

COMMENT ON WAYNE SWAN'S "DEMOLITION MAN ABBOTT"¹

Once upon a time (the early part of the 19th century, to be precise) there lived two brothers named Grimm, who wrote *grim* fairy tales. These tales were intended to create fear in children in order to reinforce the moral lessons of the stories. Into the first half of the 20th century, parents continued to read these fairy tales to their children because they approved the finger-wagging lessons inserted into the stories. Keep your promises! Don't talk to strangers! Work hard! Obey your parents!²

By the second half of the recently past century parents began to move away from the notion of frightening their children into submission and replaced it with a variety "soft power" rewards and encouragements. Reason with the children when possible! Teach them to share! Show them that other modes of behaviour are in their best interests! Parents in the late 20th century also placed more emphasis on individuality for their progeny and less on conformity to a "manual of manners," as the Grimms viewed their collection of stories. So, did this "soft power" work? I cannot say for certain, but speaking for myself, I like to believe there are a better alternatives than deliberately frightening children in order to achieve a predetermined end. Somewhere, somehow there must be an undesirable payback for such treatment.

Apparently not everyone shares this opinion, but Wayne Swan appears to do so. His comments on the 2014 pre-budget spin indicate that he also recognises the consequence of creating fear within the electorate. Are Abbott and Hockey, therefore, a 21st century version of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm? To answer that in the affirmative would seem to stretch the comparison almost to breaking point, but nevertheless such a comparison retains limited merit. A closer analogy might be the words written by Aaron Sorkin for Andrew Shepherd, which was the leading character in the film *The American President*. Shepherd (the president) belatedly responded to his major political opponent as follows:³

He [Senator Rumson] is interested in two things and two things only: making you afraid if it and telling you who's to blame for it. That, ladies and gentlemen, is how you win elections. You gather a group of middle-aged, middle-class, middle-income voters who remember with longing an easier time, and you talk to them about family and American values and character.

That may not be adequate to explain fully the result of the last federal election in Australia, but it was nevertheless a relevant influence. Wayne Swan's main point, as I interpret it, is that elections may be won with such a scheme, but it is not the way to run the country. This lesson did not come from the Grimm fairy tales, but it nevertheless seems to be shared as widely: pre-election rhetoric and post-election politics appear to be polar opposites.

¹ Wayne Swan, "Demolition Man Abbott Swings His Wrecking Ball," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 May 2014. Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/demolition-man-abbott-swings-his-wrecking-ball-20140507-zr6by.html>.

² Thomas O'Neill, "Guardians of the Fairy Tale: The Brothers Grimm," *National Geographic*, 1999. Available at: <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/grimm/article.html>

³ "The American President (1995) Quotes" at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112346/quotes>.

How did this incongruence come about? Various possibilities exist, but one is of special interest here. Rodney Benson suggested in a recent essay in *Le Monde Diplomatique*⁴ that partisan media were dominant in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, but were then “overshadowed by mass-advertising supported newspapers and regulated audiovisual media, dominated [in the USA] by the big three national television networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, which adopted a bland, objective style to maximise audiences.” This changed with cable-based media in the 1980s. The market became segmented as a result of the greatly enhanced set of choices, and one among the participating media emerged as the supreme content provider for each segment. For example, according to Benson, the right-wing Clear Channel Communications had a virtually monopoly with American talk radio and Fox News had great drawing power with Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity.

The partisan media may have initiated this process of market segmentation for political news, but it is also possible that partisan audiences already existed and chose to give recognition only to like-minded sources. This, then, gave additional power to the partisan media to make extreme partisans “more extreme ... and more convinced that their beliefs are the correct ones.”⁵ The question as to how the process started – that is, which is the egg and which is the chicken – is less important than the consequence: that the process quickly became self-reinforcing so that partisan media became instrumental in assembling and informing like-minded people and, perhaps more importantly, inhibiting them from switching to other segments of the partisan media spectrum.

In applying this to political parties, Abbott-in-opposition relentlessly carved four ideas into commandments: no new taxes, no more debt, no surprises (and no excuses) and stop the boats. Each appealed to a segment of the partisan media-users, and each segment developed a set of paradigms that became increasingly inflexible over time. The political appeal to segments supported a majority of votes without having a coherent and homogeneous set of voters that could be used to define the majority. Yes, there was a mandate, but it reflected w-percent favouring “no new taxes”, x-percent “no more debt”, y-percent “no surprises” and z-percent “stop the boats”. It is quite possible that no individual in Australia would accept those four percentages as representative of his or her preferences. That alone creates problems in defining the electoral mandate. Even more disturbing is the possibility that the voter-segment with a principal interest in any of the four “commandments” is so inflexible as to make the relevant issues non-negotiable. These people may refuse to be part of an effort to reach a consensus and may refuse to contribute anything in defining the mandate.

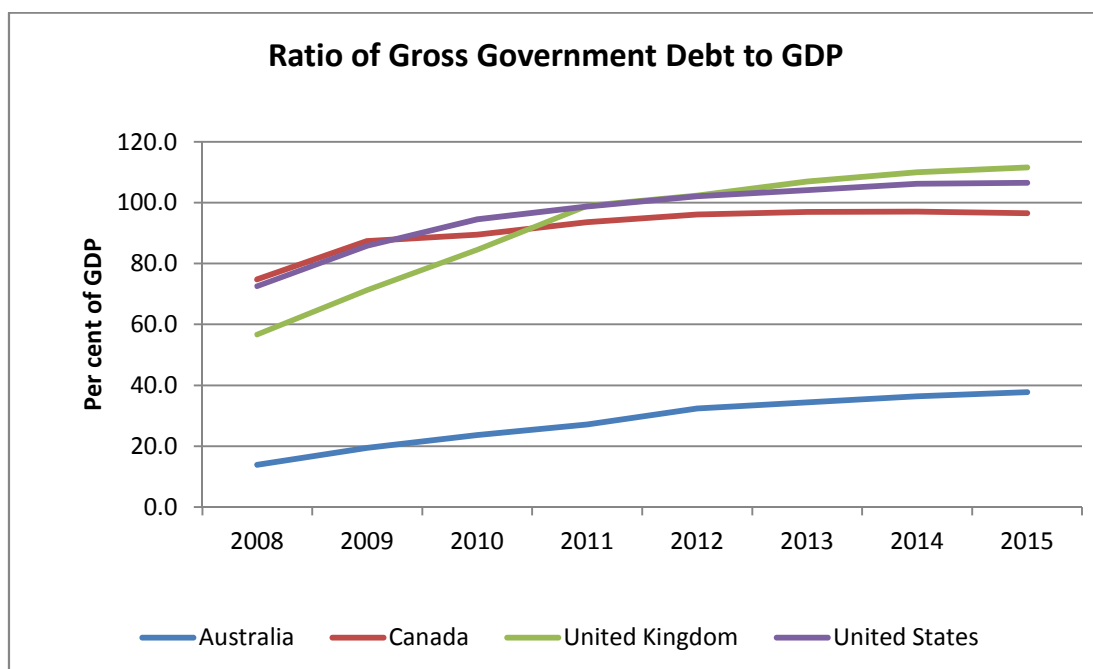
This suggests that voters expect the impossible. They want election promises to fit into their pre-existing world views without caveats, and when the promises are cast into concrete they tolerate no exceptions. This places at least a portion of culpability onto voters, which is not what Wayne Swan was trying to do. He placed the overwhelming responsibility on Tony Abbott. Is Wayne correct, or does this analysis override his views?

⁴ “Listening for the News You Want to Hear: Partisan Media,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, English Edition, 1 May 2014. Available for subscribers at: <http://mondediplo.com/2014/05/13information>.

⁵ Benson attributes this statement to Matthew Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarise America*, University of Chicago Press, 2013, which I have not read.

Representative government in Australia requires that citizens participate at least to the extent of electing members of the Australian Parliament to represent them. This delegation of responsibility and power is necessarily based on incomplete information on the issues requiring government attention, since otherwise participation by citizens would be direct and complete. There would be no need for a representative government if full information were available to all voters. With representative government voters cannot know what they want as final outcomes of the political process, since they lack sufficient information to make that choice. They therefore depend on the “front line” for this information – political parties and the media. The former have been selective in what is communicated to the public and the latter have increasingly structured and formatted the information to suit their own purposes and not necessarily those of the public. The “front line” is becoming a fortress of fear factories.

What can we do about it? For a start we can accept the possibility that those who succeed in being elected to form government will always be inferior in governing, and those who would be superior in governing may never get elected. Then we have something on which to focus. Second, we can resist the fear factor by thinking for ourselves and relying less on political parties and the partisan media. To offer an example, the electorate was hammered continuously about Australia’s “debt crisis.” If someone were to ask: *what debt crisis*, the likely response would be: *what planet have you been living on?* Consider what we can collect as factual information and form an opinion from that. The chart below shows government debt as a percent of gross domestic product (GDP) for Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA using data from the OECD. Australia clearly stands alone (see the blue line in the chart below). If we have a debt crisis, then the other three nations would appear to be on rocket ships to outer space.⁶



⁶ This may alter substantially with projections beyond 2015, but that is another matter to be taken up later. It should also be noted that the OECD data are taken from *gross government liabilities* and these numbers will differ from *net government debt*. The citation for the source is: OECD (2014), "Government Debt", *Economics: Key Tables from OECD*, No. 21. doi: [10.1787/gov-debt-table-2014-1-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/gov-debt-table-2014-1-en).

Canada's increase in the ratio has been flatter than Australia's since 2011, and OECD's projections suggest that the ratio for Canada will peak in 2014, while Australia's will continue to rise in 2015. But Canada's peak is estimated to be 97.1 per cent of GDP in that year, compared to an estimated 36.4 per cent for Australia. That is a huge difference and if anyone tries to convince you that Canada has a more enviable debt position than Australia you can hopefully respond by ignoring it as an obvious attempt to panic and confuse.

Why do the fear-creators persist in their efforts? Because, as we noted from Aaron Sorkin, the ploy is to find something to make voters afraid and then find someone to blame. That, we said, was the way to win elections. But Abbott won the election. Why is he still trying to "win" it? Wayne Swan seems to suggest it is because Tony Abbott is hard-wired as the demolition man. Perhaps so, but it may not be that simple. The focus of this comment is on the Swan's concern about the fear that was being stirred up prior to budget night; but there are other factors.

For example, Ross Gittins published a critical opinion⁷ of the Australian Labor Party for its short-term opportunism in opposing "Joe Hockey's deficit levy – no matter how watered down it is ... – and his intention to resume indexing the petroleum excise on the basis of no stronger argument than that their broken promises." In March, Deborah Orr made a similar comment about the British Labour party:⁸ "Poor Ed Miliband. He is neither the problem nor the solution. Instead, he's the inevitable product of a Labour party that doesn't know what it is or what it wants. That's the problem. The Labour party doesn't know what it's for any more, and it has ended up with a leader who doesn't know, either.

Deborah went beyond placing some of the blame on the opposition party and suggested that the lack of a socially responsible private sector is also part of the problem:

The paradox of left-right politics is that only a socially responsible private sector can render an ever-expanding public sector unnecessary. The party that wants the public sector to be smaller is the party least likely to tackle social irresponsibility in the private sector. The party that sees itself as the champion of a large public sector, removes from the private sector much incentive to feel responsible for those it employs. Each party has an inbuilt inability to deliver on its goals, and the electorate no alternative but to see-saw between the two of them. When one party breaks away from this wretched game, both will have to. So far, unfortunately, there's no sign that either will.

It appears that Deborah's see-saw between political parties and Sorkin's fear-and-blame are two sides of the same coin. Perhaps we need a new coin, not new sides to the old coin. Older ways of thinking are no longer effective. For the past 50 years critical inquiry was viewed as a major element in the search for truth and knowledge. However, as noted

⁷ Ross Gittins, "Labor Sells Principles to Fight Deficit Levy," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May 2014. Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/business/labor-sells-principles-to-fight-deficit-levy-20140511-383of.html>

⁸ Deborah Orr, "Workers Are Treated with Contempt: This Should Be Labour's Focus," *The Guardian*, 29 March 2014. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/29/workers-treated-with-contempt-labour-miliband-deborah-orr>

recently by Michael Roth,⁹ if carried too far critical reflection may become a fetish in which disbelief becomes an end in itself and is used as a display of intelligence. This, as he puts it, “depletes our natural resources” by limiting the capacity to replace that which we have debunked. The new element, according to Roth is “ongoing, pragmatic learning that finds inspiration in unexpected sources, and increases our capacity to understand and contribute to the world — and reshape it, and ourselves, in the process.” It is easier to say that than to do it, but saying it at least appears to be a promising start.

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11 May 2014

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This document was amended on 14 May to include the last three paragraphs.

⁹ Michael S Roth, “Young Minds in Critical Condition,” *The New York Times*, 10 May 2014. Available at: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/10/young-minds-in-critical-condition/?hp&rref=opinion>.