covers his field, and the sickness that cuts off his children,
> While our olive and vine sing and laugh round our door, and our children bring fruits and flowers.
>
> Then the groan and the dolor are quite forgotten, and the slave grinding at the mill,
> And the captive in chains, and the poor in the prison, and the soldier in the field
> When the shatter'd bone hath laid him groaning among the happier dead.
>
> It is an easy thing to rejoice in the tents of prosperity:
> Thus could I sing and thus rejoice: but it is not so with me.'

No, it is not so with me. And I doubt that it is so with you, my fellow citizens.

I, for one, yearn for a politics that speaks to our better nature. Instead, we are typically served up a political diet that assumes that the worst in our nature will prevail. The appeal is made to our capacity for greed and fear. Or we are asked to buy into a politics of exclusion – in which we are made 'one' by defining those who are 'other'.

I realise that the alternative form of politics – based on inclusion is more difficult to practice. However, I think that Australia lives in hope that such a politics might emerge. Is it really so hard to offer the community prosperity without appealing to personal greed and security, without appealing to our collective fears? Could we not imagine a political settlement that extends across party lines and offers a positive vision of what this wonderful country might be?

Unfortunately, I doubt that the current crop of political leaders can even imagine such a politics. They complain of 'volatility' in the electorate. I see a community that has a settled view of what it wants. It's just that what we seek cannot be found amongst the major parties and the political class that make up their dwindling numbers. Disappointed, we cast about for an alternative.

The good news is that this is exactly as it should be. As I have stressed today, democratic government is not something handed down to us by politicians. It is something that we make and claim for ourselves. I suspect that this simple truth is already at work within rural and regional Australia – places where the bonds of community are naturally stronger due to the fact that nothing much gets done unless people come together for mutual support and shared benefit.

Country Australia might be just the place to create a new movement of Australians who demand that they be seen and heard – and who champion the idea that in Australia, there should be no invisible people.

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