30 September, 2019

Committee Secretary
The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry on 'Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy'. In the following pages, we address the theme of 'sustaining democracy' and, in particular, the question of 'How are the challenges and opportunities facing Australia similar or different to those of other democracies?'

Our comments are based on our respective areas of research strength. Dr. Kefford, an Australian politics specialist at the University of Queensland, has extensively researched Australian political parties and the rise of populist parties in this country Professor McDonnell is an international expert on populism, currently based at Griffith University in Brisbane. He previously worked in one of Europe's leading Politics departments, the European University Institute in Florence. He is the author of numerous books and articles on populism in Europe and internationally.

Given our complementary specialisms, our submission focuses on the phenomenon of populism and its manifestations in Australia and Western European democracies over recent decades. While the emergence of One Nation in the late 1990s mirrored in many ways that of populists in countries such as France, Italy, and Denmark, the subsequent history of populism in the two areas has been markedly different. In Australia, radical right populism has remained a marginal force, with One Nation absent from the Commonwealth parliament from 2000 to 2016. By contrast, Western European populists of both radical right and left are not only now electoral forces to be reckoned with in most countries, but have increasingly become parties of government in countries such as Austria, Finland, Greece and Italy. They have had similar success also in the new democracies of Eastern Europe, particularly in Hungary and Poland.

Below, we firstly define the term populism and clarify its relationship to democracy. We then discuss the reasons underpinning the divergent histories of Australian and Western European populism. Thereafter, we consider the degree of underlying support for populist politics in Australia. We will argue that the relative failure of populism – especially radical right populism – in Australia compared to Western Europe is due to a series of factors, ranging from the lack of capable leaders and durable populist parties of the type found in Western Europe to the absence of economic crisis. Nonetheless, this does not imply that, in the right conditions, a well-organised radical right populist party could not emerge and gain long-term traction in Australia. Certainly, the evidence is that many of the attitudes conducive to the rise of such a party are already present in Australian society. We conclude with a list of suggestions for how mainstream parties might seek to manage the growth of populist attitudes amongst the public and the challenges posed by populist parties.

Populism: Democratic, but not liberal democratic

While there is a lot of confusion around the term 'populism' in the media and public debate, we follow the increasingly agreed understanding of populism among scholars who consider it as 'first and foremost a set of ideas characterized by an antagonism between the people and the elite' (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013: 6). As one of the leading scholars in the field, Margaret Canovan (1981: 294) argued: 'all forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation of and appeal to "the people"

and all are in one sense or another anti-elitist'. This moral juxtaposition of a good 'people' with bad 'elites' is the basis for the most widely-used current definition of populism, proposed by the Dutch academic Cas Mudde, as 'a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2007: 23).

Populists present themselves as the sole true democrats and the sole true defenders of the 'real people' (think, for example, of Pauline Hanson's claims in her 1996 maiden speech to be speaking for '90 per cent of Australians'). As Jan-Werner Müller (2016: 20) argues, 'populists are always anti-pluralist: populists claim that they, and only they, represent the people'. Within this logic, it is necessarily the populist movement itself that 'authentically identifies and represents this real or true people' (Müller 2016: 22-23). Having defined their respective 'people' and 'elites', populists cast themselves as being on a mission to return sovereignty to this people (hence many populists talk about making people 'masters again in their own homes'). As Hanspeter Kriesi (2014: 363) puts it: 'the central populist message is that politics has escaped popular control and that popular control has to be restored'. Populists therefore tend to 'speak and behave as if democracy meant the power of the people and only the power of the people' (Mény and Surel 2002: 9). In this way, we might say that populists exploit the gap between what the ideal of democracy promises (as Abraham Lincoln put it in his Gettysburg address, 'government of the people, by the people, for the people') and what contemporary liberal democracies actually deliver (which is, in fact, limited and restrained majority rule *in the name of the people*). It is important therefore to note that populism is not anti-democratic, however populists often do claim that the checks and balances of liberal democracy - such as independent media and judges, or minority rights – get in the way of the democratic will of the people. Populism therefore proposes what has been termed a type of 'illiberal democracy' (something that the populist Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has explicitly called for).

The above conceptions of 'the people', 'elites' and democracy are common to all populist movements of, but populism of the radical right has some additional features. Most notably, for these parties, 'the people' are said to be oppressed not only *from above* by political, cultural, media, financial, judicial and other elites, but they are also threatened *from below* by the presence of 'dangerous others' who do not share the values of the people and threaten their prosperity (moreover, whether it concerns jobs, houses or rights, these others are said to be favoured by the elites over the people). The main 'others' for radical right populists in Western democracies have undoubtedly been immigrants (especially Muslims after the September 11 attacks), but – depending on the context and political opportunities – the 'others' in some countries can be the LGBTIQ community, 'undeserving' welfare recipients, Communist sympathisers, Indigenous communities or any group within society whose ethnic identity, religious/political beliefs or behaviour can be construed by populists as placing them not just outside 'the real people', but in an *antagonistic* relationship to them.

Populism in Western Europe: A long and continuing success story

Populism is on the rise internationally in the twenty-first century. In some areas of the globe, this growth has been sudden, however, this is not the case in Western Europe. Rather, Western Europe has been the most consistently fertile ground for populist parties for several decades. Indeed, countries like France, Italy, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland have had radical right populist parties since the 1970s and 1980s. Meanwhile, countries previously thought immune to radical right populism for historical reasons of association with Fascism such as Germany and Spain, have proven scholars wrong over the last decade. Populism in Western Europe thus seems here to stay and is exerting greater influence than ever. These parties have gone from being seen as episodic and marginal pariahs to being counted amongst the largest, and sometimes the ruling, parties in their countries, in turn raising questions about their effects on politics nationally and internationally.

To assess why populism has done so well in the established European democracies, especially since the 1990s, while it has largely failed in Australia over the same time period, would require much more

space than we have at our disposition here. However, we can identify and briefly discuss the principal 'supply and demand' factors:

Supply: Parties that are built to last

While some populist parties in Europe have been beset by leadership problems (such as the Alliance for Germany in recent years), many of the most successful populist parties have avoided the type of turmoil that has plagued a party such as One Nation. Notably, some of the most prominent European radical right populist parties have proven not to be dependent on their founder-leaders (as many scholars once believed populist parties were). For example, in recent years, we have seen a new generation of leaders such as Marine Le Pen of the Front National (FN – National Front), Matteo Salvini of the Lega Nord (LN – Northern League), and Kristian Thulesen Dahl of the Dansk Folkeparti (DF - Danish Peoples Party) proving that their parties can not only survive leadership change, but go on to achieve even greater electoral successes. This speaks to the fact that these parties have established strong and active grassroots organisations that are built to withstand single electoral setbacks and/or change at the top of the party. Indeed, in some European countries, populist parties are now the only parties whose membership is growing rather than receding (as has been the case for mainstream parties across the continent for several decades). They are also often more active at grassroots level between elections than their mainstream competitors (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015).

Demand: Salience of key issues and favourable conditions

While populism has been growing in Europe since the 1970s from North to South and East to West, comprising countries in which the economy is strong (such as Switzerland and Sweden), and those in which it has been weak (e.g. Italy and Greece), it is true that populism across the continent has risen since the GFC in 2008. The past decade of economic decline and then stagnation across Europe saw greater vote shares for populists of both right and left amidst the growing perception that mainstream parties were incapable of being responsive to their voters and were instead in thrall to the European Union and international markets. Australia has, of course, not had to face any such pressures over the past two decades. In addition, the key issue for radical right populists – immigration – has remained extremely salient for many years in Europe. If we look at recent Eurobarometer survey data, we can see that citizens across Western Europe list immigration as one of the top two issues facing the EU. While immigration is an important issue in Australia, it has not yet occupied similar and sustained prominence. On the other hand, the degree of dissatisfaction with mainstream parties and the functioning of democracy is similar in both Australia and major Western European nations – something that points to a general malaise facing established democracies.

The Australian Experience

One Nation is the main case of a populist party in Australia. However, its history is markedly different to the consistently successful and durable Western European populist parties we have discussed above. Like many of these, One Nation also emerged in the late 1990s but imploded and remained on the periphery of Australian democracy until it re-entered the Commonwealth parliament as a result of the 2016 election result. While some caution is needed in thinking through the capacity for parties like these to succeed and the drivers of support for them, it is important for the committee to reflect on the potential for populist success in Australia akin to that in other Western democracies.

In recent years, numerous studies have explored how widespread attitudes associated with these complex phenomena are. The most comprehensive study in Australia (that we know of) to date has been recently conducted by Kefford and Ratcliff. This explored how widespread attitudes related to populism and the populist radical right are in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US). Their key conclusions, which are of clear relevance to this committee, were as follows:

- As was the case in Western European cases (Rooduijn, 2014), there was evidence that attitudes associated with populism and the populist radical right were reasonably widespread (approximately 20 per cent of the Australian electorate) and a coherent radical right ideology was evident amongst a sizable number of voters (Kefford and Ratcliff, 2018);

- Consistent with previous studies (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018; Akkerman et al., 2014; Rooduijn, 2014), there was a clear correlation between voters holding attitudes associated with populism, nativism and authoritarianism and an intention to vote for a populist radical right party. In Australia, this means parties like One Nation;

- However, what was driving voters to support populist radical right parties were attitudes associated with nativism and authoritarianism, rather than populism. In simple terms, this means attitudes to issues like immigration, national identity, cultural cohesion and attitudes to reconciliation and Indigenous Australians.

Three points are important to emphasise here. First, as Mudde (2017) has pointed out, nativism (and we could also say authoritarianism) are the most significant factors in driving voting behaviour for populists of the right. Second, despite what is often asserted, support for the populist radical right is not necessarily drawn from working class voters. This has been shown over and over internationally (Norris and Inglehart, 2018; Sides et al., 2018). Third, the demand among the Australian public for parties with offers like that put forward by One Nation, appears greater than One Nation has been able to mobilise. Indeed, if a radical right populist party in Australia was led by a figure such as Marine Le Pen or Matteo Salvini, we envisage it would be significantly more influential and successful.

In short, we believe that the relative lack of radical right populist success in Australia is not so much due to a lack of demand for populist ideas and policies, but a lack of supply of populist leadership of the type found elsewhere. In this sense, Australia may be like countries such as Finland and Sweden where, once an effective populist leader of a well-organised party emerged, radical right populism quickly flourished in societies where experts had previously thought it would not.

Recommendations

Given the points made above, we have four recommendation for the committee to consider.

(1) Mainstream parties in Australia with a stake in the stability and effective functioning of liberal democracy need to take a strong stand against populist parties. This requires a united commitment to placing such parties last on voting cards at every election (as happened, until recently, with One Nation). Doing short-term deals for the sake of a single election is not only bad politics, but legitimises the positions of parties and movements that seek to further weaken the guardrails of Australian democracy. Moreover, the evidence from Europe is that mainstream cooperation with populist parties has no significant effect in taming their behaviour or policies.

(2) Mainstream parties in Australia need a more active grassroots membership and need to re-occupy the zones of engagement with citizens, as European populists (especially of the Right) have done and as European mainstream parties have failed to do. In short, Australian mainstream parties need to take the linkage role they play in our democracy seriously. To do otherwise is self-defeating and provides opportunities for populists to exploit the weaknesses of liberal democracy.

(3) Political parties in Australia should seek out and explore ways for citizens to be more actively involved in politics – whether that is through deliberative forums (mini-publics, citizens assemblies), encouraging and funding a more active and critical civil society, or through promoting and elevating the voices of citizens often ignored or overlooked in public debates.

(4) Australia is one of the most successful multicultural nations on earth. Political elites have a duty and a responsibility to defend and advance this success story, especially when they are so willing to rely on immigration to fuel economic growth. This is particularly important when we know that cultural anxiety is a critical driver of support for these parties. Committing to advance the story of how immigration enriches us a nation, is vitally important.

We hope this submission has been of assistance to the committee and we would be happy to appear in-person if deemed useful to the committee's deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Glenn Kefford and Professor Duncan McDonnell

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