



The Lost Art

As I believe I may have mentioned on a previous occasion, I listen to a lot of podcasts. One of these is a British podcast called The Rest Is Politics, which is co-hosted by Rory Stewart and Alastair Campbell.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with these gentlemen, Rory Stewart was a Conservative MP from 2010 to 2019, who served in several junior ministerial and Cabinet portfolios. Stewart resigned from Parliament in 2019 after his failure to prevent both Brexit and the accession of Boris Johnson to the Prime Ministership, and has subsequently authored a best-selling book about his time as an MP, Politics on the Edge. Alastair Campbell is a journalist who was formerly Director of Communications during the Prime Ministership of Tony Blair, and is now the editor of the journal The New European. Campbell has published widely on politics and public policy, is a public advocate for improved mental health and addiction services, and was expelled from the Labour Party in 2019 after publicly voting for the Liberal-Democrats in protest at Labour's response to the Brexit referendum.

Both Stewart and Campbell are formidably qualified to co-host a podcast on politics. But both are "outsiders" in the sense that they have both left the political arena (though not wider political discourse) because of clashes between their personal convictions and the direction in which political culture and public policy has been taking in recent years.

Stewart in particular has suffered because of his principled stand on issues. While, politically speaking, I would disagree with Stewart on many issues, listening to him in both the podcast and in many interviews he has conducted since the release of his book, I get a deep sense of the hurt he has experienced through his engagement with the political process, and his decision to act on the basis of conscience rather than party imperative.

For example, a couple of months ago, Stewart conducted an interview in which he criticised the expulsion of former Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn from the Labour Party on the grounds of Corbyn's alleged antisemitism (or alleged failure to deal with antisemitism within the Labour Party). Stewart decried the process that was utilised to effect Corbyn's expulsion, as well as what he regarded as the treatment meted out to someone who, after all, was a former Leader of the party and a significant figure in the party's recent history. In the same interview, while criticising Corbyn's policies on various issues, Stewart also acknowledged that Corbyn's opposition to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq had been proved to be correct, as had his stance on issues such as the corrections system, education, and poverty.

The result was a storm of invective and criticism directed at Stewart by figures from within both the Labour and Conservative parties, which included accusations of "supporting" antisemitism, accusations of "appeasing" terrorists, and claims that Stewart was acting out of "spite" because of his own "failed ambitions". Indeed, what was noteworthy about the response to Stewart's remarks was that little, if any, of it addressed the actual views he expressed; rather, the response was characterised by an ad hominem attack on Stewart himself that at times

assumed quite vicious and derogatory proportions.

One of the criticisms often directed at social media is that it consists of nothing more than "bubbles" in which people only see and hear the views and opinions they agree with, or which are sympathetic to their worldview. But given what happened to Stewart - which is only one of hundreds of documented cases of online "pile on" - can you really blame anyone for wanting to remain within such "bubbles"? A person makes an observation or expresses an opinion about an issue in a public forum – which opinion may or may not have “controversial” elements - and instead of receiving reasoned disagreement and principled dissent, they are subjected to an avalanche of online “outrage”. And the results have ranged from the uncomfortable to the tragic - people have lost their lives as a consequence of being "trolled" online.

It seems to me that, within our present culture of social discourse - both online and in the "real world" - we have forgotten the art, not just of debate, but of actually listening to what people say before we respond. And, it seems to me, that's because we have forgotten how to hold subtlety and nuance and complexity together. We have forgotten that seemingly contradictory realities can be simultaneously true about a person or a situation. Everything has to be cut and dried, true or false, black or white – the George W Bush “you’re either with us or against us” fallacy. We are more concerned with being right – or, more often, with proving the other side are wrong – than we are with gaining insight or understanding. We are more interested in shouting down and silencing others than in making them accountable or persuading them to our point of view. We are more concerned with occupying the moral high ground than we are with appreciating someone else’s perspective (irrespective of how wrong we might think it to be). We are more interested in accusing

and finger-pointing than we are with contemplating our own position and considering the possibility that someone else may be right (in part or in whole).

A careful study of the Gospels will show that, by contrast, Jesus always listened to those who approached him with questions or criticisms before he responded. Even though Jesus had some pointed - perhaps even harsh - criticisms to make of the religious and political leaders of his time, it was always after having first listened carefully to their question or criticism, and was always geared toward a point of justice or a challenge to unjust power. Jesus' criticisms, however strident, were never personal - indeed, to the extent that personal communication was involved, it was never an attack but an appeal to change course and re-orient life and human relationships toward covenantal relationship with God. The fact that Jesus continued to extend - and receive - hospitality from, among others, the people he criticised demonstrates both the listening and the non personal nature of his ministry.

Advent is often described as a "time of waiting". But what is often lost is the fact that this is not just passive hanging around, waiting for Christmas to happen. Advent is a time to take a deep dive into ourselves, to reflect on our own human realities and to consider how those realities interact with the other human realities by which we are surrounded. Have we wounded others, however unintentionally? Have we failed to listen as carefully as we could? Have we spoken before even giving the other a chance to speak first? The way that Jesus listened carefully to others before responding to them reminds us that Advent is not merely a time to pause and draw breath in preparation for Christmas - it is time we paid attention, too. Time we actively listened to the world around us - and to the still, small voice of God's compassion and understanding which,

while it might at times have uncomfortable things to say, nonetheless speaks to us from love and from having listened to us first.

Remember For Your Diaries

There will be an important Meeting of the Congregation following the morning church service on Sunday 3rd December. The agenda for the meeting will include:

Presentation of the proposed budget for 2024

Membership of the Church Council

Report from the Church Council on the future of the congregation.

- Tom Gay, Chairperson of the Congregation.

Halleluiah Chorus Concert

On Wednesday 13th December at 7:30pm, Ringwood Uniting Church will host a rendition of George Fredrich Handel's famous Halleluiah Chorus. But it won't be just any old concert - attendees will also have the opportunity to join in the singing of this Christmas favourite. For full details [click this link](#).

Presbytery Newsletter

The latest edition of the Presbytery of Yarra Yarra Newsletter is now available. Please [click this link](#) to read.

Salvation Army Christmas Concert

The Salvation Army's Melbourne Staff Band are holding a concert on Saturday 2nd December at 7:30pm. Featured guests include vocalist Alana Conway and Carey Grammar's Vivace Junior School Choir. For full details [click this link](#).

Blessings,

Brendan

