

Is New Zealand safe from “Trumpism”? Part 1

Clay Nelson © 3 April 2016

Sixteen years ago there was an episode of *The Simpsons* where Bart is shown his life 30 years in the future. Not surprisingly he learns he will become a beer-swilling bum. On the other hand Lisa is shown behind the desk in the Oval Office as the “first *straight* female President” telling her staff “As you know, we’ve inherited quite a budget crunch from President Trump. How bad is it? The country is broke.”

It turns out that Dan Greaney who wrote the episode may have only been about six years off in his prediction.

His explanation for the prescient prediction was he wanted Lisa to come into the presidency when America is on the ropes. “What we needed was for Lisa to have problems that were beyond her fixing, that everything was as bad as it could possibly be. That’s why we had Trump be president before her.”

“The Simpson’s,” he said, “has always embraced the over-the-top side of American culture ... and Trump is just the fulfilment of that.”

For that reason The Donald has been a running joke for late night television hosts for decades. Jon Stewart had only one regret in his decision to step down from *The Daily Show* recently. When he announced it he did not know Trump was going to run for president, which would have given him an enormous amount of fodder for his special brand of satire. In other words, no one thought anyone could or would take Trump seriously. As a political junkie all my life and an undergraduate Political Science major I never foresaw what we are seeing now happening. I don’t feel too bad about that because political pundits and professionals are equally nonplussed by this political phenomenon. And their confusion is nothing compared with the establishment figures who thought they controlled the apparatus of the Republican Party. They are faced with having to support a candidate who is a xenophobic, sexist, racist, which--don’t get me wrong-- they could live with. What they can’t live with is his belief that Social Security and Medicare should be increased and not privatised, that the Iraq War was a mistake, that the US should be an honest broker in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, that George W Bush did not protect the country, that the military should be cut back significantly to rebuild the infrastructure, that politics has been corrupted by a plutocracy of billionaires buying elections, that the TPPA is bad for American workers and should be rejected, and that Republicans should be willing to deal with Democrats to accomplish good things for the American people. Thus, we are seeing panic in Republican ranks as they mobilise corporate media and social media to fill my Facebook newsfeed with story after story about how terrible it would be if he gets the nomination. If he should get it, being a Republican will no longer have meaning. Better Ted Cruz get it, never mind he is universally detested and that is just by his friends. He also is xenophobic, sexist and racist, but that is as Republican as apple pie. At least his policy positions, which would make Attila the Hun blush, are acceptable to the farthest fringiest right of the far right. His idea of the centre of American politics is just to the right of Ronald Reagan.

Right now 61% of those who wager money online as to what the outcome of political elections will be are betting Trump will get the nomination. These betting sites have been highly reliable in predicting outcomes. One would think that Democrats would not want to get in the way of the Republican Party’s choosing the right to die, but recently Democratic SuperPacs, a type of independent political action committee which may raise unlimited sums of money from corporations, unions, and individuals, and Hillary are running attack ads on Trump in concert with Cruz, Kasich and Republican SuperPacs. There is only one reason I can see. Hillary is more afraid of Trump than she is of Cruz. She is a smart woman. I think Trump could win in a landslide against her and I think she knows it. She may be exceedingly

qualified to be president but she is indelibly part of the plutocracy that many Americans blame for their economic misery. As her husband famously argued in his first campaign for the presidency, “It’s the economy, stupid.”

Many of the 99% are ready to storm the gates with pitchforks and Trump is their pitchfork of choice. Sure, many of them are feeling the Bern and would rather challenge the 1% with Sanders as their pitchfork, but the playing field is in no way level. Hillary, in this complicated election, is the last establishment figure standing—Republican or Democrat. The plutocracy has no other choice than to make sure she is the nominee. In that case, for the 99% Trump will have to do. There are other reasons Trump, but not Cruz, could win and Scott Adams, the creator of the cartoon *Dilbert*, explains this better than I could.

Scott Adams remembers being young and improving at chess, but the masterful kid across the board would outmanoeuvre him until the game seemed a runaway. Now, this kid didn’t want to just beat Adams; he wanted to embarrass him. “So after he’d picked away three-fourths of my pieces and I was discouraged,” Adams recounts, “he would offer to turn the board around and play with my pieces.” And then effectively “win” again.

On those occasions, he got insight into the type of personality that loves not only the challenge of game strategy, but the thrill of overwhelming the competition. It is the sport of meticulously plotted domination. And that is part of why Adams believes Donald Trump will win the presidency...in a landslide.

Adams, in other words, believes that Trump himself has turned the campaign game around. On the stump, the real estate mogul is not running on the knowledge of his numbers or the dissection of the data. He is running on our emotions, Adams says, and sly appeals to our own human irrationality.

Since last August, when many were calling Trump’s entry a clown candidacy, Adams was already declaring The Donald a master in the powers of persuasion who would undoubtedly rise in the polls. He began blogging about how Trump can rhetorically dismantle Clinton’s candidacy next.

Adams, mind you, is not endorsing Trump or supporting his politics. And he is not saying that Trump would be the best president. What he recognises is the careful art behind Trump’s rhetorical techniques. And The Donald, he says, is playing his competitors like a fiddle – before beating them like a drum.

Most simply put: Adams believes Trump will win because he’s “a master persuader”. He is so deft at the powers of persuasion, Adams believes, that the candidate could have run as a Democrat and, by picking different hot-button issues, still won this presidency. In other words: Trump is such a master linguistic strategist that he could have turned the political chessboard around and still embarrassed the field.

Adams is not just a cartoonist, he has a Masters in Business Administration and is a qualified hypnotist. “The most important thing when you study hypnosis is that you learn that humans are irrational,” Adams says. “Until you understand that, hypnosis is hard to do ... For me, it was this great awakening to understand that humans are deeply irrational, and it’s probably the greatest influence on me in terms of my writing my cartoons.”

So Adams began writing about the workplace, and the budding *Dilbert* in the early 1990s because the workplace was a “huge part of people’s lives that was invisible to the rest of the world and about suffering in a hundred different ways”.

“By simply mentioning that world,” Adams says, the comic connected with readers “on an

emotional level.” And isn’t that essentially, in turn, what Trump is doing? He is acknowledging the suffering of some, Adams says, and then appealing emotionally to that. And he bolsters that approach, Adams says, by “exploiting the business model” like an entrepreneur. In this model, which “the news industry doesn’t have the ability to change ... the media doesn’t really have the option of ignoring the most interesting story”, says Adams, contending that Trump “can always be the most interesting story if he has nothing to fear and nothing to lose”.

Having nothing to lose essentially then increases his chance of winning, because it opens up his field of rhetorical play. “Psychology is the only necessary skill for running for president,” writes Adams, adding: “Trump knows psychology.”

Within that context, here is what Candidate Trump is doing to win campaign hearts and minds, according to Adams:

1. Trump knows people are basically irrational.

“If you see voters as rational you’ll be a terrible politician. People are not wired to be rational. Our brains simply evolved to keep us alive. Brains did not evolve to give us truth. Brains merely give us movies in our minds that keep us sane and motivated. But none of it is rational or true, except maybe sometimes by coincidence.”

2. Knowing that people are irrational, Trump aims to appeal on an emotional level.

The evidence is that Trump completely ignores reality and rational thinking in favour of emotional appeal,” Adams writes. “Sure, much of what Trump says makes sense to his supporters, but I assure you that is coincidence. Trump says whatever gets him the result he wants. He understands humans as 90 per cent irrational and acts accordingly.”

Adams adds: “People vote based on emotion. Period.”

3. When you run on emotion, facts don’t matter

“While his opponents are losing sleep trying to memorise the names of foreign leaders – in case someone asks – Trump knows that is a waste of time,” Adams writes. “There are plenty of important facts Trump does not know. But the reason he doesn’t know those facts is – in part – because he knows facts don’t matter. They never have and they never will. So he ignores them.” And stating numbers that might not quite be facts nevertheless can anchor those numbers, and facts, in your mind. In other words, reality that is in truth illusion.

4. If facts don’t matter, you can’t really be “wrong”

Trump “doesn’t apologise or correct himself. If you are not trained in persuasion, Trump looks stupid, evil, and maybe crazy,” Adams writes. “If you understand persuasion, Trump is pitch-perfect most of the time. He ignores unnecessary rational thought and objective data and incessantly hammers on what matters – emotions.”

“Did Trump’s involvement in the birther thing confuse you?” Adams goes on to ask. “Were you wondering how Trump could believe Obama was not a citizen? The answer is that Trump never believed anything about Obama’s place of birth. The facts were irrelevant, so he ignored them while finding a place in the hearts of conservatives. For later. “This is later. He plans ahead.”

5. With fewer facts in play, it’s easier to bend reality

Steve Jobs famously aimed to create “reality distortion fields” to meet his needs and achieve his ends. A reality distortion field (RDF) is a phenomenon in which an individual’s intellectual abilities, persuasion skills and persistence make other people believe in the possibility of achieving very difficult tasks. Trump employs similar techniques, and apparently can be similarly thin-skinned when his “reality” is challenged. “The Master Persuader will warp reality until he gets what he wants,” writes Adams.

6. To bend reality, Trump is a master of identity politics – and identity is the strongest

persuader

“Do you think it is a coincidence that Trump called Fox journalist Megyn Kelly a bimbo and then she got a non-bimbo haircut ?” Adams writes. “It doesn’t look like a coincidence to this trained persuader.”

One way Trump has bent reality through identity politics is by deploying “linguistic kill shots” that land true, and alter perception through two ways.

“The best Trump linguistic kill shots,” Adams writes, “have the following qualities:

1. The fresh word that is not generally used in politics;
2. Relates to the physicality of the subject (so you are always reminded).”

Writes Adams: “Identity is always the strongest level of persuasion. The only way to beat it is with dirty tricks or a stronger identity play ... And Trump is well on his way to owning the identities of white Alpha Males, and Women Who Like Alpha Males. Clinton is well on her way to owning the identities of angry women, beta males, immigrants, and disenfranchised minorities.

“If this were poker, which hand looks stronger to you for a national election?”

I have reached the conclusion that if Trump gets the nomination, I have serious doubts that Hillary can stop him. She may not even be able to keep it close. Since Trump couldn’t play Sanders the same way, I see Sanders as the only plausible obstacle to a Trump presidency if he gets the nomination.

In spite of the title of this sermon, there is no such thing as “Trumpism.” He is running on his personality. His motivation is his love of the game. He is not running on any set of principles that could be considered an “ism”. In his mind he has already won by getting so much further than some of his confidantes say he thought he could, so he has nothing to lose, making him all the more likely to succeed.

Because at present there is no one on the scene in New Zealand politics that has the tall poppy profile to be our version of Trump willing to play with nothing to lose, I don’t see Trumpism entering our politics anytime soon, but there may be many willing to welcome a Kiwi version of The Donald.

This week I needed some work done at the house by a sparky. As he was fixing some wiring he asked where my accent was from. That led to a conversation about the election. It turns out he was a big fan of Trump. On further conversation, his support was not based on rational arguments, it was his attraction to his kick ass, can do attitude. And there were a lot of behinds he wanted kicked. So, if any of you are interested in being New Zealand’s Donald Trump, you will find support. Maybe, more than any of us suspect.

In two weeks I will explore how we got here. What has changed in the world that would bring us to this unexpected place?