

From Tony Abbott's speech at the G20 retreat, Brisbane, 15/11/14

The brief speech can be seen here: <http://youtu.be/epjAMuS8Wo>

Tony Abbott, as prime minister of the host nation at the 2014 meeting of G20 leaders in Brisbane in November, decided to convene a little “retreat” for his guests one afternoon, in addition to the schedule of formal sessions, so the leaders could exchange some of their (presumably) more private concerns. He seems to have felt this would be welcomed by all, and kicked off with a brief introduction and a few remarks about the difficulties he had himself encountered as he tried to steer his country.

He chose to have the gathering in the old legislative council chamber of the Queensland parliament, a lovely old room upstairs. The legislators who once sat there reviewing the State's laws had been abolished along with all their functions a half century before. As he told his guests, this could be seen as an appropriate reminder of the way governors can be frustrated in their exercise of power.

His short recorded speech turned out to be most interesting. In those few minutes, he seemed to tell us more about himself than he had managed to do in hundreds of speeches and interviews delivered to his countrymen over the course of several years. It was as if “politics Abbott” (David Marr's incisive term) had fallen away, and we saw something of what had been hidden beneath that cloak. It felt slightly embarrassing, partly, I think because we couldn't help wondering what the other leaders must have thought of this unguarded persona, blinking in the light of public scrutiny for perhaps the first time.

He didn't lose a moment showing us what was on his mind. Power. He saw himself in a room full of power - one of a handful of people in the world in a position to exert it over millions. His theme wasn't the joy of wielding power, though, but the chagrin of not having enough of it; and in this complaint, he seemed to expect the full concurrence of his colleagues. And he appeared to be utterly oblivious to the deep irony of a democratic leader talking this way when some of the seats a few metres from him were oppressed by the backsides of the world's most potent autocrats. I've tried to find a correct frame for this little glimpse of his vision of power, and all I can come up with is this - it reminds me of the way power is understood in the Vatican. Absolutism justified by infallibility.

I thought I would list a few of the telling phrases he spoke that day, and try to extract some of their significance. A gruesome & nit-picking exercise, you might say. Well, there is this in its defence. If it turns out that our leader - and the cabinet and advisory group he's gathered around him - have a strange and fundamentally anti-democratic vision of governing, we had better know about it. So if you have patience, read on. Here is the list:

1. *our power and our authority is circumscribed*
2. *it was too much of a restriction on the power of the then premier*

3. *symbolises the limitations on our power*
4. *some of the most influential & powerful people in this world*
5. *to demonstrate to an anxious and uncertain world that there are people who know what they're doing*
6. *a plan for growth and for jobs ... that's our challenge*
7. *there is a better and brighter future for all of us*
8. *the limitations of our authority*
9. *the clash of policy and politics*
10. *the difficulty of trying to put good economics into practice given the political constraints we all have*
11. *the illegal boats*
12. *it doesn't matter what spending program you look at ... or how wasteful ... there are always some people who vote who love that program very much*
13. *important economic reform - important liberalisations*
14. *deregulate higher education ... less central government spending and more fees students will have to pay*
15. *we think this will free up our universities to be more competitive amongst themselves and more competitive internationally*
16. *but students never like to pay more*
17. *to try to inject more price signals into our health system*
18. *most Australians who went to see a doctor have been seen at no charge*
19. *explain the reasons as carefully as we can*
20. *gatherings like this affirm the importance of good policy*
21. *... importance of governments not over-promising things that are unaffordable and undeliverable*

The retreat was apparently his own idea - an opportunity for the delegates to speak informally about some of their immediate concerns. No doubt he was thinking of his

time as a seminarian, almost 30 years before. Television cameras recorded this short speech, although the rest of the proceedings were private. A couple of things about his presence and delivery struck me - the odd way his rhetorical style was exactly the same as when he's spinning yarns for us, his subjects, except that this time he appeared uncomfortably nervous. His usual impression of delivering pre-digested fiction in stuttering sentences with utmost assurance was spoiled by something diffident and a bit hesitant. The debating society reference to the symbolism of Queensland's old abolished upper legislative chamber seemed peculiarly flat, not least because of its obvious ambiguity - apparently unnoticed by the speaker. This unicameral government produced, after all, 50 years after the abolition, the most thoroughly corrupt State administration ever seen up to that time.

Then there was the strong impression of someone out of their depth. Not only could he not find a mode of address appropriate to that gathering, but he couldn't think of anything elevating to say. His need to complain about his ungrateful citizens appears to have easily over-ridden his judgement, suggesting a serious weakness of that faculty.

And then there were the several revealing hints - little windows onto his real attitudes, preferences and prejudices, usually papered over in the presence of his constituents ... and I had to wonder about the effect of this monologue on his colleagues in that room, many of whom, being old hands, would have read his signals as if they had been shouted.

1. *some of the most influential & powerful people in this world* He opened with this reference to the gathering as a collection of power and influence. Even though he later spoke of the leaders' capacity to do good, I thought this opening showed something about his true feelings. All politicians, of course, are fascinated by power - but in many different ways. This, and subsequent phrases, struck me as revealing a fundamentally authoritarian view of power - as something which ought to be possessed by the worthy, but which might also, aberrantly, fall into the hands of the unworthy. The implied purpose of politics, under this view, is to ensure that the good guys get the power. Opponents are not just people with different ideas, competing for the right to persuade, but enemies, to be defeated - crushed and eliminated if possible.
2. *our power and our authority is circumscribed; the limitations of our authority* Talking about the limitations of power and authority like this very much strengthens the feeling that this is a man with a Manichean view of the moral world. The players in his political world are characters from the moral one dressed in soldiers' garb, and only there to fight and win. John Locke's account of representative government, from 1690 is probably still the best we have. An elected government of representatives, Locke said, gains a temporary and revocable commission to execute the people's will. That is all. The "authority" Abbott speaks about, doesn't belong to the government at all, but to citizens. Someone who confuses these two things (as many do) is showing his authoritarian, anti-democratic bias. Abbott appears to be saying that limitations on his power are kind of affront; that by winning an election, he has been given a prize -

the ability to do just what he wants until he loses office ... and incidentally the privilege of using the office to hang onto power as long as possible.

3. *people who know what they're doing* This curious phrase can mean only one thing - that Abbott really and truly believes he somehow has a monopoly on the truth. Unless it is meaningless (hardly likely) it means *ipso facto* his opponents don't know what they are doing. The sequence of his ideas here is telling - first, unwelcome limitations of his authority, then we know best, then doing good. One could be forgiven for thinking of other systems of knowledge monopoly hand in hand with absolute power, specially the claims of the catholic church. You could also think of his effortless dismissal of a huge body of scientific results, and his vindictive treatment of people on the other side of this question - say, Tim Flannery. This monolithic conception of truth must surely have soaked into him during his catholic childhood and training - but it isn't uncommon elsewhere. It's what Isaiah Berlin had in mind when he suggested there were "hedgehogs" - people who saw "one big idea", and foxes, who believed in many things. The first kind need an immovable rock; the others thrive on chaos, motion and diversity. Abbott is nothing if not a hedgehog. But it is still a bit surprising to see his bias so openly displayed. It suggests the depth of his attachment to it, and the distance from consciousness. He is not likely to be persuaded, one would think.
4. *a plan for growth and for jobs* He appears to uphold a pure version of the belief that the natural world exists for us; that much of our worth is measured by our enterprise in exploiting whatever opportunities are found in our way; that settler lands are specially rich opportunities for doing this; and that perpetual growth - in the sense of indefinitely rising productivity - is not only the proper goal of economic activity, but the only guide to policy formation. Remarks like this make it certain that he is one of those who see the human world as something autonomous. It's origins, purposes, principles, and goals are all inherent - in other words it is "ordained", and doesn't require any explanation by anything prior, or superior - unless that is divine. No way could he be convinced that the human world - absolutely everything - is contained in the manifold systems of the planet's surface, and is bounded by them in its potential and obedient to its laws. This prejudice makes him an instinctive anti-environmentalist, and it would put him profoundly off-side with our developing ecological understanding. No limits for him.
5. *trying to put good economics into practice* What can he mean by "good economics"? Perhaps a couple of things are going on here. As a man of slogans, he undoubtedly means that the labour party always manages the economy badly; only the party of business can do it properly. Second, he may be simply saying that the neoliberal orthodoxy is just all there is; anything else is bad. He might perhaps have somewhere in his mind the loathing of his recently defeated opponents, and a black-and-white assessment that whatever they did - the opposite must be good. Who knows - there might even be something a little bit messianic about him; good economics might just be equivalent to "my economics".

6. *the clash of policy and politics* Seen like this, his problem of not getting his way with the legislature looks like a bunch of good guys who want to do good stuff, and know what to do, being blocked by a dysfunctional process. Democracy is getting in the way. We know about this because we've seen it before. It's Dick Cheney. It's everyone who thinks democracy is OK for getting us to the throne, but no good for getting things done. We remember that the people who don't care for the hard work of debate, the effort of regarding other views, the great skill of rational compromise - often, what appears to be their certainty is really a metastasis; it originates in some insecurity that will never be admitted. We don't need Freud to tell us that rectitude is a mask.
7. *the illegal boats* It seems incredible that he would utter this fiction in a company which could have pretty much zero sympathy for either his predicament or his success. As has been explained many times, there is nothing illegal about seeking refuge in another country. Calling the human targets of Abbott's rotten policy "illegals", as Howard started to do nearly 20 years ago, is just a lie. It seems Abbott has said it so often he's forgotten. He must have no idea the disgust and bewilderment the other people in that room must have felt at times on learning about his actions. Thick skin? Deafness? Arrogance? Who knows?
8. *some people who vote who love that program very much* We've heard this before too. It's Mitt Romney whinging about the 47% of bludgers; it's Reagan on welfare queens. Is it too much to suggest that the political/cultural categories implied here are very close to those of Ayn Rand - an unsentimental division of society into the deserving elite and the undeserving multitude who's proper function is to serve them. The distressing thing about this sort of talk is that it is both anti-egalitarian, and assured - as if the very idea of equal opportunity were unthinkable. It is perhaps at points like this that Abbott is at his greatest distance from the genuine folk traditions of our country. He usually keeps this bias better hidden, but it would not take too much revelation like this before the level of distaste for him became terminal in the electorate.
9. *important economic reform - important liberalisations* Calling the two measure he talks about "important economic reforms" is, well, more like delusion than exaggeration. Calling them "liberalisations" shows the way he feels about neoliberal (Thatcherite) orthodoxy. Since he has no economic expertise, or even interest, belonging to this tribe must be something to do with a larger orthodoxy - perhaps the set of people who think the world was made for men. It may be that his adherence to the neoliberal catechism has the same motive as his repulsion from scientific discovery. He needs to preserve a naive vision of the holy.
10. *free up our universities to be more competitive; but students never like to pay more* This ultra-simplistic proposition, I feel certain, would fail historical and empirical tests. The abject poverty of his argument cannot possibly have been lost on his fellow retreaters - he is saying that making degrees expensive will be good for universities and good for the economy. He's saying students are an ungrateful bunch who always want something for nothing. He may have been persuaded that because American universities are the best, their way of socking students must be the best. But this is

ridiculous. There are a host of complex reasons why the US tertiary system has the successes and failures it does - not the least of them is the vast inequality in that country, as well as the vast wealth.

11. *more price signals into our health system; most Australians who went to see a doctor have been seen at no charge* There is something disingenuous about these couple of sentences. It's hard to know if he massaged the truth to make it brief, or if he knew quite well what he was doing. The fact is, while he makes it sound as if Australian citizens get a free ride, he's only talking about the small fraction of the nation's health expenditure due to GP visits (about 80% bulk-billed); not specialist services outside hospitals; not investigative services like radiology, and not hospital services. Again, his proposal, when it emerged in the budget, offended the community's sense of fairness - something he seems unable to understand. It's as if his egalitarian gene had been switched off. Tony Windsor's story comes to mind. Apparently when they were negotiating after the 2010 election to see if the independent members would side with Abbott or Gillard, Abbott called Windsor and said to him "I'll do anything to get this job. Anything", or words to that effect. The story rings true. One can imagine him promising anything; justifying mendacity in the service of some higher principle. A man of principle - but only one.
12. *explain the reasons as carefully as we can* In view of his record, this is a curious thing to say. If there's one thing he's been good at, it's concealing his reasons. He must believe otherwise, but perhaps (just a guess) his catholic training is visible here too - a discipline in which defensible arguments can be found for anything whatsoever. Normally, in our cognitive processes, we have access to a kind of "bullshit alarm" - a sort of device that keeps a rough measure of the space between the operations of our rational, calculating mind and the intuitive one, so that if we found ourselves supporting some conclusion that grates too badly with our unreflective picture of reality, we take a second look. But people can be induced by training to mute their alarms. To those unaffected, the consequences can look strange.
13. *the importance of good policy* Good policy again. Again, no attempt at definition or defence. Just as if he expected his colleagues to agree at once. But surely, we want to ask, there isn't just good and bad policy, there must be policy that works for some but not others; policy you haven't thought of; policy someone else prefers; policy that has to be tested because it bears on a problem we never met before. It looks as if the habit of seeing everything in two tones affects just about everything you do.
14. *governments not over-promising things that are unaffordable and undeliverable* This is just an oblique reference to his opponents. He's saying labour always spends recklessly; conservatives should always manage the money.

Nowhere here is there any sign of what Mr Abbott considers to be a good society - unless you count his hints of a society composed of economic agents in unhindered competition. You would think this was the place to confide in his fellow leaders, and, since the cameras were rolling, to show the voters something of his vision - the one he's having so much trouble turning into law. A great chance to "carefully explain his

reasons". Instead, we see a man who appears distinctly uncomfortable. Out of his depth. Articulating things that were better said in a partisan gripe somewhere else; and completely at a loss to put together thoughts suitable for this great occasion, where, as he said, most of the political clout in the world was sitting in a circle in one room facing each other. Probably a bit surprised to hear their potency described in just that way.

Altogether, a remarkable little speech. It's just possible Abbott could grow into his role, given time, and perform more like a statesman - but I doubt it. What we see here looks very much like the real thing, and all there is. A man immersed in a monolithic belief system from his birth; who's ambition nearly carried him into the high offices of his church, and for whom politics became a kind of consolation priesthood. If I had to guess, I'd say there was no way he could ever learn to practice the art of democratic politics - not just because he's inflexible, but because he believes politics is about the exercise of power, not the art and practice of sharing it.

It wouldn't do to hold Tony Abbott responsible for things that were endowed with his personality, or things that came with his religion. Just the same, as a politician, he's obliged to find sources of judgement and action that aren't captive to his unalterable past. To know if he's done that, we'd look for signs of what he's learned by practicing his craft, studying political thinkers, and composing his own original understanding of what constitutes a good and just society, and what are legitimate means for achieving it. On the same day as the retreat, Barack Obama addressed an ultra-enthusiastic audience at UQ. It was very striking, at least to me, that the two men revealed such different qualities in respect of their accomplishments as mature politicians.

Quite apart from Obama's charm, you could sense a man who saw human potential everywhere - someone who knew in his marrow that the best and only way to release that potential is to make the field of opportunity as flat as you can. Equality as a core value in politics makes everything different. It means you favour interventions in the economy that remove or shrink systemic privilege; it means spreading educational opportunity; supporting the helpless and nurturing talent wherever it's found. And it means, to the greatest extent possible, including the whole community in various processes of government. It means repudiating every flavour and hint of that old anti-democratic fear - that the people are too irresponsible and fickle to govern. Egalitarians say: the remedy for that is not to exclude citizens from decisions, but to make them more capable of them. Authoritarians and elitists say: governors and magistrates know best; freedom for the governed comes with submission. Placing the two speeches side by side, you could hear this dialogue.

Unless I'm mistaken, an old issue, the principle of truth in politics - what circumstances warrant lying or omission; are there limits to justifiable untruths in the public interest; what if media are complicit in political lies? - has been discussed with more interest and concern since Abbott's ascendancy than before it. David Marr's fine Quarterly Essay last year concluded Abbott had decided years ago that a politician had to conceal certain convictions, and even parts of his policy agenda on a sort of "we know best" principle,

revealing them only when he had the power to execute. At several points in his retreat speech, you could sense a confirmation of this claim. At various times in the weeks before, he had spoken very firmly in support of the export coal industry, and listening to his speech in Brisbane I realised just how much duplicity this entailed.

You could take apart his coal position something like this:

- Australia should be mining and exporting as much coal as it can, for as long as it can;
- So every other coal exporter competing with us ought to be doing the same;
- It follows that CO₂ from coal combustion (the biggest single source) must rise globally;
- But Abbott is committed to an expensive domestic program to reduce emissions by a modest amount;
- He has repeatedly denied that he's a denier.

This logical quagmire is a consequence of purposeful lying - not innocent omission or fudging, but a deliberate intention to claim something untrue. It is simply not possible for someone to say we should burn all the coal we can, and also to say we need emission reduction, without lying. What should concern us, it seems to me, is that such shameless mendacity is so unremarked in our public discourse. Large sections of the media take it for granted, as if this is politics as usual. Of course it is not. It is Tony Abbott's special way of doing business.

It's often said, the Abbott government is ideological. But what does this mean? It's not easy to say, but probably what most people have in mind is something like this: the government is guided in its decisions by a set of principles, and a coherent view of large goals for policy; an ideology is a vision of society in the form of a program. Is that really what drives Abbott's government? Insofar as you could label the government's programmatic ideals, they are neoliberal. But neoliberalism isn't anything coherent; it's a pragmatic and shifting bundle of economic and cultural doctrines and prejudices, together with a recent history of political successes and failures. To be sure, its adherents share a pretty well known list of slogans and some cultural commitments - but these have a decidedly negative character - as Sam Tanenhaus said, modern conservatives are much better at hating than creating.

If this is an ideology, it is a hollow one. It accounts for intransigence and the cultural warfare that seems to be embedded in Abbott's rhetoric; it might account for the government's peculiar aversion to candour and its enthusiasm for "hot-button" style opinion campaigns. It certainly makes sense of the strange echoes heard in Canberra that sound just like some extreme US republicans. But can anyone find a credible story about Australia's future? Abbott may well turn out to be, as some have foreseen, the most incompetent and maladroit leader for a long time. It should not be too long before we find out.