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## The return of history: can liberal democracy survive?

JCPML Anniversary Lecture presented by Stan Grant on 19 July 2018.

It was Christmas Eve 2004, when my family boarded a train to China. Typically, I almost missed it. For years, it seems I had lived my life at a rush. That morning I had been on air for my last shift at CNN's broadcast centre in Hong Kong. I had been anchoring the morning news program since 2001, beamed out across the world to a potential audience of millions. But I was chafing against the limitations of the studio, I longed to breathe the air, go to where news was made. I wanted to swap the air conditioned comfort for the wind and the rain and the heat. I wanted to sweat. I wanted exhaustion. I wanted history. Now I had my wish: bound for Beijing.

The train was ready to pull out. The immigration official had just handed me my stamped passport and I pushed through the gate, dragging my carry on bag behind me. My wife and three young sons were on board; ahead was our journey into a new civilisation; a place of ancient thought, revolution, famine and war. The most populous nation on earth was about to welcome five new people.

The train trip was my idea. This was a ritual; I wanted us to savour this move. I didn't want the view from thirty thousand feet, I wanted to feel the earth beneath me, I wanted the view from the window. I wanted to see this land unfold and its people come to life. It was Napoleon who said of China: "let her sleep, for when she wakes she will shake the world". Now China was stirring.

It wasn't hard to convince my sons, they had just seen the movie the Polar Express. Their imaginations were fired by thoughts of the North Pole and Santa Claus. They hung their stockings on the door of their sleeper cabins and we all bedded down and drifted off to the rattle and hum of the railway tracks.

I woke up to a hard frosty morning, I wiped the condensation from the window and looked outside. In the distance was a Buddhist pagoda, the ground was bare and flinty. A man was working a plough tethered to a horse. It struck me then, out here in remote, rural China, this was not the West. There was nothing here that felt familiar. It mattered nothing to this man that it was Christmas Day. The birth of Jesus? Possibly, this peasant farmer having spent his entire life in atheist communist China, had never heard of him.

He was working his field, this day like every day, in his ancestral village, like his father and father before him. But around him his country was changing; what had been closed was now open, the world was coming. China was on fast-forward. Over the next few years, I would report it all: hundreds of millions of people lifted out of poverty; new cities built seemingly overnight; villages drowned to make way for new dams; high speed trains. I spent so much of my time in trains; I recall shivering in crowded unheated carriages with migrant workers heading home for Chinese New Year: migrants chasing the new China dream.

In my time in China, this old rural nation became an urban one. The sons and daughters of farmers, now danced the nights away in city bars. There was a new generation of millionaires, with gleaming new shopping malls to spend their money. Mao suits were swapped for Armani. Bicycles swapped for BMWs. Deng Xiaoping didn't actually say it, but he may as well have, "to get rich is glorious".

By the time I left China, a country that once could not feed itself, the so-called "sick man of Asia" had become a power to rival the might of the United States; with an economy on track to overtake America and a military primed to defend this newfound power. When I left, a new man had taken the helm; a man who modelled himself on China's revolutionary leader, the Great Helmsman, Mao Zedong; a man who is now President for life, Xi Jinping.

When I woke that cold Christmas morning on a train bound for Beijing, I was on a fast track into the future: a future where a decade later we would be talking about the triumph of authoritarianism and the retreat of democracy.

The China that I became immersed in, had been a long time coming. I could begin that journey and any point in the past five thousand years and it would be as fascinating, turbulent and bloody. I want to go back to a time of war, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a new global order was taking shape. In 1941 Japan occupied China and was unleashing a ferocious bombing campaign to break the Chinese resistance.

On December 7, 1941, the bombing of Pearl Harbour, brought the United States into the war in the Pacific. The allies now joined with the Chinese against Japan. But China was fighting two wars. While united in the effort against the Japanese, the Civil War between the nationalists – the Kuomintang – and Communists – was on simmer. What had begun in 1927, reignited after 1945. Eventually Mao Zedong would lead his Peoples Liberation Army to victory.

In 1941 Australia's future too was taking shape. We were at war. In February, 1942 Japan would bomb Darwin. Prime Minister, John Curtin, penned the words that would reset the direction of our nation. In an article in the Melbourne Herald, Curtin reset the trajectory of our nation, he wrote: "Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with Britain."

Curtin called America the "arsenal of democracy". A year later he would speak directly to the American people.

"On the great waters of the Pacific Ocean, war now breathes its bloody steam. From the skies of the Pacific pours down a deathly hail". He said.

He would go on: "It is to the people of America I am now speaking; to you who are, or who will be fighting; to you who are sweating in factories or workshops to turn out the vital munitions of war; to all of you who are making sacrifices in one way or another to provide the enormous resources required for our great task."

Curtin, looked to the spirit of America and made his blood oath.

"I pledge to you my word we will not fail. You, as I have said, must be our leader. We will pull knee to knee with you for every ounce of our weight".

To steal a line from former US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, - someone described as the most consequential American diplomat of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – John Curtin was “present at the creation”. Acheson was talking about the creation of a new world; a post World War Two global order helmed by the United States. Pax Americana, despite critics who equate it with American imperialism, embraced the strengths of multilateralism: the Bretton Woods agreement that set the rules and institutions of the international monetary system; the United Nations Security Council designed to maintain international peace; the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade that in 1995 was replaced by the World Trade Organisation.

The Marshall Plan, rebuilt Japan and Germany out of the ruins of war, turning old foes into new allies. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, was formed in 1949, forged a military alliance between North American and European nations to defend each other: as article 5 states, an attack on one is an attack on all. In 1951, Australia, New Zealand and the United States signed their own security treaty called ANZUS, a commitment of military cooperation, despite strains that have seen New Zealand suspended in the 1980s; the Australia-US alliance remains strong. John Curtin’s pledge of “pulling knee to knee”, holds.

This global order, was undoubtedly good for America. The United States, has grown to become economically and militarily, the most powerful nation the world has ever seen. Its influence has expanded via its soft power, and pervasive culture: we watch its movies; wear its fashion, drink its soft drink, and eat its food. People the world over have sought to immigrate and become Americans or emulate and become more like America. What was good for America was good too for those of us allied with it. The Post-World War Two economic boom, became known as the “Golden Age” of capitalism. During the 1950’s OECD (Organisation Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, averaged economic growth of four percent a year, and five percent a year in the 60s.

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was boom time for democracy. Germany emerged from the trauma of Nazism; South Africa threw off the yoke of apartheid; decolonisation across Africa and Asia created new free, democratic nations and in other parts of the world – Latin America and Europe – autocratic regimes were swept

aside. Between 1970 and 2010 the number of democracies in the world increased from 35 to 120: according to Freedom House – which measures the health of democracy – 63 percent of the world lived in democracies.

Democracy's appeal is obvious; as the Economist magazine in a recent essay, pointed out: "Democracies are on average richer than non-democracies, are less likely to go to war and have a better record of fighting corruption. More fundamentally, democracy lets people speak their minds and shape their own and their children's futures". It is worth recalling the words of Winston Churchill: "Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe...it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms".

By the beginning of the 1990s this American led liberal democratic order had triumphed over its great ideological rival, communism. Who could forget the words in 1987, of US President, Ronald Reagan, to his Soviet counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev: "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall". Indeed in 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. The Soviet Union was dismantled: on December 26, 1991 at 7.32pm the Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin for the last time.

In the United States, a little known State Department official, Francis Fukuyama, had been looking on and believed he saw not just a pivotal moment for the world; but the very zenith of humanity. He penned an essay published in the National Interest magazine in 1989, with the title "The End of History?". The original essay posed it as a question – "The End of History" question mark – but he followed it with a book, "The End of History and the Last Man" – the question mark was gone. To Fukuyama, the course of the world was set.

Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy may constitute the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution – the final form of human government". As Fukuyama wrote back then: "as mankind approaches the end of the millennium the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potential universal validity: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty".

George H.W. Bush, the 41<sup>st</sup> president: addressing congress in 1990, hailed a new optimism “free from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice and more secure in the quest for peace”. President Bush said a new world was “struggling to be born...a world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle”. Liberal democracy came to be seen as a *fait accompli*; those remaining hold outs would soon too be swept aside. In 1997, President Bill Clinton, lectured the Chinese leadership, saying its refusal to adopt liberal democracy put it “on the wrong side of history”.

Who would have doubted President Clinton? This was the age of globalisation; a more connected world; a more wired world. Borders and trade barriers were coming down; people and goods moving more freely. Europe would soon put aside its blood soaked history, to form a new union. But history is not so predictable, nor so easily tamed. With the vantage of hindsight, we can see how the triumphant West fell prey to hubris, with an unshakable belief in liberalism and its shibboleths: secularism, universalism, individualism tied to the power of the market.

The West went to sleep at the very time when its power and reach was at its height. Political scientist, Joseph Nye, - the man credited with coining the phrase “soft power” - in his book ‘The Paradox of American Power’, warned about the dangers of American complacency. After the collapse of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War, he said, the United States stopped paying attention to the world and turned their sights inward. Even those who did look beyond America, he wrote, “...became arrogant about our power, arguing that we did not need to heed other nations. We seemed both invincible and invulnerable”.

Political scientist and former Permanent Representative of Singapore to the United Nations, Kishore Mahbubani, in his new book, poses the question “Has the West Lost it?”. The short answer is not yet. But history is turning. The West he says has been at the forefront of history for 200 years, but now it must adapt to a world it no longer dominates. Mahbubani says Fukuyama’s “End of History” “did a lot of brain damage; having won the Cold War the West went on autopilot”. In 2008, journalist and political commentator, Fareed Zakaria, published his book “The Post-American World”: The United States was not vanishing, but other powers had risen to challenge it.

My career as a journalist has spanned this extraordinary moment in history. I have spent the best part of two decades outside of Australia, with a front row seat at the biggest events of our time. It has taken me from the mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan; to blood soaked markets ripped apart by terrorist bombings; to the fall of Saddam Hussein, I have peered into the closed world of North Korea; watched up close as apartheid fell in South Africa; saw the Peoples Liberation Army cross the border into Hong Kong as China reclaimed its territory; saw a new nation born in East Timor; saw a peace deal signed to end the troubles of Northern Ireland; and watched a nation mourn the death of Princess Diana that changed the British royal family. Three pivotal moments stand out: they have helped set a new course for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the rise of Islamist terrorism, the global financial crisis and the increasing power of China.

The attack on the US on September 11, 2001, was a devastating rejection of so-called 'western values', by a small but enormously influential, radicalised group of Islamists. Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda was weaponising religion – not the first time in history – and violently rejecting the ideals of universalism and individualism and secularism. It sparked a war on terror, that has spanned from Afghanistan to Iraq, and has morphed into new theatres across the Middle East; Africa and South East Asia: London, Brussels, Paris, Jakarta, Nairobi, Sydney are just some of the cities that have felt the reach of terrorism. It remains a war without end.

In 2008 the collapse of the big banks which sparked what has become known as the global financial crisis rocked the foundations of the liberal democratic order. On a personal level, economic collapse cost jobs and houses; more broadly as The Economist magazine pointed out

“The damage the crisis did was psychological as well as financial. It revealed fundamental weaknesses in the West's political systems, undermining the self-confidence that had been one of their great assets.”

People who lost their homes and livelihoods looked on aghast, as the banks were deemed 'too big to fail' – those who profited from a corrupt, exploitative system who rigged the game in their favour, signing up gullible vulnerable people to a complex

financial steel game – paid little or no price. The newly installed Obama administration bailed them out as people went to the wall. The global financial crisis has shone a spotlight on the growing inequality, to ordinary people the game looked rigged. The lifeblood of democracy is faith and trust; if people feel cheated; if governments fail to deliver on the promise of a better future; then the future of democracy itself is at risk.

While the liberal democratic west struggled; I was reporting on the China economic juggernaut. It was continuing to grow, defying warnings of imminent collapse while steadfastly; determinedly rejecting what we in the West call universal values. It has defied the march of history, adapting the bits of western capitalism that suit it but rejecting liberalism. Indeed, under Xi Jinping China is doubling down on authoritarianism. More than a decade ago, Historian Azar Gat, writing in the journal *Foreign Affairs* identified China's brand of authoritarian capitalism as the greatest challenge the global liberal order. As Gat wrote: "As China rapidly narrows the economic gap with the developed world, the possibility looms that it will become a true authoritarian superpower."

It is one of the ironies of history, that it was the power and ideas of the West that have underwritten China's rise. Historian, Niall Ferguson, says China has been the big winner of the liberal order. He points out that in 1980, China accounted for two percent of the world economy, now it is nearly 20 percent; more than the US and Canada combined. As America has been bogged down by war and financial collapse; the Chinese Communist Party could claim it has a better model.

It may be too soon, to imagine a China dominated world. The US counts scores of alliances to China's two: North Korea and Pakistan. But Beijing is expanding its reach, developing transactional relationships into Africa, Central Asia and the Pacific. It is extending its economic influence via the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank and its One Belt One Road initiative; a new Silk Road of infrastructure and investment covering more than 68 countries, 65 percent of the world's population and 40 percent of global GDP. It has been called China's Marshall Plan.



Kishore Mahbubani says the West has missed this, as it has missed the growth of Asia more generally from India to Indonesia. He says “the two critical decades that saw the return of China and India, the 1990s and 2000s, coincided with a period of maximum insularity and self congratulation.” For Mahbubani the trail leads back to Fukuyama and the End of History: “Western rulers fell in love with his essay and began to believe that their society had reached the top of the metaphorical Mount Everest of human development....”

Francis Fukuyama, at least in his original essay, did acknowledge the prospect that history would return. It is a part of his essay too easily overlooked. “The end of history, he wrote, will be a very sad time....In the post historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual care taking of the museum of human history.” He warned of a ‘nostalgia for the time when history existed’. As he concluded perhaps “the end of history will serve to get history started again”.

History is indeed back. Take a snapshot of our world, you would be forgiven for thinking we are edging toward the abyss: sleepwalking to catastrophe is how some put it. We have a nuclear armed North Korea; a belligerent Russia renewing talk of a Cold War; the threat of conflict in the South China Sea; the spectre of fascism; resurgent populism; a return to hard borders; rising xenophobia; a retreat from global trade and refuge in protectionist policies; the potential fracturing of Europe. This is all played out against the drumbeat of anger: voices of resurgent nationalism; tribalism; sectarianism.

The very idea of liberalism that undergirds democracy is under attack. Freedom House, released a report “Freedom in the World 2015 – Discarding Democracy: the Return of the Iron Fist”. It found an erosion in civil liberties and rule of law, claiming that democracy was “under greater threat than at any point in the last 25 years.”

Countries have taken an autocratic turn. The political strongman is ascendant, tightening his grip in authoritarian regimes or consolidating power at the ballot box. Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan is cracking down on opponents and locking up journalists; Vladimir Putin jails his rivals; and Hungary’s Viktor Orban has transformed from one time student democracy campaigner to political demagogue,

who now boasts of his “illiberal democracy”. Add to that list Al Sisi in Egypt; Duterte in the Philippines and of course Xi Jinping in China. They each spin a seductive tale of national greatness, ethnic or religious purity, a narrative of historical grievance and a permanent enemy. Each promises to make his country great again.

Cue Donald Trump. He tapped into a deep wellspring of disillusion and resentment that took him to the White House. When he spoke of “draining the swamp”, he appealed to those who believed the Washington elite had abandoned them. Why wouldn’t they? These are the people Barack Obama had mocked as “clinging to their god and their guns”, and who Hillary Clinton labelled “the deplorable”. Trump, like populists elsewhere, has exploited the blowback against globalisation: those who feel they’ve lost their jobs and their country. His pledge to reopen factories and close up borders struck a chord. His appeal is to the worst fears of his nation. Where once Ronald Reagan spoke of America as the “shining city on the hill”, Donald Trump speaks of “American carnage” and so many Americans believe him.

President Trump has arrived at a critical time. He is both a product of democracy and to his critics a harbinger of its end. He vows to put America first at a time when American power and prestige is waning. Trump could appear to be set on dismantling the liberal order: he has publicly humiliated allies; questioned the future of NATO; withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council; pulled out of the Paris Climate accord; and walked away from the Trans Pacific Partnership, a critical plank in Obama’s pivot to Asia to offset Chinese influence. We have the remainder of this term and perhaps four more years after to see where the Trump presidency takes us.

Rather than being the architect of the retreat of America however, Donald Trump is a symptom. The unravelling has been underway for nearly two decades. George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq on the faulty pretence that Saddam Hussein held a store of weapons of mass destruction, and represented an existential threat, drained America of blood and treasure, and made the world more dangerous. Barack Obama, whose presidency spanned much of this time, was seen as a defender of the liberal order, but for all his civility, poise and eloquence – not to mention his Nobel Peace Prize – there is a case that Obama left the world in a precarious place: Islamic State had carved out a caliphate in Iraq and Syria; Iran and Saudi Arabia were locked in a

power play spilling over into a proxy war in Yemen; Syria was torn apart by civil war with Bashar Al Assad entrenched in power; Russia was reasserting its influence in the Middle East; Putin had annexed Crimea; China militarised the disputed islands of the South China Sea; North Korea became a nuclear armed power and the European Union began to come apart.

The Obama years began with a theme of hope. Remember his victory speech? “This was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and the planet began to heal.” His critics called that the “Moses speech”. Eight years later, those same critics, declared the Obama presidency a failure. In the sober minded journal “Foreign Affairs”, Harvard University’s Professor of International Relations, Stephen Walt, declared the Obama years “...a tragedy, especially when it comes to foreign policy.

None of these American leaders – leaders of the free world – exhibited the capacity, foresight, judgment and persuasion to successfully navigate a changing world. The challenge for the United States is not necessarily to preserve its hegemony with intervention or confrontation or obstruction, as Michael Mazarr, Rand Corporation Political Scientist, warns, that approach could accelerate US decline. He says America must learn to “navigate and lead a truly more diversified, pluralistic system that is materialising.”

Mazarr says, geopolitical rivals, Russia, India and China, are looking for a greater seat at the table. They have seen how the US has leveraged its leadership to exploit the global order to suit its ends; ignoring the rules when convenient. Vladimir Putin has long complained that the West insulted Russia after the Cold War: enlarging NATO into Eastern Europe and backing moves against Russian-backed leaders. Putin has warned of a “confrontation of visions on global governance” if the West attempts to “retain a monopoly on geopolitical domination”.

Joseph Nye says fears of China overthrowing the world order are exaggerated, China instead he says “has tried to increase its influence in it.” China has bolstered its contribution to key international planks of the global order; the UN, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank. Xi Jinping has said openly that China has been a “participant, builder and contributor” and stands “firmly for the international order”.

Yet, there is a paradox: while China has blended with the global order, it does not share its liberal values. It rejects rulings it does not like. Beijing feels the global institutions are dominated still by the US and western democracies. China, is establishing its own rival entities and networks.

US leadership, requires the ability to work with rivals while not abandoning its democratic principles. Evan Feigenbaum, a former high ranking State Department official, has put it best: for Washington, rebalancing power “poses an uncomfortable trade off between liberalism and effectiveness”. Feigenbaum says many contests of wills lie ahead, and the US will need to pick its fights more carefully. It begs the question: at what point does America say “this far and no farther”.

Pax Americana, if it is not yet over, certainly could go; just like Pax Britannica or Pax Romana. Geo politics has shifted; the West’s conceit was that China or post-Cold War Russia would become more like us, they haven’t. Political Scientist, Bruno Marques, writing recently in American Interest magazine in an essay titled “America’s Pivot from the West” said “America is bruised and disillusioned...looking for something less ideal”. Historian, Stephen Kotkin, in the journal Foreign Affairs, reminds us that “states rise, fall and compete with one another.” He says “great power politics will drive events, and international rivalries will be decided by the relative capacities of the competitors.” Richard Haas, president of the US Council on Foreign Relations, in his book with the ominous title “A World in Disarray”, argues that the disruptions of globalisation have challenged the “ability of the world to cope” at a time when American “share of global power is shrinking”. Last year the Economist magazine, carried a front page headline declaring China’s Xi Jinping the most powerful person on the planet.

As Pax Americana fades, there are those who fear, so too inevitably will democracy. The question is: what comes next? Democracy has been tested before; many historians draw parallels today with the rise of fascism in the 1930’s, then too it emerged out economic collapse, powered by a blow back against globalisation. Heed this, from Benjamin Carter Hett in his new book “The Death of Democracy: Hitler’s Rise To Power”: “for years he was constantly mocked and underestimated...(he) brought some unusual talents to the game. He had a rare ability to captivate a crowd

with his voice. Much less obvious to contemporaries was his uncanny intuition, his ability to read what people felt and wanted to hear, and to predict what they would do next”.

Sound familiar? Of course this isn't to argue that Donald Trump is Adolf Hitler, but it is a reminder that as a society we create our leaders. The media has been complicit in its elitism, its sneering and mockery, not just of Trump but his supporters. 1930s Germany was considered one of the most educated, literate, sophisticated societies on earth, but it was deeply damaged, still traumatised by World War I and the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler tapped into that national humiliation, as Hett says “millions of Germans retreated into conspiracy theories...that they were beset by conspiratorial cliques of communists, capitalists, Jews and Freemasons. Hitler could give voice to this flight from reality as could no other German politician of his time”.

Historian, David Runciman, says this may not be a re-run of the '30s; democracy may end in ways we cannot yet even foresee. He says it is wrong to see populism as anti-democratic, it is the essence of democracy, but it carries within it the seed of destruction. Runciman fears that it could lead to a hollowing out of liberal institutions. As he says “This is the crisis facing Western democracies: we don't know what failure looks like anymore and we have no idea how much danger we are in”.

Democracy is battling on multiple fronts; there are new challenges posed by ageing populations; digital technology; artificial intelligence – will robots get a vote? -; inequality; climate change; mass dislocation of people and forced migration. Social media presents new opportunities and crises: Facebook with two billion members is the biggest population on the planet and not confined to borders, ethnicities, economies, or faiths: it connects us but exposes us at the same time. Twitter has helped fire social revolutions but has also unleashed hatred and division. It is a place where the rules of civil discourse no longer apply; where people hide behind anonymity and unleash verbal violence and intimidation, free from the reach of the law. The safeguards of our society cannot keep pace with our technology. David Runciman warns that the threats to democracy may already be greater than democracy's capacity to withstand.

Harvard University Professors in Government, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, are concerned enough to have written a new book "How Democracies Die". Democracies die in war, they write, but they also die at the hands of elected leaders "Presidents or Prime Ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power." They worry about Donald Trump's attack on judges and the media and fear that the United States will abandon its role as democracy promoter. But, they stress, this democratic drift precedes Trump: "The soft guard-rails of American democracy have been weakening for decades."

So, in 2018, this is what confronts us: democracy and liberalism is being assailed from without and within. America is in retreat, led by a man who gives little indication that he even believes the so-called global rules based order. China is a viable challenger, soon to become the biggest economy in the world, extending its influence and building a powerful military. Authoritarianism is on the rise and a new wave of political leaders are exploiting a resurgent populism fuelled by fear, anxiety and xenophobia. Those who have seen their jobs shipped off shore, their factories shut down, who've lost their homes, and worry about losing control of their country to immigrants, have lost faith in institutions and politics-as-usual and are extracting their revenge.

It was part of the hubris of the "End of History" to forget that history matters. Identity matters. Language matters. Faith matters. Nations matter. In the giddy rush to an imagined utopian cosmopolitan world of universal values, the globalists overlooked those who cling to what Edmund Burke called 'the little platoons". Worse, they disdained them or mocked them as ignorant and bigoted. They stopped speaking to them and spoke down to them. When Donald Trump donned a NASCAR cap and scoffed down Big Macs, he connected. Yes, he was a billionaire but he spoke like ordinary people, he ate what ordinary people ate, he liked their sports and he looked authentic. When he said "America first", they liked what they heard.

At this instinctive level, Donald Trump, understands the politics of our age; even as thus far he displays little of the acumen to manage it. The leviathan is reawakened: George H.W Bush's post-Cold War dream of greater cooperation, is quickly being supplanted by big power politics that now threatens to define the age. The

conservative political journal "Standpoint" recently called this "Trump Doctrine": a return of sovereignty; the primacy of the nation state, that President Trump has said remains "the best vehicle for elevating the human condition".

I believe in cosmopolitanism; as a man who has lived in five different countries and reported from scores more, I confidently call myself a citizen of the world. Yet, I hear British Prime Minister, Theresa May, when she says, "If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what citizenship means." From the days of Athens, democracy has sat uncomfortably with citizenship: who belongs? The Athenians were defined by who was excluded as much as who was included. Cosmopolitanism, just does not speak to a Brexit or Trump voter, out here in Australia a Pauline Hanson One Nation supporter. If Western cosmopolitan, liberals, want to reclaim history, they will need to find a better story.

China has a story: Xi Jinping knows his people when he speaks of the "hundred years of humiliation" by foreign powers. Vladimir Putin touches something deeply held when he speaks of Russian nationalism, Russian Orthodox religion and lament for the glory of the Soviet empire. Recep Tayyip Erdogan tells a uniquely Turkish story; Viktor Orban knows what it is to be Hungarian. These are narratives that touch something in the darkest and most troubling parts of the national soul; yet all the more powerful for that.

The return of the power of the nation, is also the return of identity. Identity worries me. Hyper-Identity can kill. Think of Hutu versus Tutsi in Rwanda, Hindu pitted against Muslim in India, Palestinian and Israeli, Catholic and Protestant in Ireland, the internal Muslim blood feud between Sunni and Shia. Identity spawned in history and nourished on violence can exert a deadly hold.

Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has warned against what he calls 'solitarist' identities. He says, it can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world. When we divide ourselves, he writes "our shared humanity gets savagely challenged." At its worst the politics of identity appears to me like that line from Franz Kafka "a cage went in search of a bird." It is rigid and conformist. It is

policed by self righteous, moral and political guardians. Identity has its own orthodoxy; it imposes its own tyranny.

History is the breeding ground of the politics of identity. It is history as betrayal; a narrative of loss and inheritance robbed. American Political Scientist, Mark Lilla, has condemned the growth of identity politics as a cancer on democracy. He fears we are sacrificing the idea of shared citizenship. In his recent book "The Once and Future Liberal", Lilla despairs at how "Identity liberalism banished the word "we" to the outer reaches of respectable political discourse."

Lilla says it is a "disastrous foundation for democratic politics." America he says is in a "moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism's message"; it impedes progressive politics becoming a unifying force. He believes it cost Hillary Clinton the presidency and propelled Trump to the White House. White working class Americans, showed they can play identity politics too.

The potency of identity politics, is an attack on democracy from within; it can create an atomised, tribalised, fractured polity. It is another indication that the west has lost its way; it exposes a crisis of confidence. Criticism and skepticism are virtues of the West, it helps keep the worst aspects of nationalism at bay. But there seems to be an increasing tendency to apologise for Western traditions and overly qualify the success of the West. I understand that. As an Indigenous Australian, my family has been scarred by the worst of Western civilisation. Colonisation has been the handmaiden of Western civilisation. We have experienced the trauma of dispossession and dispersal; legislated discrimination locked us out of Australia and as individuals we have endured the daily wounds of racism. Yet, I can celebrate the fact that it has been this nation's profound liberal traditions that have put me here today. Indigenous people have fought through the courts and at the ballot box to find justice. The 1992 High Court Mabo decision; the 1967 referendum are powerful proof that the institutions of this democracy can work for us.

As an individual I have set my star by the values of the Enlightenment: the belief in freedom, in the power of reason, the universalism of humanity. Think of Emmanuel Kant's ideas of liberty, the foundation of enlightenment itself that we should strive to



live “free of the ball and chain of an everlasting permanent minority.” I do not overlook that these philosophers of the Enlightenment did not carry their own prejudice and outright racism, but their ideas shine greater than their failings.

In the words of French Philosopher, Pascal Bruckner, Western civilisation is ‘like a jailer who throws you into prison yet slips you the key.’ Tyranny, racism, colonialism, are part of the western tradition, yet that same tradition holds out the tantalising possibility of liberty. It is that very idea that is at risk in our age. It is also liberal democracy’s great last line of defence. It is liberalism that can speak of the equality of all, and hold despots to account. It is liberalism that can truly say government of the people, by the people, for the people.

Today all over the world people are asking again the question: what is a nation? French Historian Ernest Renan was grappling with this idea of history and identity more than a century ago. Renan wrote that nations seek a ‘collective identity’. Nation he wrote is ‘a soul, a spiritual principle’. But how to form a nation out of the conflicting stories of our past? It is a question that rings as loudly here in Australia as anywhere. Who are we? What do we stand for? Who belongs in our nation? What do we ask of each other? At a time when nations are seeking to redefine themselves and too readily looking to the darkest recesses of the psyche, we have a chance to speak to our better angels.

This past year we have seen Indigenous people present our nation with a unique opportunity; a gesture to find that elusive national soul. The Uluru Statement From the Heart, is a powerful affirmation of faith in our democracy. It seeks to locate Indigenous people in the heart of a constitution first written to excluded them. It emerged from negotiations across Australia culminating in the symbolic heart of this land: Uluru. It asks for a truth and justice process, a move to drafting a makarrata (a Yolngu word from Arnhem Land acknowledging making peace after a struggle) and it looks to blend the fundamental spiritual sovereignty of Indigenous people with the political sovereignty of the Commonwealth. Its key recommendation: an Indigenous body – a voice – enshrined in the Constitution to ensure Indigenous people some input into policy making directed toward them.

Consider its words: “We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country”.

A gift to their country. The Uluru Statement, is its own gift: the gift of a national story; a story that begins 60 thousand years ago and finds its fulfilment in the constitution of our nation. It encapsulates the group rights of the first people of this land, but holds too to the fundamental tenet of liberalism: the inalienable freedom of the individual, potentially releasing Indigenous people from the grip of inter-generational despair to give full flower to their own aspirations in this nation. The Uluru Statement is a remarkable document; coming at a time a profound statement coming at a time when democracy globally is in retreat. That it comes from those who have carried the greatest burden and felt the most estranged from this nation’s democratic processes makes it all the more extraordinary.

The Uluru Statement could have been an appeal to vengeance; it could have fed a narrative of grievance. It could have played to the worst of identity politics and sought to divide our nation. If it had it would deservedly have been condemned. Instead it seeks to bring Indigenous people closer to the Australian nation and bring Australians closer to us. The Prime Minister has rejected it as is his right, that is how it is supposed to work: democracy relies on persuasion and negotiation. But it has not diminished the Uluru Statements power, it is walking its way around the country, speaking to Australians. It will find its place. To borrow from Francis Fukuyama, it could stand as our “End of History” moment, completing our liberal democracy: one of the oldest and most resilient on Earth.

Last Christmas, my family was on another train. We were huddled up against the cold on the New York Subway. We were in the United States for my youngest son’s basketball tour. He is in love with all things America: it is where he sees his future. This Indigenous boy from Australia, believes in the dream of America. John Curtin looked to America in a time of war, and the new order he helped form has shone a great light on the world. For my son’s sake I hope that light does not dim.

I am heartened by the words of the French political writer and diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, famously travelled to America to encounter that nations experiment in democracy – he saw its vices and virtues – but as he wrote: “Democracies always look weaker than they really are: they are all confusion on the surface but have lots of hidden strengths.”