



New populism

A biblical critique



Phil Anderson

Phil Anderson has been co-ordinator of the UK National Prayer Breakfast and former Leader of the Opposition on Thurrock Council, a top tier local authority. Phil's new book *Nation in Transit: A Manifesto for Post-Brexit Britain* is published by Muddy Pearl.

And the winner is ...

Does anyone remember Jedward? The hyperactive twins with the big hair and zany personalities shot to fame in 2009 by coming uncomfortably close to winning TV singing competition *The X Factor*. This despite one rather obvious limitation: they couldn't actually sing. However, John and Edward Grimes did have charisma: they came across well on camera and audiences warmed to them. Their controversial success became self-fulfilling; people would vote for them just to see what song they were going to destroy next week. Chief judge and millionaire music mogul Simon Cowell clearly hated them, which gave them a kind of anti-establishment appeal. With all these factors going in their favour, their evident lack of competence as vocalists somehow seemed not to matter.

Jedward made it through seven rounds of headlines before finally being eliminated from *The X Factor*. It launched their careers as performers and TV presenters, and they remain one of the show's most financially successful acts. Can you remember who went on to win that year? Nope, me neither.

Fast forward to 2016 and Jedward's success seems strangely prophetic. Across the Western world, that same combination of charisma, controversy and anti-establishment appeal above competence is still enabling people to win the public vote. But these contests aren't TV talent shows. They are the democratic elections which decide who will shape the future our nations.

Turning backs on the middle

They used to say that elections were won from the centre ground. A succession of British leaders like Tony Blair and David Cameron came to power by softening the positions of their parties to appeal to more moderate voters. But over the last few years those moderate voters seem to have evaporated, not just in the UK, but across the Western world. Wherever you look, the politicians who are grabbing headlines and votes are those who reject the established consensus on both economic and social issues and offer something rather more extreme.

You would think that figures like Trump, Le Pen, Tsipras and Corbyn have little in common with each other. But in spite of their differences it is clear that they are being lifted on the same political tide. All have built their success on personal charisma, addressing packed rallies of adoring supporters. All have an equally large body of opponents who regard them with fear, anger or contempt, and this controversy generates the oxygen of publicity that sustains their reputation in a media-dominated age. All are seen as anti-establishment and outside of the political mainstream, having either started new political parties or come from the fringes of existing ones. None of them attract votes for the plausibility of their political agenda; even their own parties seem to have grave concerns about whether their promises could actually be delivered. But like Jedward, what they do have is that elusive political 'X factor'.

The new populism comes in at least three different flavours. First on the scene were the hard right, who blame most of society's problems on outsiders. They claim that open borders have damaged the economy (by exposing it to global competition), put strain on jobs, communities, housing and public services (by letting in too many immigrants), and harmed security (by going soft on radical Islam). Then after the financial crisis came a resurgence of the hard left. They point the finger of blame at the economic system and a wealthy global elite who have disproportionately benefited from it. They make clear and specific promises to protect workers and provide generously funded public services, backed up by rather more vague plans to make someone else (usually the rich or foreigners) pay for it all. Finally, the recent French presidential elections saw the emergence of a third version which might be called the 'radical centre'. Politicians like Emmanuel Macron actively embrace globalisation and liberalism, and blame stale political elites for holding the nation back from fulfilling its potential.

Although some of the new populists certainly borrow from the traditional language of right and left, it is increasingly clear that what we are seeing is not just a re-run of post-war political divides. Parties such as the SNP and UKIP in Britain freely combine the nationalist rhetoric of the right with the anti-austerity and protectionist messages of the left. The left traditionally found its supporters among the white working class, who are now those most likely to respond to the anti-immigration messages of the hard right. Wealthy educated professionals who traditionally supported the centre right are now just as likely to found voting on the left. Political commentators are suggesting that the new divide is between 'open' and 'closed'; those who see opportunities in a globalised world which favours the educated, mobile and self-reliant versus the more traditional and in some ways more vulnerable who are most threatened by it. Another characterisation is 'somewheres' and 'anywheres'; people who are anchored in a particular community and tied to its possibly uncertain future versus those whose lives, assets and qualifications are more portable and feel able to pursue opportunities wherever they find them.

Why would anyone vote for that?

Political commentators have looked at the success of the new populists with frank bemusement. Before the election they generally downplay their chances: 'Their ideas clearly wouldn't work, so we can't see that many people will actually vote for them.' Wrong. After the election they expect that the unexpected victor will be forced to moderate their actions when faced with the realities of political power. Wrong again. Not only have leaders like Tsipras and Trump set about trying to implement their campaign promises word-for-word, in Tsipras' case they have managed to be re-elected even

after making what for anyone else would have been a humiliating climbdown. Tsipras was eventually forced into accepting the harsh bailout terms for the Greek economy, which he had campaigned against. However, rather than punishing Tsipras, voters endorsed him at the ballot box. He may have largely failed, but at least he tried.

This points to one of the key changes in the new political landscape. Empathy now Trumps competence (pun intended). Politicians used to make their pitch based on how good a job they would do of managing the economy and the affairs of state. In today's environment, the most important thing is to persuade voters that you understand and sympathise with their concerns. Unless you can prove that you 'get it', you aren't even really in the race to do something about it. In recent elections Trump and Corbyn were both successful in persuading a significant portion of the electorate that they understood their grievances and would speak and act on their behalf.

The things that are making us unhappy are pretty universal. We all want security for ourselves and our families; that includes protection from crime and violence, and access to decent healthcare when we are sick. Despite the strident claims of our materialistic culture, research backs up the idea that money does not make you happy. It is, however, fair to say that poverty makes you miserable, so people do expect enough prosperity to ensure a basic standard of living. Perhaps the biggest driver of happiness is the quality of our relationships. Stable families, close friendships and strong communities are what matters most, and your number of close relationships is a far more reliable indicator of life satisfaction than the size of your bank balance.

We have entered an era when all of these things feel under threat. Jobs are insecure, houses unaffordable and public services are creaking. Family break-up and community breakdown are at an all time high. The reasons seem complex and international. It's far easier to pick on a single cause or group as a focus for the anger and frustration. Why grapple with unappealing and difficult-to-explain complexity when you can simply blame the problem on 'immigrants', 'bankers', 'Europe', or 'the Tories'? This politics of grievance is leading us towards a divided society and a polarised politics, at exactly the moment when unity of purpose is most desperately needed.

Salt, light and camel knees

We all have our own political views, and that's fine. Or is it? In an era where political ideas are becoming wedded to divisive and insular tribal identities, complete with their own messianic leaders and social media echo-chambers, it might be time for re-think. As Christians we have two key callings to the world of politics and government. One is to be salt and light in the world, including the political world (Matthew 5.13-16). The other is to pray: for

Notes

1. cf Proverbs 29.18

our friends, for our enemies, and for rulers and those in authority (1 Timothy 2.1–2). More than ever, we need to work out how we are going to live out these callings in our own generation. What might that involve?

1. *Being light – the work of the prophet*

In the Old Testament, the prophets were called to stand slightly outside of the political system. They ‘spoke truth to power’, often at considerable personal risk. To be the light the Church needs to follow in that prophetic tradition.

the Church needs to follow in the prophetic tradition and speak truth to power

One function of light is to expose darkness. Although the vast majority of politicians choose to get involved because they want to make a positive difference, there is always a risk that proximity to power can corrupt those good intentions. The cynicism and distain in which the public and the media increasingly hold them hardly helps; if no one will recognise that you are acting in good faith no matter what you do, then why even try? We need to hold our political leaders to high standards of integrity in their words and actions. In the case of the new populists that will mean a particular focus on truthfulness and divisiveness. Where people distort the truth to win the debate we must call that out regardless of whether we agree with their wider point or not. And where they respond to every issue by blaming ‘immigrants’, ‘racists’, ‘scroungers’, or ‘tories’ we must keep reminding them that these are not cartoon villains but real people, made in the image of God and deserving to be treated with respect and dignity.

Light also serves as a beacon. We have already seen that populism takes root because people are unhappy and desperately lacking hope and vision. ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish’¹ or turn to anyone who seems to offer them something to cling to. Do we dare to believe that the grace and wisdom of God has more to offer our society than division and anger? We should shine a light on Christian workers whose initiatives show the best of how community can function, Christian politicians who are making a positive difference by applying their faith, and Christian writers and thinkers whose creative insights offer the possibility of a better way.

2. *Being salt – the work of the counsellor*

If the Old Testament prophets usually stood outside the political system, the counsellors exerted their influence close to the seats of power. Joseph and Daniel became senior officials to foreign kings, while Hushai and Ahitophel gave their advice in the court of King David. Their

roles were effective because they worked from inside the system. This meant that they had to accept getting their hands dirty in the day-to-day business of government, and were constantly faced with difficult choices. How did Daniel decide to go along with the imperial policies of Babylon and to learn the idolatrous ‘language and literature of the Babylonians’, but to draw the line at eating meat offered to those idols or backing off from his practise of visible public prayer?

While the prophets often spoke through dramatic set-piece confrontations, the counsellors had influence through a day-to-day relationship of trust. A whisper from a trusted friend registers louder than a shout from outside; it was true then and it remains true today. Does your local MP have your number in their phone, and will they pick up when you call? The Christians who can answer ‘yes’ to that question are those who have chosen to invest the hours in knocking on doors, delivering leaflets and sitting through local party committee meetings. They have had to deal with the tensions of working in a political party not all of whose policies they can support, but in the process they have brought a distinctive salty flavour of godliness to whatever they have touched.

3. *Prayer – the work of the intercessor*

James, the early church leader, was said to spend so long in prayer that his knees became as hard as those of a camel. The Old Testament model here is that of the priest, whose principal role was to intercede before God for the people.

Many people will be concerned at some of what they observe from the new generation of populist politicians. They look at Le Pen and Farage and fear for a divided and prejudiced society. They look at Tsipras or Corbyn and fear for economic and social chaos. Or they look at Trump and fear for the stability and security of our world. Some will angrily join an opposing tribe, which arguably makes them as much a part of the problem as of the solution. Others retreat into denial or cynicism about the whole system. As Christians our first calling is not to take to the streets or the sofa, but to our knees.

It’s easy to pray for leaders who you basically agree with, but the biblical command to love your enemies requires us to find a new language of praying for those whose views we oppose. As an elected politician I would start by laying aside my hurt, anger, or desire for revenge. I would then ask God to bless my opponents in their health, their prosperity and the strength of their personal relationships. Finally, I would ask the Spirit of God to break in on their lives, trusting in him to do the rest.

All of us can pray, and many more of us need to get engaged with the world of politics and government than is currently the case. As I have often said to Christian audiences, if we aren’t willing to be salt and light then we shouldn’t be surprised if the world of politics seems dark and unsavoury as a result!