

Madness is Catching

On 23 August 2018 Malcolm Turnbull described the turmoil in the Liberal Party as "madness". The word perfectly describes the situation which saw his term as Prime Minister brought to an early end. According to the insights of the great philosopher René Girard, "madness" describes the *contagion* of violence, by which someone, or some group, is punished for the perceived welfare of a dominant group - in other words, the concerted effort to find and punish a scapegoat. The bringing down of yet another sitting Prime Minister is an example of "scapegoating".

Girard presents certain features of the scapegoating process which have operated in humanity from the beginning, and which can be detected in the Liberal Party's latest woes.

The first feature is the existence of a crisis. Then it is assumed that something blameworthy must have been done to cause the crisis. Naturally, there must be someone to blame, and that one becomes the scapegoat.

Girard identifies certain criteria which mark out the scapegoat. The person or group is different, even slightly. Perhaps they have some weakness, some perceived lack which marks them out as on the outer. The scapegoat has few friends - or not quite enough - who could mount a defence. Girard also describes the curious fact that the scapegoat is not always some down-and-out. Indeed, a leader can become the scapegoat in the right circumstances.

Then there is the aspect of the violence done to the scapegoat - often expulsion, or the stab in the back, real or metaphorical. Once the process is in motion the violence becomes contagious. A certain "madness" sets in, where even unlikely people are drawn in. Erstwhile supporters throw stones, even sorrowfully. They see no other way out than to help push the victim off the cliff.

Girard points out that the victim is actually innocent of causing the crisis, and the mob's fury is misplaced. However the scapegoat does not necessarily have to be innocent of everything. For example, Malcolm Turnbull has made notable errors of judgement, but like all scapegoats, he cannot truthfully be blamed for the crisis. That crisis was clearly outlined by Julia Gillard in an interview aired on the same day, where she described the problems of the Liberals to be similar to those of right-wings parties world-wide. They include the tendency for some to believe that harder and more insular policies will protect, conserve, and shore up defences against a variety of perceived threats.

It is not politics which is broken, as some have claimed. We are so fortunate in this nation to have structures and systems which serve us fairly well in comparison to weaker democracies. The problem is violence itself. And it is violence which was played out in this latest episode of Prime Ministerial assassinations. According to Girard, it is not that violence is part of politics, but that *politics is part of violence*. We exist within the institution of violence.

And where does this violence come from? It comes from where it always has come - from rivalry. In this case, rivalry for power has descended into a thwarted rivalry so intense that for the main protagonists it has become all-consuming. Jumping onto the back of this revenge - whipping it up and egging it on - are powerful sections of the media. Rivalry operates there too, for profit and prestige: money and ratings, in other words. The Liberal Party has not been served well by people who are eaten by revenge and their media jockeys.

It will be difficult for Scott Morrison to unify and restore faith in the party. Like his predecessor, he has victimised so many other people when immigration minister. That victimisation contributes to the predicament of both the Coalition and Labour. Under their succeeding governments, innocent people have been used as scapegoats, victims despatched violently, arbitrarily and cruelly to address a perceived crisis.

However, it is not only violence which is contagious, but goodness. In Girard's view, this has to be expressed in withdrawal from rivalry, in the refusal to retaliate. What is needed is people of stature, compassion and self-effacement, who are oriented to service and can sink their own problems for the common good.

What do politicians think of when they say the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of the day's work? The actual way forward for humanity is contained in that prayer: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us".

But as we know, Christianity is easier to claim than to practise.

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