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# Rebuilding our political system to nurture equality

Presentation by

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## **About the presentation:**

As we're increasingly realising, social connectedness and a shared political discourse which honours the common good are all fundamental to a functioning society and economy. Yet there's pervasive foreboding that these things are falling away in our society. Faith in our major institutions, including our democracy continues its steady decline both here and in other Western Democracies. This talk will explore the ways in which inequality is more than a simple material phenomenon. It will argue that politics as currently practices is losing its capacity to address these concerns, and explore an alternative from which our political system could borrow – in which people are represented by citizens juries or councils – selected by lot as they were in ancient Athens. It will also explore the ways in which such a system might be more hospitable to solving our social problems.

## Nicholas Gruen

Thanks very much. I'll wait for my slides to come up. There they are. Now I just thought I'd share with you a tweet that I put out a few days ago:

*How can we build a democracy that's more supportive of equality? Find out next Monday at Communities in Control conference at Moonee Valley next Monday morning.*

So, my friend and fellow blogger, Kim Parish, tweeted back:

*Put the housekeeping on number 7 in the third race at long odds and then do a Fine Cotton conspiracy on behalf of the undeserving poor and broadcast the tip on Facebook.*

Well, I'm probably going to disappoint you.

Anyway, this is what we think of as where democracy has got to in the west. It's a pretty pass and it always seems very serious if we are to explain all this in terms of the material conditions of life.

(There are) three potential explanations. I don't want to say that they're - well, let's have a look at them: the recession, austerity (particularly severe in the United Kingdom) and inequality, the growth of inequality. (This is) particularly severe, as you can see, in the United States. That's a growth in the Gini coefficient. I won't explain that to you - I have to explain it to myself. But you can see that up is bad. That is, if you think inequality is a bad thing.

It started out a bit above 34 and has gone up to 44. Really quite a remarkable state of affairs. And the result - or is it the result? Certainly something else that has been happening at the same time is that the degree of popularisation between the two main sides of politics over there has really gone through the roof. That diagram is quite an interesting one. Their political system requires a degree of compromise between parties in the congress and, as you can see from that diagram, that is becoming harder and harder to bring about.

Some extraordinary facts about polarisation in the United States is that in the 1990s one-fifth of US partisans (that is, people who identify with either republican or democrat) regarded their opponents very unfavourably.



Today, two-fifths are desperately opposed to their opponents and two-fifths are uncomfortable with a politically mixed marriage. Amazing. And at least race and sexual orientation now takes a back seat to whether you're a republican or a democrat. Isn't that an extraordinary thing to happen in a democracy?

That's the level of distrust. Incredibly high until - well, until before Watergate, as you can see. Watergate plays a pretty important role in America and it's pretty much rock bottom. And in Australia there is not that much difference. I know that all the marketing hype is how different the two parties are but - partly because of compulsory voting - our parties tend to think a lot about the centre of politics and spend a lot of their time trying to grab it in various ways. And yet exactly the same things are going on. There is increasing lack of coherence in the centre, increasing inability to build coalitions in the centre, and distrust has been going in exactly the same direction as the United States and the United Kingdom and most western countries.

So, here's the thing. We think of Donald Trump and Brexit as the great signs - the great earthquake, if you like - that suddenly woke a lot of people up to the fact that things are pretty sick in our democracy. Well, Donald is somebody to think about, because I would put it to you that Australia led the world in neoliberal reform - well, we pioneered a kind of neoliberal reform that also involved rebuilding the safety net under the Whitlam and Hawke-Keating governments.

And just as we led the world there, we led the world - well, we were three years ahead of Brexit and Trump. What I mean by that is that, if you think of the singular achievement of the parliament that we elected in 2013, it was to abolish carbon pricing. Carbon pricing was a difficult political consensus that had been reached over the previous 15 years and it had the support of the consciences of about 80%, maybe 90% of our parliamentarians.

I will repeat that. 80% or 90% of our parliamentarians knew that carbon pricing was in the national interest, and our political system abolished carbon pricing. Carbon pricing, if it was still in existence today, would mean that our budget deficit was \$10 billion a year less. That's the degree of self-vandalism. That's the degree to which the elites of Australia humiliated themselves in the parliament of 2013.



And this is a nice cartoon by Michael Leunig - a certain amount of low-key Australian celebration there - but it made no difference. We still are making no progress on that matter.

And why am I telling you this? Well here's a puzzle. Because that's incomes, household incomes over the period from 2000 and, as you can see, there was a huge deterioration in those things in 2008 in the United Kingdom and the United States, these places that are supposed to be the beacon of crumbling democracy, but not here. Got a bit sick for a while, but not here. We didn't have a recession.

Now we've heard a lot about inequality and, on one measure, inequality has risen, and that measure is the amount of money going to the top 1%. We're not doing very well on that score. On most other measures of equality, we're doing relatively well.

This is a chart from ACOSS which is taken from the OECD. Look at those numbers. They're much lower than the American ones. They go from 30 a long time - well, yes, a long time ago, up to 34 - but if you extend the graph and you look at it from 2008, it's basically kind of flatlining - or I wouldn't want to argue it's trending down. This is the Gini coefficient, by the way, which is a very summary measure of everyone and how disparate the earnings are. But anyway, let's just call it flatlining.

So, we don't have the explanation of a recession of austerity or, if you want to call what we've had austerity, it's incredibly mild compared with what has been happening in the northern hemisphere.

So, I want to propose to you a very different explanation for what's happening in our democracy. I don't want to suggest to you that there's nothing in the material explanation but I do want to suggest to you that there's a lot more and we should be really thinking about it.

I want to get you to imagine you are an evolving human being on the African Savanna and there are all sorts of parts of our make-up that protect us on the African Savanna, and one of them is that we get disgusted by certain types of food that might be bad.



We like sugar, we like fat, we like salt, and take that community and optimise for profit in food manufacture and sale and that's what you get.

I want to suggest to you that we live in a fast-food culture, that this process of optimising, optimising around things that are in many ways good about us, things that helped us in an earlier age but, when you optimise them sufficiently, single-mindedly, they turn toxic. I want to suggest to you that that's our culture in vast number of dimensions. Of course, politics is where I'm heading. And, of course, we also hear that it's the internet; that the internet has done these things to us and the internet has certainly intensified these things but I'll just draw a - I'll just put a sort of screen over those things where the internet revved up activity but many of those things (well, certainly the first couple) didn't rely on the internet by any means.

And here's a pre-internet fact that I think is just huge. Our political system has been sucked more or less entirely into our entertainment system, and our entertainment system isn't what it used to be. Some of you may have heard of Tristan Harris who worked at Google and made a presentation to Google in 2013 about how Google was optimising or hacking the human brain to try and maximise advertising. That's not all bad, of course. It focuses people on trying to get you what you want, just as McDonald's and KFC are focused on that, and in the end it poisons you.

And so we have a fast-food culture. Welcome the equivalent in politics. We are immersed in politics as culture war. You more or less can't get anywhere in a campaign if you're not demonising your opponents and saying how great you are. That's the formula. And when we think about democracy, we are often sucked into an idea which I call magic sentimentalism, and here's how it works.

You know the disappearing lady inside the box? Now you see them, now you don't? That's done with the expression, "We the people, we're the good guys, aren't we?" and it's those politicians who are always misleading us. Trouble is, we vote for the politicians and they're misleading us because, in the words of Bernard Woolley in *Yes Minister* when Prime Minister Hacker says to Bernard, "It seems that the civil service just exists to prevent politicians implementing the sacred promises they've made to the people," Bernard says, "Well, somebody has to."



And so, we the people, we feature as the good guys and then we disappear and then we appear again. And think of the republican debate. Remember there was a very strong line of logic - and I'm not trying to argue a particular position here, I'm just thinking of the underlying logic - remember how we wanted to elect our president? That was how the republican cause was derailed. The logic went like this: we're sick of politicians, we don't want politicians to appoint a president, we'll take that into our own hands, thank you very much. We'll elect the president. What do you think that would give you, given all the other people you've elected are politicians?

And there's a diagram. You know this argument by diagram, and I won't explain the diagram to you but it explains how we have an 18<sup>th</sup> century technology, which is voting on paper, and now we have the technology to have direct democracy and then we'll fix up everything.

I don't think we will. I had an interesting debate with Joe Trippi, who's a friend of mine - really one of the great democrat political campaign strategists in America - and he grew up in what became Silicone Valley. He was the guy who brought the internet to politics, the first guy to really crack the code with the Howard Dean campaign. If anyone's interested, I can tell you an amazing story about that, but I don't have time to tell you now. And in 2008, in a very brilliantly titled book, *The Revolution will not be Televised*, he argued that everything was going to get - the people were coming and they were coming via the internet.

So in 2008, this guy turned up and, of course, one of the ideas that he had was to hold a policy brainstorming on the internet. So the world is plunging into the greatest recession it has seen since the Great Depression in the 1930s and there was a policy brainstorming session which none of you - I expect almost none of you - have ever heard of. But there it was in June or July 2009, and everybody got to vote - anyone who wanted to vote - and they would argue out their case online and they could vote other people's ideas up and down, and what do you think came first? To legalise marijuana. And what do you think came second? Because second, something really important turned up as far as the thing that came second.





Now the third one, I have to admit, addressed a particularly American problem, which, of course, as you know, is alien abduction. So, keep that in mind when we're talking about we the people.

I want to take you through some very simple ideas about democracy by an economist and political philosopher, Joseph Schumpeter, another amazing fellow. Some of you may be familiar with him giving us the term creative destruction about innovation, but I'm not talking about that at the moment. What I like about these ideas is that they're very simple. I sort of only trust simple ideas, especially in an area like this.

Collectives act almost exclusively by accepting leadership. Think of the local football club. There are leaders in the local football club. I'm not really talking about the people on the field. I'm talking about the club itself. There is a president, there is a secretary, there is a treasurer and so on. And one of the things that we can think about here is that we're in unique times. So, Schumpeter's idea is that democracy is not the rule of the people; it is the competition within the ruling elite for the consent of the governed. His idea is that there is a middle class, if you like, a respectable middle class with different ideologies who will compete for the consent of the governed. So, his idea of democracy is that it is only possible where a strong elite is dedicated to public service and the rule of law.

And here's the thing. Our guys have given up. So, this is the Daily Mail owned by good self-respecting capitalists who rely on the rule of law to hang on to all their money, and that's the headline when the unanimous decision of the High Court of the United Kingdom disagrees with their campaign for Brexit. The same famous terms used - I don't know whether they knew this - by Stalin in the Stalinist purchase.

Here's the *Daily Telegraph* in Australia, and this was the execution of two brown-skinned Australians in Indonesia: how terrible it was. But this is power without responsibility because five years previously they'd gloated about how they were going to be executed. That's power without responsibility. That's the class that Schumpeter put his hopes in to keep democracy functioning.

So, can we do without responsible class leadership? We're going to have to find out, because they've pulled the plug out from us.

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So, what I take from Schumpeter's basic idea that collectives need leadership is that we do need a cognitive elite. We do need people who make it their business to understand about things and try to put them right, because otherwise we are simply in chaos. And we might be able to do with the Officer for Minimising Chaos, or whatever they were called.

The second idea is this: consider a person who's paying too much rent or is worried about how much their housing is costing them. There is a private realm and a public realm. I am not telling you that the private realm is more important than the public realm but they're very, very different. In the private realm, we go through the paper, we look where - well, I could live a bit further out. That would involve these costs in terms of my time and petrol money and so on and I'd have to get up earlier. So, we work things out in a very pragmatic way and in a way that we have experience with every day.

If I have to vote for a party and I think my housing is too expensive, do I vote for a rental subsidy, do I vote for rent control, do I vote for or against negative gearing? It's very hard to know. I can't give you very good answers to those questions. Economists have got some pretty strong hunches in some areas and not much idea in other areas. So, thinking about how we vote is a much more abstract business. And here's the thing - none of us have an incentive to vote for private benefit because the chances of changing the outcome are infinitesimal.

So why do we vote? We vote for expressive reasons. Our emotions make us - bind us to the idea of voting in the same way that emotions bound together communities. That, of course, means that politics carries very strong emotional messages and we need to attend to the balance of emotions - a point made recently by philosopher, Martha Nussbaum. She makes the point rather intriguingly via a discussion of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. I'll let you look that up because it's fun and it's easy. You can actually get the whole chapter on the net.

Anyway, she talks about two different kinds of emotions: emotions inspiring worthy collective projects requiring effort and sacrifice and emotions of protecting the fragile self by denigrating and subordinating others. No prizes for guessing which of these two emotions travels most easily in our current political culture.





Here's Abraham Lincoln. He was the politician par excellence of the first kind of emotion. Here's Winston Churchill, a good version of the second emotion or at least the fight - the emotions for fight story. And here's somebody else who used emotion as well. So, I'm going to give the one type of emotion a feminine colour there, the colour of the suffragettes (purple), love and care, and fear and fight (there's Winston), and fear and hate (somebody else).

And then I'm going to talk to you about what happened in the Austrian election. In the Austrian election, a party called *Meine Stimme Gilt* (which is interested in some ideas that I'll put to you in a minute), part of its methodology was to serve, in a scientific way, a representative sample of Austrian citizens. They gave them the 26 portfolios of government and they asked them to say, of all these portfolios, which is the most important for your politicians to focus on over the next four years when you vote them into the parliament (or the congress or whatever they call them in Austria. I really should know, shouldn't I, but I don't.)

And guess what came first? If you can read that, you'll also need to know German. They're cool names. Anyway, *bildung*. I know enough German, which is almost nothing, to know what *bildung* might be. It came first. It was education. And what came fourth was *immigration*. Yes, you can probably guess that one too. Immigration. Now, I have to admit that they came quite close in a numerical sense, but education came first. What do you think the election was about? It certainly wasn't about education, because you can't get into the papers talking about education.

So, the election was about immigration, and we all got into our corners and there was the usual political war, which was who could misrepresent their opponents more egregiously. Although in that case perhaps it wasn't misrepresentation. I don't know.

So, another little test for you. Who do you think said this, because this was on a famous day in Australian political history? "It was quite a joy to hold the little kids' hands and watch them smile." Any ideas? That was the first quote that came out of the Children Overboard scandal, and that was the second quote [on presentation]. That's what we remember. And those are two emotional messages going into our political system, one in order to be wiped out by the other.



I think there are a whole lot of issues here and in other countries which are stuck. They're stuck for the fact that they're difficult, that they're abstract, that they are capable of being stopped by highly emotive one-liners. Our democracy is stuck on all of them, although it is making some progress. More slowly than one might hope, in some of the areas.

So, if we assume that we need small groups of people who are representative of us, there are two ways to do that. One is elections. Can anyone think of another way to represent the people in small groups? We actually do it in our society right now. Jury duty. Exactly. We can represent them by sortition or by random selection, and one of the important things of random selection is that, if you select people at random - certainly for a small group like a jury of 12 - you will want to get a large consensus, if not unanimous than 9, 10 out of 12 at least, to be confident that this isn't a statistical artefact.

So here are two ways of representing the people. And let me give you some sort of quite shocking facts. Election is a boutique idea that sort of - well, it happened in a very corrupt way in the parliaments of Europe, rotten boroughs and so on, and then gradually got cleansed through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I'm thinking particularly of England. But in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, you had the French Revolution and the American Revolution, and one of the main things they all agreed on was they certainly didn't want democracy.

Aristotle and Montesquieu had said that elections were aristocratical. In other words, they're a form of merit selection, and so they went with that idea. And also there were property franchises and all kinds of things.

But selection by lot had, of course, existed in Athens and most of the government was run by the boule, which was 500 people selected by lot. They were the guys that ran the government. There was an assembly, the ecclesia, which had room for 6,000 people to turn up and met once a month, I think. But selection by lot was preserved - has a much older lineage and it was preserved through the renaissance in Venice, Florence and so on.

And here are some different characteristics of representation by election. Aristocracy reformed. It is aristocratic, as I've said. It's competitive.



This is a really big deal and a sort of a logical fact that I came upon which really - as I said to you earlier, when I run into a simple fact I really listen hard - it is that you don't get to be a politician under an electoral system without beating another politician. That is what you have to do and, once you've won and you go into the chamber, you go and fight the other side. That's all you do as a politician.

So, is it that surprising that this particular kind of fast-food culture has got us so polarised, so wound up, so overwhelmed with the evil and stupidity of people we disagree with? And by contrast, this method is much more powerfully, and I would use the word jealously democratic.

The Athenians ran the only jealous democracy the world has ever seen, and what I mean by that is that it was run in the teeth of oligarchy. They understood their democracy to be something which was designed to be resilient against oligarchs, and it's very difficult to drive corruption and power when people are chosen at random. Think about that. People's political careers cannot be hacked by the powerful.

And here's this word which I discovered, an ancient Greek word: *isegoria*. There are two words in Greek, ancient Greek, which one of them corresponds or is translated as freedom of speech. That word is *parrhesia*. It in fact means - it's closer to the meaning of speaking truth to power. We do not have the word *isegoria*. *Isegoria* doesn't mean freedom of speech. It means equality of speech. And one of the reasons people vote for Pauline Hanson is that they want to hear their way of speaking spoken and they don't want to have their speech policed by people. So, this idea of the equality of speech is very important, I think.

There is a movement to try to establish the idea of sortition or selection by lot as a means of participating in politics, and I will talk to you a bit about what that looks like and the sorts of impacts that it has.

Firstly, people are incredibly enthusiastic when they come out of these things. About over 90% of people think they're good, having participated in them. About 85% of people think they're fantastically good. Here are some quotes. Again, we think of politics as activism. We think of it as an inherently oppositional, as hostile, and yet it's ultimately got to be about cooperation and coming to common views, and that is what is presented in a jury.

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You're not there to win an argument. You're there to arrive at a conclusion with other people, and that has tremendous power particularly because it addresses the right part of the fast-food menu, if you like. We evolve to cooperate in groups. We're incredibly good at that. Better than pretty much any species.

The other thing that happens is that, when people go into these processes, their opinion of politicians rises, because they see how difficult it is to do what politicians do. Their opinions of bureaucrats rises strongly. There's one group for whom the opinion starts off low and falls further: the media.

You may not be able to read this but something like over 90% of people who've been through this process say, before they know the answer what will be decided, that they will respect the decision that is made. Think about Brexit. Think about Trump. Think about whether that is a situation that confronts our democracy.

I'll skip that. I want to focus on how views change. Here's deliberative vote polling on energy in Texas. One finding was that the people were happy to invest for the future. Not only were they happy to invest it for the future, pricing for poorer citizens went up as a consideration. Here's a diagram which was 'Would you be willing to pay more for wind and solar energy?', which rose from 52% to 84%. And the actual amount that people would be prepared to pay more for was actually not much. It was just enough to make a huge difference to the incentives in the energy system.

At a UK national health deliberation in 1998, there were substantial majorities before and after deliberation in favour of increased government spending. Positive and protective attitudes towards the NHS, the National Health Service, as an institution increased through the deliberation. Those who agreed that governments should pay for everyone's health care went from 58% to 75%. So, I hope I'm conveying to you the idea that this is an environment in which people start to understand that we're in a community and that everyone has to try and get on in that community.

I'll leave that one aside.



This was in Bulgaria. We went from a minority to a majority to close special schools for gypsies. You can imagine how good those schools might be. Kind of Brown versus Board of Education in Bulgaria.

A quick travel through Oregon. Now, Oregon has citizens-initiated referendums, that great marvel of direct democracy usually hijacked by wealthy people. What a surprise. But a real chestnut for citizens-initiated referenda is mandatory sentencing. So, there was a mandatory sentencing referendum and it was supported by 70% of people in Oregon. It actually sounds quite like reasonable mandatory sentencing. Again, if somebody wants to ask me about it later, I'm happy to tell you what it was. And there were 70% in favour. In Oregon, since 2011, part of having a citizens-initiated referendum is having a citizens' jury sit on the referendum question and provide public advice to all people in Oregon before they vote.

The citizens' jury, we can presume, were roughly 70% in favour - 24 people - roughly 70% in favour of this mandatory sentencing going in. As they learnt more about it, (they) swung away from it and ended up voting 21 to 3 against it. That was enough not to swing the final vote between yes and no but certainly to produce a large swing against the vote in favour. That's an attempt to characterise some of the types of swings in the literature. I won't go into that now.

I want to just spend the conclusion giving you two - saying two more things. The first is, I want to suggest to you how we could actually build this into our Constitution.

The second is - to backtrack from that and say - that I thought that was kind of one of the more important parts of what I was talking about a year or so ago. I realised that - I mean, apart from anything else - getting something in our Constitution is pretty hard work. We're not very good at it. But secondly, what it does is it ends up that everybody's doing little citizen jury exercises. I want to argue the case for embracing sortition, embracing the idea of selection by lot, as a form of activism, and I'll say what I mean about that in a minute.

But my idea about how you could put this in our Constitution is that we have a chamber chosen by sortition. A good number for that chamber is 227.



That's the number of parliamentarians we have in the House of Representatives and the Senate. And the goal would be to have those two houses and then also have a citizens' house with representation by lot. You could also have it replacing the Senate, but that makes it harder, and the Senate does some pretty useful things.

And I would give this chamber powers like the House of Lords, which would be to delay legislation by a certain amount. I would also give it a very sneaky power - I had in mind the way in which we abolished carbon pricing. The power is this: that if the people's chamber decides that abolishing carbon pricing is a bad idea by a super majority of, say, 60% or two-thirds, it can impose a secret ballot on the other chambers. I'm very confident that we would not have had carbon pricing passed through our parliament if that was the case.

But I want to talk about sortition as activism because I think this is a way that we can go out and grab this kind of politics in a much more active way. The best example I can give you is in the United Kingdom we have very good evidence that, if you hold a poll - well, the polls are sort of all over the place on Brexit but plenty of them are still around about 50/50. As you know, the vote was 52 in favour of Brexit, 48 against. We also know via two mechanisms - a deliberative poll in 2010 and a much more recent citizens' assembly - that, once people deliberate and understand more about this, there is a swing from about 50/50 to 60/40 against. I think it would be fantastically good politics for the anti-Brexit forces, who are now fighting quite hard, to raise about a million pounds and hold 10 citizens' juries simultaneously around the country and to demonstrate that fact to everyone else in the country. I think that would be pretty good media candy. I think it would get a lot of coverage, and I think it would showcase a different way of doing things, a calmer way of doing things, and so on.

And there are a whole range of ways in which we could use sortition. Some people in this sector will have problems with ethics committees. When I was at the Centre for Social Innovation, I eventually asked people to give me a trigger warning when anyone said ethics committee. Ethics committees are very bizarre things which sit as bureaucrats over people who are trying to help things and adjudicate on their ethics, usually in all kinds of bizarre ways.





What I suggested was that, instead of having an ethics approval process - well, that we have one - it be just a random selection of the target group. We'd say, "We're planning to do this," and they'd go, "Yeah?" You'd go, "Well, is that all right with you?" and they'd go, "Yeah." So, I won't say any more about that.

I will put this to you. Who knows what that picture is? I don't suppose you will. But that is the extraordinary event that happened on Christmas 1914, when the Germans and the allied troops - it's just unbelievable, really - stopped killing each other and started singing Christmas carols and giving each other gifts and were hounded back into their trenches.

So, imagine if you couldn't go to a war except with a vote, a strong vote of a citizens' chamber. Is that not fair? Imagine if, during the Greek crisis or right now in Brexit, if there was a group of ordinary people who were tasked and paid to be part of this process. We would feel a lot calmer about it because we would feel less spun to. We would feel that people like us were in there trying to learn what they could learn.

So, here's a list of topics that might be worth exploring as areas where your sector might consider sortition and might consider taking the political fight - the political conversation - to groups of ordinary people from the community.

I will leave it there with an old cartoon of mine. There you are. Thank you.

ENDS

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