

Don't Blame the Unemployed

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Professor Baume studied medicine at the University of Sydney, General Hospital, Birmingham, and as a U.S. Public Health Service Fellow in Nashville, Tennessee. He practiced as a gastroenterologist and physician in Australia from 1967 to 1974 and received his M.D. from the University of Sydney during that time. From 1974 to 1991 he served as a Senator for New South Wales. He held a number of portfolios, including Aboriginal Affairs, Health, and Education, and was a member of Cabinet. From 1991 to 2000, Professor Baume was Professor of Community Medicine at the University of N.S.W. He was on the Council of the Australian National University from 1986 to 2006 and was Chancellor of A.N.U. from 1994 to 2006. He has also been Commissioner of the Australian Law Reform Commission, Deputy Chair of the Australian National Council on AIDS, and Foundation Chair of the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority.

Did you know that the good food you have just eaten demands a quarter of all your blood for digestion and absorption, and this can lead to anyone becoming somnolent—in spite of anything that is done? That is why the post-prandial speaking slot and after-dinner addresses are so dangerous.

But what a distinguished audience this is. If one added all the higher degrees, all the titles, all the honorifics, in this room together with the many accomplishments of all the partners who mean so much, one is able to count so much talent and so much achievement—it is most impressive.

You, as members of the Royal Society of New South Wales, are enriching the communal debate and communal understanding. Your regular lectures raise topics that would not otherwise be raised and they provide platforms for worthwhile arguments that would not otherwise be heard. Your monthly meetings are valuable and worth attending. Where else would a mere doctor learn about beer, and botanic gardens, and Antarctic

photography? You are thoughtful and distinguished and contributing to society.

Let me put one—just one—serious proposition to you to start.

Let me first tell you a story. An Australian recently visited Detroit and called a taxi. When it came it was filthy. So he called another taxi. It too was filthy. Later he was told by American friends that people who drove taxis in Detroit generally lived in those taxis because they were too poor to live anywhere else.

Against the background of that story, will you now consider the unexpected Brexit result in Britain, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America, the election of Pauline Hanson to the Australian Senate, the rise of Marine Le Pen in France, the movement away from established political groupings here, and more?

Why has it all happened? Where is it leading? Why were they elected? And by whom? Well, let me try to guess.

They were elected properly under systems that we have designed. But so was Hitler elected. They were elected by people who were angry, people who had lost faith with established political parties, people who were under threat — as they saw things — people who were nostalgic for some mythical bygone era, people who were alienated, people who had nothing to lose and people who think that politicians do not care and do not understand. People who wanted to hear simple answers to complex and difficult questions.

They wanted to change the system and they had votes. They were not happy with the arrangements that exist. They did not like our values, or our society. They saw in those people they voted for some prospect for real change. And the movement they have started is not over.

More protest votes. More racist and anti-immigration votes. More votes for Pauline Hanson and her detestable views. Did you know that David Marr wrote an essay about her recently called “The White Queen”? It was a good title. But returning to my predictions: more votes for populists. More votes for one issue people. It will all continue.

Given all these things, and, in addition, given inequality, given lack of opportunity, and given political failure, why should the young — our young (our grandchildren and grand nephews and nieces) — comply? Why should they adopt the form of society we have and we have shaped and we have asked them to adopt? Why should they go to school? Why should they stay out of the workforce until they are fifteen? Why should they not die in despair from suicide? Why should they not try to change the society which cannot deliver to them what are not unreasonable demands for their lives? Why should they not be revolutionaries?

And we are creating or allowing to be created an ever more unequal society that the young might want to change. There is no justification for CEO salaries that are 300 times what someone on the factory floor earns, or what someone who delivers the mail is paid.

If there is no place for the young in this society, if there is great inequality, no hope, if there is systemic and systematic disadvantage, then they might try something different. It might be a fundamentalist society. It might be a totalitarian society.

Added to that: if automation proceeds — as it will — we are going to have driverless cars to go with the driverless trains we already have.

There go professional drivers. If clever robots can work 24 hours, then we do not need people in factories. There go manufacturing jobs. We all go to the ATM for money. There go bank jobs. You know about climate change. There go coal mining jobs. We do not need secretaries, or telephonists, or as many shop assistants as we did. There they go. Did you see the segment with Stan Grant last Friday? There went ward clerk jobs. There went many cleaning jobs. And so on.

Yes, there are going to be new jobs. Lots of new jobs. Lots of sunrise industries. But there are probably going to be fewer paid jobs overall, not compensated by new industries and the increased need for personal care workers. There are not going to be enough paid jobs to go around: let us accept that this is so.

Then the questions change.

Let us not blame people if they get no paid work. It is not silly for the union movement to propose a four-day working week. It makes the available paid work go around. How much they are paid for those four days

is another question. Let us teach people to use leisure productively, because they are going to have increased time and increased leisure. Let us encourage people to learn more. Let us encourage people to be carers: we are going to need so many more of these as the grey tsunami bears down.

But let us do something to welcome and encourage people instead of blaming them and stereotyping them. Trying to maintain the status quo without serious talk is not enough.

Now that is the end of serious talk. Let us be a little lighter and tell you what Parliament was like. Mind you, it is one thing to talk about how it was then: it is certainly different today.

You might care to know that in pre-revolutionary France some people referred to Versailles as "*ce pays ci*"—this special land—and politicians and their staff regard Canberra as much the same. They talk about minutiae, about what goes on in Canberra, about the relationships between certain people, and they think that those things matter and they think we are interested in those minutiae. Of course, they are wrong. We actually care about wider issues.

The first thing you might consider is that the Parliament represents the community that elected it. This is really frightening—or it should be: there are eggheads, like us, there are ignoramuses, there are racists, there are ideologues, there are conspiracy theorists, there are businessmen and women, there are slobs, there are average people, there are people of all sizes and shapes. There is Pauline Hanson and her horrible acolytes, there is Jacqui Lambie, there is Derryn Hinch, there is Cory Bernardi. They are all there. They were all elected properly. They each represent a constituency.

When I first went there I realised how little I knew about how politics worked. A word about political parties. A colleague once said that members of political parties were either: mad, lonely, or ambitious, or a combination of those things. That is a sad statement, and parties need to be different again: they used not to be like that. Actually, there were—and are—a few people genuinely interested in the country, But it was possible to meet all those types—the mad, the lonely, and the ambitious—through a couple of decades or so in Parliament and longer in one major political party.

I remember telling some parliamentary colleague on the phone that he was mad, and a few minutes later he put his head into my room and said, "I am not mad." He was the person who announced, when the issue of equal employment opportunity became important, that "a woman's place is in the kitchen and the other room." His wife, to her credit, left him because of that.

One time the then young Paul Keating made a strong speech against Sir Reginald Schwarz who was then the Post-Master General. It was a really strong speech—and Keating is good at vilification. Tom Uren (who had been a boxer) told Keating that in Changi prisoner of war camp Reg Schwarz had been beaten daily for his underlings, of whom Uren was one. Uren then told Keating that if Keating attacked Schwarz again, Uren would hit him. The old Changi ethos was strong. It went across the chamber. Political foes had this tie from when they were all prisoners of war together and they looked after each other in Parliament.

One of my seniors had been on the awful Burma railway and he was treated always with great respect by the other side of politics—and he treated those on the other side

with great respect too. That same senior person called me into his Sydney office soon after I had been pre-selected. He said: "Your job is to introduce people if asked to and give votes of thanks. Otherwise you are to be silent. Now, how do you take your tea?"

Which reminds me. My political patron John Carrick, now Sir John, had been in Changi as a prisoner of war. As a Minister he addressed a visiting Japanese delegation in Japanese. Apparently, the delegation knew his story and recognised prison-camp Japanese — and bowed very low.

The best remembered day in Australian politics was November 11th, 1975. It is told that Whitlam strode back into Parliament, saw the young Keating, a Minister for three weeks, pointed at him, and shouted: "Keating, you're sacked!"

On that fateful day, a message was passed down our ranks in the Senate at about 2.20 P.M.: "Don't let your expression change. Whitlam has been sacked. Malcolm is the Prime Minister. We are getting the Budget as quickly as possible. Pass it on." That is history as it is not known to most people. Had the Labor leaders in the Senate had prior knowledge of the events that day, the procedure they adopted would have been different and they might have won.

It is also recounted that just before a swearing-in, Whitlam met parliamentarian Barry Cohen looking morose. It transpired that Cohen — a Jew — lacked a yarmulke for his swearing-in. It is told that Whitlam took Cohen to his desk, opened a drawer, and said: "What colour, comrade?"

My own election took 35 days to be final. The Hare-Clark system is very fair but very slow. Actually, when it was final, we heard about it on radio through my beloved mother-in-law. My party never told me.

Many strange things happen in the Parliament. Bill Wentworth was one of the most intelligent men I ever met. He was brilliant. He was also too conservative for me. He was the driving force behind a uniform rail gauge for Australia and advocated a harbour tunnel ten years before others. People said he was mad on both issues. But they came to pass. Before he died, he told me that there had to be a tunnel from the Spit to North Sydney. It will happen too. But apparently when he was speaking once, someone, probably Fred Daly, borrowed a waiter's white jacket and stood behind him solicitously while he spoke about "reds under the bed". That resulted in Daly being thrown out. It was Daly who said: "In the great horse race of life, always back self-interest. At least you know it is trying".

Which reminds me. Once, in my medical days, the Prime Minister was ill and I was involved peripherally in his care. So, when, subsequently, I was elected, the only person I knew well — from the other side of politics — was the Prime Minister, and his behaviour towards me was always as impeccable and friendly as the treatment I got from Fraser and Anthony.

Some very strange things happened in Parliament. When I first went there I was told that there were three things new people had to learn then. They were: more people have talked their way out of Parliament than have ever talked themselves in; when the person in the chair stands up, you sit down; and do not eat the fish. Today that is not so — the fish is quite safe to eat.

I was also told that the people opposite were the opposition. If it was enemies you wanted to find, you had to look around you at people on your own side. The Senate committee system meant that I got to know a lot

of political opponents. They wanted many of the same things I wanted for Australia — they just had different ways of getting there.

Fred Chaney once told me a story about getting angry. Apparently, Doug Anthony, then leader of the National Party, told Chaney to get angry only on purpose. Just then there was a visitor and Anthony become very angry — thumping the desk and shouting. He turned to Chaney and winked. It was all put on.

Once as a minister I attended a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Melbourne. Someone had threatened to kill me and so my wife and I were transferred from our insecure motel to a secure suite in a hotel with an armed guard in the next room and our car was tracked by traffic and got all green lights. The strange thing was that our children were in Sydney and no one worried about *their* safety — except us.

There used to be bipartisanship on many issues. I recall that Neal Blewett wanted to bring in a beaut policy for the then fatal illness of HIV infection. It was possible for my side of politics to let it pass without comment — they “looked the other way” — and Australia led the world with that policy.

In the old Parliament House we had a bowling green and a bowling club. It was very democratic. At lunch-time we would play bowls with anyone who was there — often drivers and cooks and cleaners and attendants. We played bowls against many of the local clubs and had mixtures of people in our teams. The new Parliament House does not have a bowling green.

By the way, the theatre of Parliament is always in the House of Representatives, while politeness reigns in the Senate. After all, the votes in the House of Representatives are certain. Theatre is all that remains. That

is not the case in the Senate, which brings governments down from time to time.

There was another occasion — when I was a front bencher — that a health matter came up. My party wanted a certain amendment. Janine Haines from the Democrats listened to the argument and said “You’ve got me.” I reported to my party that we had the Democrats. Not so. The Democrats were not bound by a party whip. We had Janine Haines but no other Democrat.

One never ceased being a doctor in Parliament. Labor people came to me. Our people went to Labor doctors: they were making sure that confidentiality was observed. Of course, many others came — attendants and staff, for example. It was mostly for repeat prescriptions (which they often did not want their colleagues to know about), ladies wanted the pill, and so on. Occasionally we had real medical emergencies, one person had a nasty corneal ulcer, one person had a stroke, there were heart attacks, and so on.

Naturally, we charged nothing — not least because we would have been in breach of the Constitution if we had accepted Medicare rebates. It has to do with holding an office of profit under the Crown. In any event, we were drawing salaries because of our main job.

In the same vein, long after I had entered Parliament, the Department of Veterans’ Affairs wanted a report about a person who had seen me years previously, and the Department was willing to pay some money for that report. I provided the report but insisted that I was not paid, so the constitution was not breached.

The mail was delivered hourly, and hour after hour I watched a man who was obviously hypothyroid (a diagnosis that is missed easily, as Robert Clancy will attest) deliver

mail. Finally, it was too much for me and I intervened to get a blood test, which confirmed the diagnosis. Then I wrote to the local doctor and the man was treated. But the local doctor never acknowledged my letter.

Once, the President of the Senate became ill. He was Tasmanian and Labor, and one of the Labor doctors, also a Tasmanian—but from a different faction of the Labor party—insisted that I saw him so that no silly preselection questions would ever be asked. The Senate was then in a furious act of passing legislation at the end of session so the President was in and out of the chair minute by minute. It took about two hours to assess him. He had to go to hospital.

When I was first involved, community leaders—people like you—stood for Parliament, people who had good and worthwhile careers in the community in the years before

they entered Parliament. They often used what they had achieved professionally as preselection talking points. If people tried to bully professional people, those professionals could tell them to jump in the lake.

Today, alas, we have too many professional party apparatchiks who have done no trade or profession apart from practical politics. They understand the pre-selection process and how parties work. They “game” the system and get pre-selected. Parliament is the poorer with this change.

We want people who have had a successful career. Parliament was serious but it was fun, too. It is poorer, and many of our young think it is irrelevant, if people like you are not part of it—if you are not in there yourselves or vetting those who wish to enter Parliament.

So please enjoy your evening. And help run a better Australia.

