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Melbourne, Yarra River, Australia

Australia

The Coronavirus Pandemic Supports the Case for Benevolent Authoritarian Leadership

— Dr. Mark Manolopoulos

June 23, 2020

What, if anything, has the coronavirus taught us about leadership?

In Australia, at both the federal and state levels, governments have shown unusually strong leadership during the pandemic. Unlike the UK and the USA, our governments responded quite quickly. They speedily and quite uniformly implemented the standard measures (border closures, traveler quarantine, physical distancing, massive financial support to the unemployed and at-risk businesses, etc.). The state and federal governments even formed a “National Cabinet”: whatever the practical benefits, it also showed a front of unity between governments whose relations are typically marked by bickering and disunity.

The results of such efforts have been exceptional: rather than having massive numbers of infections and deaths – in the last week of June 2020, the globe is approaching ten million infections and half-a-million deaths – Australia has experienced around 7,500 infections and just over 100 deaths (Worldometers 2020). Obviously, there is a range of factors

contributing to the low numbers of infections and deaths, including our relative remoteness from other countries.

However, I contend that the major reason why we in Australia have achieved good results thus far (I say “thus far” due to the ever-present threat of a second wave) is precisely due to the “strong” leadership displayed by the federal and state governments – indeed, the style of leadership may be described as “authoritarian.” It has been authoritarian in a number of ways.

First of all, there has been minimal consultation with the broader electorate: the governments have mainly liaised with the health experts. This is a wise move: liaise with those who know the most. This is a crucial point to which I shall return. I assume there has also been consultation with other groups, but I think it has been quite minimal. The governments did what they had to do – they did the smart and right thing (this point will resonate as I proceed) – without garnering the support of the masses. There has been nothing really democratic about the way our governments have been operating – and that’s been a good thing. That is why I claim that the governments have acted in an authoritarian way.

Next, not only have Australia’s governments acted in an authoritarian way with regard to the pandemic, they have acted in a distinctly socialist-authoritarian way (and we note here that contemporary authoritarianism is mainly/often associated with socialist states). Australia’s federal and state governments have acted in a distinctly socialist-authoritarian manner in terms of supporting those most disadvantaged by the coronavirus crisis. Our unemployment benefit (affectionately known as “the dole”) was almost doubled from its paltry \$40-a-day amount to a more livable wage. Furthermore, the federal government quickly established the “JobKeeper” scheme, whereby the government has been paying the wages of those employees in businesses that have been significantly impacted by the pandemic.

The profound irony here is that Australia’s current federal government is stridently conservative – infamous for its climate-change denialism – so it is remarkable that a right-wing neoliberal government is acting in a socialist-authoritarian way. But, as I say, the results have been impressive.

Now, one might respond that the Australian governments have only been behaving in a left-authoritarian way only because we are facing an emergency – “desperate times, desperate measures” and all that. But COVID-19 is not the only global crisis we are experiencing: we are also facing the multi-pronged environmental crisis. We could also reference here other global crises like religio-political extremism, unchecked immigration flows, the continuing oppression of females, and so on – and what is arguably (or unarguably?) the most catastrophic crisis of all: global neoliberal hyper-capitalism.

My “preposterous” thesis is that only a strong – socialist-authoritarian – form of global governance is able to meet these kinds of crises/catastrophes. But how, exactly, do I envisage this kind of governance?

I have written about this form of global political system in my two most recent books, *Radical neo-enlightenment: Passionate Reason, open faith, thoughtful change* (2018) and *Following Reason: A theory and strategy for rational leadership* (2019). (You may note that I capitalize the word “Reason” – for good reason, as will become clearer as I proceed.) Indeed, I had also written about it in a 2016 article in this very Journal, titled “The greater planetary good: From a precept to a program.”

As you can tell from the titles of the books, rationality is the key player here. The name I have coined for this form of governance is “logicracy” – rule by Reason. Allow me to quickly describe it.

To begin with, we note that the variety of existing political systems, from theocracies to dictatorships to democracies, have all failed in varying degrees and ways, so we require a new global political system. It needs to be global in order to combat truly global crises like climate change and unbridled capitalism. Now, rather than being swayed by insane theologies or massive egos or populism, this new system needs to be solely informed by rationality. Reason could be literally embodied by a group of the world’s brightest people, from thinkers to activists and artists and so on.

I have called this body of the brightest an “oligarchy of the wise(r).” It would exemplify the best form of benevolent authoritarian leadership.

Of course, this idea is not new: the logicratic oligarchy is akin to Plato’s “philosopher-rulers” (1974; Plato employs the word “kings” but obviously the logicratic oligarchy would be stridently gender-inclusive).

This logicratic oligarchy would likely need to be supported by a mass movement of followers – followers who love Reason. Leveraging people power might/would be required to install the oligarchy as the world’s supreme ruling body: force might be necessary to dislodge the existing power elites. although logicracy infinitely favors peaceful means over violent ones, so the aim is peaceful transformation to logicracy.

Collectively, the logicratic oligarchy would consider problems and find solutions. It would be odd-numbered so that any particularly vexing or “wicked” problems would be resolved democratically, by vote (and so, a democratic element would be inscribed in logicracy). One could say that logicracy is “deliberative democracy by the smartest.”

Just as the coronavirus pandemic has been navigated by health experts, logicracy is the form of government most guided by that expert of experts: Reason. There would be no recourse to deities, or outdated political ideologies, or “the markets,” or nationalism-populism, and so on. We would be ruled by rationality, pure-and-simple(ish).

The logicratic oligarchy would rule in an authoritarian way – but in a benevolently authoritarian way, given that its decisions would be informed by Reason rather than greed, power, or fame. And, as I have argued extensively in my books, the logicratic oligarchy would not be against things like moderate religion, for the oligarchy would recognize that such phenomena are not antithetical to it but compatible with it. Reason recognizes and embraces its other-than-rational others: what rationality opposes is that which is anti-rational, such as fanatical religion, greedy economic systems, racism, sexism, the oppression of non-human others, and so on. We begin to perceive just how benevolent logicratic leadership would be.

While the notions of Plato’s “philosopher-rulers” and “benevolent authoritarianism leadership” have been ridiculed – most recently Anastasia Filipiddou called the latter an “oxymoron” (2020) – the coronavirus pandemic has clearly and powerfully shown that only strong intelligent leadership – that is, some kind of logicracy – could properly navigate us through crises and catastrophes, which are fast becoming (have already become) the way of the world.

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