



**LAUNCH OF “The Secret History of Democracy” Edited by Benjamin Isakhan
and Stephen Stockwell**

SPEECH BY KELVIN THOMSON MHR for WILLS Carlton Thursday 9/6/2011

It is nearly ten years since planes organised by Osama bin Laden crashed into the World Trade Centre and changed our world forever. Ever since then people have anguished over how to adequately combat terror and violence carried out by religious fundamentalists. I, and I suspect plenty of others, have been strongly persuaded of the virtues of a secular democracy – where law and politics are public matters and religion is a private and personal matter, where no-one is entitled to foist their religious convictions on others. I have also become convinced of the importance of the emancipation and equal treatment of women right around the world, and the need to sweep away the religious, cultural and political barriers to realising this goal.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the first chapter in *The Secret History of Democracy* which caught my eye was Chapter 12, *Birthing Democracy*; “The Role of Women in the Democratic Discourse of the Middle East”. In this chapter Luisa Gandolfo makes extensive reference to the works of Qassim Amin, a nineteenth century French educated judge and writer who campaigned for women’s rights and universal suffrage. Amin is, however, quoted as being somewhat critical of the women he sought to liberate, among other things accusing them of being indiscreet: “While with friends and neighbours, her deep sighs ascend with the cigarette smoke and coffee steam as she talks loudly about her private concerns; her relationship with her husband.....she pours out every secret to her friends, even those details associated with private behaviour in the bedroom”. Plus sa change....! I had not, in my 56 years, realised until quite recently that when women get together absent the presence of men they are apt to speak about what happens in the bedroom in a very detailed and clinical way – a revelation that I confess I am still not entirely comfortable with.

Luisa Gandolfo traces the work of Middle East activists for women’s rights and universal suffrage through the 19th and 20th centuries.

She notes the ebb and flow of women's rights. Her conclusion is sobering – “For all the campaigns and vociferous calls by activists, the twentieth century has brought scant progress....

Citizenship laws are contravened by patriarchal personal laws that bestow primacy upon men in marriage, divorce, custody, maintenance and inheritance. Tradition consistently undermines the value of women through lenient legal responses to honour crimes.” She says that fears of Palestinian feminists are being realised in contemporary Gaza. Implementation of the Islamic dress code has cast a pall over Gaza, “and the contemporary feminist writer Fatema Mernissi “notes that the focus of the new Islamist agenda commences with dress, to be followed by the mobility and status of women.” Luisa Gandolfo concludes that “Democracy is not unobtainable in the Middle East” but “it must be an inclusive democracy in which women are placed legally, socially and politically on an equal standing with their male counterparts. The foundations are there” but “resisting the (re)Islamization programmes promulgated by the fundamentalist organisations has become a priority”.

The thesis of this book is that there is a lot more to the history of democracy than the Greeks, the Magna Carta and the secret ballot. It sets out to document the development of democratic practices in unexpected and under-explored quarters, detailing for example the earliest models of collective governance in Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and ancient China, and examining the possible transmission of these practices via the trade networks of the Phoenicians to the pre-classical city states of Greece.

It looks at such things as the indigenous democratic systems found among the Baganda people of Uganda, the Metis of Western Canada, Aboriginal Australians and black South Africans.

The editors endorse the view of Amartya Sen, who argues that democracy can be thought of as a universal value with global rather than Western roots. They say that if you examine the history of democracy closely you will find “no pure form of democracy to uncover, no halcyon days to lionize and no grand narrative to tell. Instead there are many imperfect democratic moments, where people have fought and sacrificed to improve their situation and that of their fellow beings.”

The editor's idea of democracy certainly squares with my own experience of it over the past 30 years. Democracy is always unfinished business. There is always one more mountain to climb, one more river to cross. People who think of democracy as going to the local polling booth once every three years to vote for a government who then does all their thinking and decision-making for them couldn't be more wrong.

And obviously in order to know where democracy is going, it is helpful to know where it has come from, and this book is very useful in that regard. Knowing where you've come from is not a guarantee of where you're heading, of course. You might be at a fork in the road! I think there are both positive and negative features of the way Australian democracy is developing today. The most dramatic developments are those arising from the information revolution. We have access to much more information, much more readily, than we used to. What John Keane's chapter refers to as 'communicative abundance'.

There is much to welcome about this. It is a powerful antidote to censorship, and to media monopoly. But it does seem to me to come with a significant cost. The first cost is that the insatiable appetite for minute by minute news is distracting governments and politicians from the real business of governing – solving problems and delivering programs. John Cain became Premier of Victoria in 1982 with a solemn pledge to hold a Press Conference every week without fail – an accountability breakthrough! When I became a Federal MP in 1996 we started noticing John Howard and Kim Beazley doing 'doorstops' every day. By the time Kevin Rudd became Opposition Leader we would see duelling Press Conferences – Leaders going out 2 and 3 times ready to answer any question the media might want to ask them. How is real work to be done when day after day is consumed in this way?

Furthermore, it seems to me that the flowering of information sources has come at the cost of shared community understanding, values and expectations. Of course people are all different, and there was never a time when we all wanted the same thing. But it is my impression talking to my constituents now that it is much more possible to live in an information bubble, ignorant of what others in the community are thinking or experiencing, than it used to be. People can believe that Barack Obama is not American, or that climate change is a hoax, because they are just not exposed to a shared reality or shared consciousness – the information bubble they live in never gets burst. As people stop reading newspapers or listening to the radio, this problem may well grow.

The other issue which I have talked about, because I believe it to be important, is the impact of population growth on democracy. As population grows, democracy shrinks. Professor Albert Bartlett, Professor of Physics at the University of Colorado, at Boulder, says when he moved to Boulder in 1950 the population was 20,000 and there were 9 councillors. Now Boulder's population is 100,000, and there are still 9 councillors.

He says “in effect today we only have 20% of the democracy we used to have in 1950”, because it’s harder for the individual to have access to a representative. He points out that originally the US Congress had 30,000 constituents per member of Congress; it’s now gone to 700,000 constituents per member of congress.

There’s no way you can represent that many people, so it’s much easier as a politician to take your ideas from the lobbyist who has plenty of money. He says “As a result we now often get one dollar one vote versus what used to be one person one vote”. There’s a crowding out effect – in a time of many important issues – global warming, health care, financial crisis – people are alienated.

Might it not be that in a country as large, diverse and growing as the United States, the problems are pretty much impossible to solve? That leaders, Governments, politicians, their energy sapped by trying to solve the problems caused by a large and rising population, simply end up opting for spin over substance, skating over the top of problems rather than actually putting in the detailed effort necessary to solve them. That in the modern era, with its twenty four/seven media cycle, it is possible to get elected without solving problems provided you can use the media to get across three messages – first, that your heart’s in the right place, second, that you’re working as hard as you can, and third and most importantly, that the other mob would be worse.

So I worry about us becoming a hovercraft democracy, where politicians glide over the surface, too busy and too remote for genuine engagement with the people. It is one of the reasons I oppose endless population growth.

The editors hope this book will cause us to “pause to consider the democratic potential found in all regions, in all cultures and in all historical epochs.”

They hope that “people all over the world may come to have a greater sense of ownership over democracy and take pride in practising and re-creating it for their time, for their situation and for their purposes.” They want to play a part in understanding and aiding the struggle of all people against tyranny and oppression.

I think their words will resonate very strongly with many of us as we watch these poverty plus Internet inspired revolts in North Africa and the Middle East – watch them with a mixture of hope, admiration and trepidation.

I congratulate the editors and contributors for this fine work and wish them every success in their ongoing endeavours.