

Trojan-horse issues

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By promising a Supreme Court that would overturn Roe v Wade, Trump persuaded the Religious Right to vote for him despite unapologetically flaunting every moral they espouse. With the confirmation of Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, he has kept his promise. But the real agenda has nothing to do with abortion.

Politicians long ago learned how to stoke and harness popular and often divisive concerns to divert public attention away from their failings and to push other, more partisan agendas, usually as a means of securing their grip on power. You might call these Trojan-horse issues.

The Trojan-horse issues we see today arguably trace their lineage to Richard Nixon. When Nixon came to power, the issue of the day, the Vietnam War, was not going well, so he sought to divert popular attention by invoking the “patriotism” of what he then called the “Silent Majority”: conservative, high-turnout voters who pitted neatly against the noisy, mostly progressive protesters against the war and America’s conduct of it. This dove-tailed with his Southern Strategy, winning over voters who were unhappy about the Civil Rights legislation passed by Lyndon Johnson a few years earlier.

Nixon’s “Silent Majority” later became conflated with the “Moral Majority”, a movement founded in 1979 by Jerry Falwell, a Baptist pastor. Its socially-conservative agenda represented a backlash to the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s, and although observers at the time quipped that it was neither moral nor a majority, it effectively mobilised conservative Christians as a political force - especially in the traditionally-Democrat South, later dubbed “the Bible belt”.

To the patriotism of the Silent Majority, the Moral Majority added religious themes and what it called “family values” to the agenda.

The religious agenda advocated Christian prayers in schools and a literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis, and encouraged Jews and other non-Christians to convert to conservative, or fundamental, Christianity.

Family values entailed promoting a traditional idea of the nuclear family, opposition to anything the Moral Majority deemed to be anti-family, opposition to state recognition or acceptance of homosexual acts and strict prohibition of abortion.

Meanwhile, patriotism, which had started as a reaction to counter-culture and resentment of national humiliation in Vietnam, now generalised to a sort of “anti-pacifism”. The Moral Majority duly opposed the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks.

They also opposed the Equal Rights Amendment.

During the 1990s, the idea of patriotism further evolved to emphasise a (selectively) original interpretation of the constitution. Ignorance is bliss, and the Moral Majority

blissfully ignored the awkward fact that their religious agenda directly contravened the constitution's First Amendment: the separation of church and state.

A direct descendant of the Moral Majority, the Religious Right pushed the religious agenda hard and by 2000, with the economy in good shape, the issues were the defence-spending "peace dividend" resulting from the collapse of communism, and the gap between rich and poor, which continued to grow despite reforms to the welfare system carried out by the Clinton administration. George W. Bush ran on a platform of compassionate conservatism, but much of the campaign seemed to be a contest of how devoutly religious each candidate was.

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By 2004 the over-bearing issues were the Iraq War, which was way over budget both in blood and treasure, the gap between rich and poor, which continued to widen, and mounting concerns about climate change. To divert attention, the presidential election campaign was directed to narrow, "moral" issues, such as abortion rights, and a proposed amendment to the constitution to allow gay marriage.

The result of that election highlighted another urgent problem that was being overlooked. The Electoral College system, a legacy of the slave-owning era, gave some states more weight relative to their populations than others in determining the outcome of Presidential elections. The bias in this system meant that George Bush won in both 2000 and 2004, despite having garnered fewer votes than his opponents did. A number of attempts over the years to correct this bias have failed, and public debate has been largely absent.

A similar anachronism skews the composition of the Senate in favour of rural, typically conservative, states. And cookie-cutter congressional electoral districts, often designed by self-interested state legislatures and ratified by state governors, as well as restrictive voter-registration practices, endorsed by state governors, ensure a sharply-polarised lower house systematically biased against urban voters.

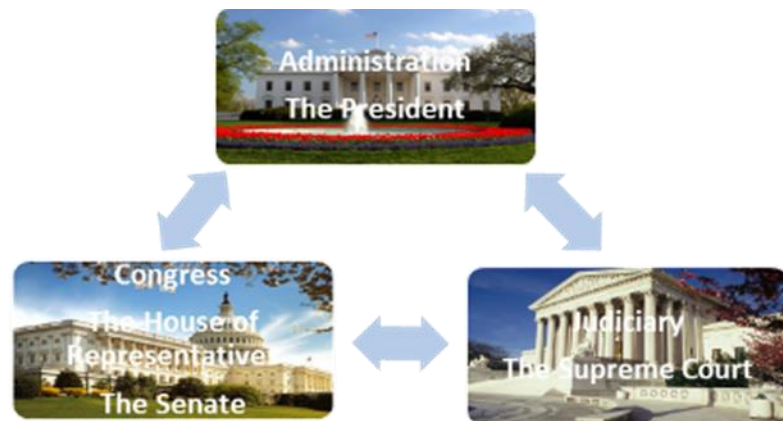
A President who claimed that God spoke to him (was he hearing voices?) made a mockery of the separation of church and state.

Thanks to opposition to gay marriage and abortion, and Electoral College bias, the President was now free to implement a giant tax cut that main-stream economists agreed was both economically irresponsible and favoured the rich at the expense of the less well off.

The government also accelerated offshore drilling for oil, including in ecologically fragile areas. Nothing to do with the right of homosexuals to marry each other, but plenty to divide the electorate and aggravate inequality and climate change - and line pockets.

Fast-forward to the 2016 election of Donald Trump. The urgent issues were - and are - climate change, an increasingly menacing geo-political landscape and still-growing, even accelerating, gaps between rich and poor; not to mention Mr Trump's questionable honesty and at-times murky business dealings.

Psephologists were perplexed by the support of the Religious Right for a thrice-married reality TV staple, serially-bankrupt, with a record of questionable business practices, and who boasted of his bullying of small businesses he had dealt with, as well as his sexual abuse of women. How did he win their support? By promising them draconian, if unrealistic, action against immigration, especially by Muslims, and a Supreme Court that would over-turn the constitutional right to abortion. Anti-immigration rants were peppered with hysterical claims about mounting crime rates - despite plain evidence that crime was falling steadily in every part of America. Once elected, Trump was free to play havoc with the checks and balances that had been carefully built into the constitution to protect the rights of ordinary citizens, in particular the independence of the judiciary.



The Supreme Court was set up as the politically-independent branch of government to counter-balance the political branches of the Administration, or Presidency, and the bi-cameral Congress, comprising the House of Representatives and the Senate. In appointing Neil Gorsuch, and later, Brett Kavanaugh, Trump and the Republicans have stacked the Court with partisan Republican judges, and because judges are appointed for life, this bias will persist for a generation or more. Whereas, with Bush as its instrument, the “patriotic” Religious Right mocked the First Amendment, the blow dealt by Trump to U.S. democracy is much more damaging, and lasting.

By further entrenching Republican control over each branch of government, Trump and his cronies can help themselves to the public purse with impunity. They haven’t wasted any time: The Economist [21 July 2018] reports that Mr Trump and his retinue spent almost a third of 2017 staying, at public expense, in Trump properties; while a working weekend at one of his Scottish golf courses, during which he managed 18 holes of golf, cost the American tax-payer \$70,000. It also reports that, since Trump’s inauguration, China has granted trademarks to at least 39 Trump-branded products, some of which had previously been denied. The president’s son-in-law merrily promises US visas to wealthy Asians who invest in his firm’s property developments [Washington Post, 7 May, 2017]. The list goes on.

As the world becomes hotter and more dangerous, the electorate more polarised than ever and U.S. democracy is knee-capped, while freedom of the press is being steadily eroded, for example, access to information about US military operations in the Iraq war was confined to organisations trusted to report sympathetically on US operations, while Trump now summarily cancels press passes of journalists he doesn’t like. Meanwhile, inequality is fed by tax cuts that favour the rich at the expense of the poor.

In Britain, neatly harnessing emotions such as patriotism and a sense of injustice, the Trojan horses are immigration and false claims financial payments to the European Union.

An eye-wateringly cynical Brexit mis-information campaign cast the European Union as the source of both ills. The hardship suffered by poorer Britons was blamed, not on foolishly brutal fiscal austerity that preserved the tax perks of the super-rich, but on “grasping” immigrants from Europe and “avaricious” Brussels bureaucrats soaking British tax-payers to feather Continental nests.

Immigrants are painted as the enemy that is at once threatening to invade and already infiltrating us. An easy scape-goat for pretty much any perceived ill.

Yet Brexit Britain will hurt the poorest parts of Britain most, while the wealthy remain largely unscathed and a well-connected elite enrich themselves further. Aside from incentives by foreign powers that may or may not have benefitted some, there are all those extra government contracts to be haggled over by the well-connected few: lucrative customs infrastructure and government service contracts, not to mention subsidies to favoured businesses. Worth billions of pounds a year, they will no longer be subject to European-level scrutiny and transparency, but will be handled in Westminster, where the Brexit elite knows whom to call on to get the result they want.

It is to this elite, not to ordinary people, that membership of the EU poses a threat. Unlike Britain and the U.S., the EU is, for example, an enthusiastic signatory to BEPS, a global initiative due to come into operation in January 2019, to counter tax avoidance by big firms and the very rich. Neither the U.S. nor post-Brexit Britain is a signatory, and it may be no coincidence that Brexit day, 29 March, is a few days before 5 April, when British residents declare their taxes.

Abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, patriotism, immigration. These are Trojan-horse issues that divide the electorate and play on voters' emotions to provide cover for political power-grabs and to entrench vested interests.

Why do we let ourselves be so duped? Don't we deserve better? In the absence of a functioning Parliament, perhaps the only way out of this wilderness is indeed to retrace our steps, rerun the referendum and, unless at least 50% of eligible voters vote to leave, treat both as the consultative plebiscites they are, stay in the EU - and get on with our lives.

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