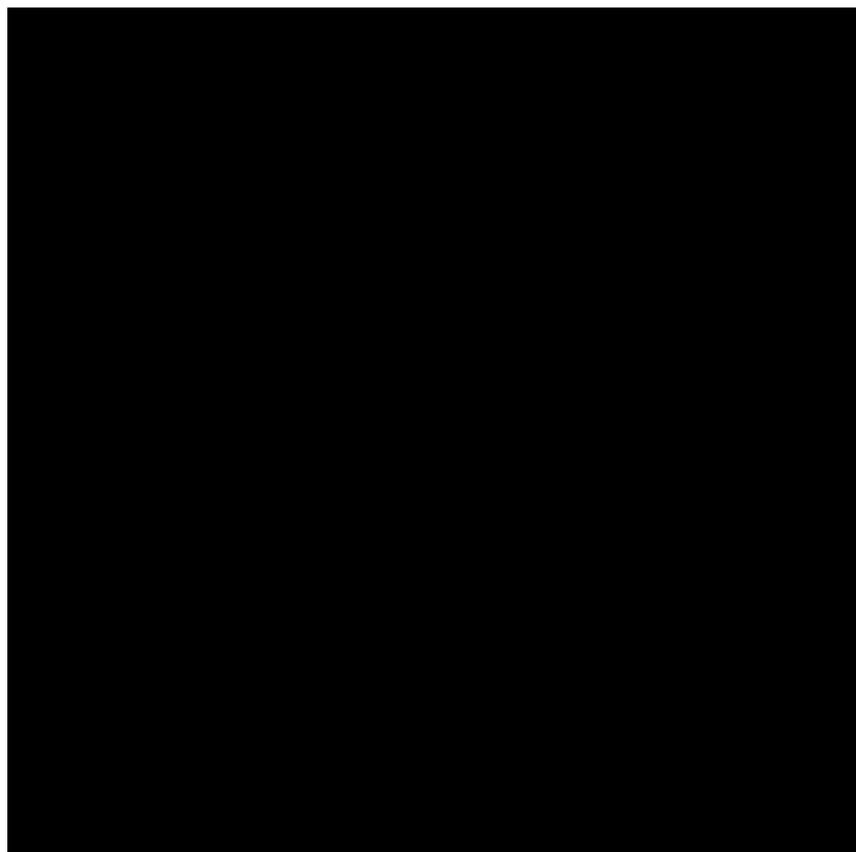


**ESSAY**

# Out of the ordinary

Bad luck, disaster, democracy

John Keane



**THE** *Lucky Country* by Donald Horne is among my treasured Australian books. When first tempted to open its covers, as an undergraduate student of politics, long-haired and lined up for conscription to Vietnam, I found myself attracted to the unsettling question posed within the opening pages of its deft description of contemporary Australia: what if things turned out badly? What if disaster struck down the arrogant politicians too set in their ways for the good of their country? What if bad luck suddenly laid its hexing hand on the shoulder of the sun-tanned bloke in an open-necked shirt, the natural-born democrat solemnly enjoying an ice-cream, his kiddie strolling beside him?

Horne never posed things quite so sharply. But from the outset his remarkable book hit readers with a brickbat, with the unsettling thought that the lucky country might not have luck on its side. This most egalitarian of continents, an easygoing country whose soldiers are renowned for the 'lowest saluting rate in the world', happily ignores the problems of the world: 'Australia is not a country of great political dialogue or intense searching after problems (or recognition of problems that exist),' Horne wrote. 'The upper levels of society give an impression of mindlessness triumphant,' he added. 'Whatever intellectual excitement there may be down below,' he continued, 'at the top the tone is so banal that to a sophisticated observer the flavour of democratic life in Australia might seem depraved, a victory of the anti-mind.' Then came Horne's pinching conclusion, the barbed thought that the young and confident Australian democracy, especially its leaders, had such a poor sense of the power of bad luck in human affairs that they had failed to grasp dilemmas and problems for which they had no ready solutions. 'A society whose predecessors pioneered a whole continent now appears to shun anything that is at all out of the ordinary,' he wrote. 'The trouble is that, by Australian standards, almost everything that is now important is out of the ordinary.'

Mindlessness triumphant: what if nothing much has changed in Australia during the past half-century? It has, of course. The country's sense of history, its sensitivity to past sufferings and future uncertainties, and to

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different possible futures, has grown exponentially. So, too, has the quality of its leadership and its sense of interdependence with the wider world.

But let us suppose for a moment that Horne was on to something. Imagine that his profound discomfort with the cluelessness of a democracy confronted by big and threatening problems turned out to have great global relevance in the twenty-first century. Given that democracies such as Australia are already struggling to come to terms with life-and-death matters such as the control of nuclear and bio-chemical weapons, climate change and the wilful sabotage of the biosphere, might it be that they are also courting not-yet-known disasters for which they are unprepared? And the vital question: when compared with alternative political systems, such as those of contemporary China, or Singapore, or Vietnam, is it just possible that democracies are singularly ill-equipped to handle bad luck, and to solve equitably and effectively massive problems that suddenly strike, or that might well be lurking just around the corner?

BAD LUCK, MISFORTUNE, actual or potential disasters: democracies everywhere are today shadowed by them, or so it seems. A mood swing among citizens and their representatives has been underway for some time. Peppered by bad news and short-term panics, and spiced with anxiety and mild melancholia, the atmospheric change is palpable and unprecedented. The apprehension has nothing yet of the biting vertigo and violence that hastened the end of the nineteenth century, with its bourgeois self-assurance and widespread belief in peace and permanent progress; and it is not a throw-back to the morbid gloom spawned by the first half of the twentieth century, with its deadly global wars, economic collapse, totalitarian regimes, genocides and nuclear threats. Although linked in various ways to these earlier global disasters, our times are evidently different; their listlessness and dejection are unique. Whether or for how long the mood swing endures, or whether its effects continue to be distributed unevenly across the existing democracies (compare melancholy Germany, Ireland and Britain with the strong sense of promise still alive in India, South Korea and Australia), remains unclear. Yet one thing is certain: more than a few causes and causers are fuelling the atmospheric change that we might call the new apprehension.

Some sense of its complexity can be gleaned from the burgeoning literature on disaster and the misfortunes and dysfunctions that are said to weaken or undermine the capacity of contemporary democracies to define, let alone handle, them. Disaster-watching has become a literary industry with an impressive public following. Viral pandemics and terrorist attacks with hijacked nuclear-tipped missiles are said to be on the list of thinkable disasters that would produce tens or hundreds of thousands – even millions – of fatalities. Also highly ranked is the cultish view that American-led free-market capitalism is once more passing through a period of ‘creative destruction’, and that this aggressive vampire capitalism thrives on inducing ‘shocks’ which take advantage of its victims. Forecasts of tsunamis triggered by massive volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, and predictions of catastrophic collisions between the earth and giant extraterrestrial bodies, are favourites on the list. So are the dangerous risks generated by spiralling military spending, disruptions of supply chains, excessive dependence on fossil fuels, climate change and the shameful suffering caused by chronic hunger.

The list cries out for a breakdown analysis. Disasters can strike suddenly or they may be slow-fuse dramas; sometimes, as the citizens of Haiti know from decades of state violence and an afternoon earthquake, people are forced simultaneously to suffer both. Disasters can be triggered by natural changes in our biosphere, such as bushfires in Victoria or hurricanes in Florida, or by famines and genocides and other events for which humans are primarily responsible; in practice, as the calamitous effects of the British bomb testing at Maralinga during the 1950s should remind us, the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘human’ is rarely clear-cut and is becoming ever less meaningful. Whatever their type or form, disasters are always high-impact events. They result in large numbers of victims in the biosphere, and by definition they inflict world-shattering consequences upon the lives and landscapes they touch.

THE GREAT LISBON Earthquake of November 1755 was a template for many catastrophes that followed. The first large-scale disaster whose natural causes and human consequences were recorded in detail, the earthquake (an estimated nine on the moment magnitude scale) consumed Lisbon and

surrounding areas in fire and tsunami, misery and disease, death and physical destruction. One hundred thousand souls may have perished. The disaster prompted the invention of cleverly designed earthquake-proof structures (still visible today in the district *Baixa Pombalina*), frustrated Portuguese colonial ambitions and led to the attempted assassination of King Joseph I.

Unluckily for the Roman Catholic Church, the earthquake struck on the morning of an important religious holiday and turned most of Lisbon's churches into piles of rubble. The bad luck provoked doubts about the Proverbs proverb that luck comes always from the Lord. It triggered bitter battles between theologians convinced that the earthquake was the manifestation of God's wrath and sceptics for whom the ill-timed devastation heaped doubt on the principle that the world was guided by an omniscient and benevolent deity (Voltaire's *Candide* and 'Poem on the Disaster of Lisbon' are perhaps the best-known examples of this suggestion).

The earthquake lent credence to the pagan etymology of the word 'disaster', which had entered the English language – possibly via French – during the sixteenth century from the Italian *disastro*, an 'ill-starred event', from the Latin *astrum*, 'star'. It prompted anguished reflection on the possible causes of natural events (the science of seismology was among its fruits), and called into question the innocence of common metaphors of ground and grounding within the language of philosophy and political thinking. Thanks to a natural upheaval of cataclysmic proportions, things political looked hereon much less governed by certainty.

IN OUR AGE of communicative abundance, the kinds of consequences suddenly sparked by the Great Lisbon Earthquake are amplified by the media hunger for bad news packed off electronically, in real time, around the world. Journalists are generally poor at analysing slow-fuse disasters; they prefer sudden catastrophes. Catastrophism, a term more commonly used by geologists and psychoanalysts, is their bread and butter. One consequence is that sudden disasters seem to be here, there and everywhere. Media coverage makes them feel more immediate, more frequent; it fuels the new apprehension, often by selecting victims with whom audiences can readily identify, so

encouraging them to feel, or draw the conclusion, that bad luck and disaster are the whole world's ruinous fate.

Democracies find it hard to turn their backs on the media fixation on sudden disasters. Swept away by tsunamis, incinerated by bushfires and swallowed by earthquakes, famines, genocides, the governments and parties and citizens of democracies find their every move is monitored, their successes lauded, their failures condemned.

So how do democracies generally measure up when coping with sudden disasters? Are their relief and reconstruction efforts more effective and efficient than those of dictatorships whose people face devastation at the hands of a natural disaster, of the kind that confronted the Chinese leadership in the aftermath of the massive earthquake in Sichuan Province in May 2008 and, in the same month, the Burmese military junta following Cyclone Nargis?

There is no simple answer, although it is easy to show two things. One of them – implied but left untreated by Jared Diamond's otherwise fine study of why some societies succumb to disasters, *Collapse* – is that contemporary monitory democracies, defined not just by periodic elections but also by their multiple watch-dog, guide-dog and barking-dog institutions, are in principle much better equipped than other political systems to scrutinise claims about the actuality or probability of sudden disasters. Robust monitory democracies are early warning systems. While never foolproof, in part because they are plagued from time to time by 'echo chambers', 'flat earth news' and other troubling media trends, monitory democracies are generally more sensitive to the criteria for defining disasters. Their mitigation of disaster – for instance, by adopting a version of the precautionary principle – is never straightforward and consistent, but always political.

In the age of monitory democracy, disasters are or should be controversial. Thanks to public monitoring of power we know, for example, that many more people die on our roads or from smoking tobacco than from terrorist attacks. We also sense that it is a tricky business spotting cover-ups by politicians of actual or imminent disasters, or assessing claims by experts about risky trends that may well be leading us toward fatal discontinuities.

The most genuine and reliable disaster forecasts are our very inability to forecast them. That is why democracies, when they have their wits about

them, doubt the wisdom of the tangle-brained, mendacious thinking specified by the Rumsfeld Rule, a version of the precautionary principle which states that we know there are 'known knowns' as well as 'known unknowns'. Democracies cannot know the things that have yet come to pass. They certainly cannot banish luck from human affairs, if by luck is meant events that lie outside the horizon of effective predictability. But since there is a subcategory of luck, the rotten luck that in the extreme can bring disaster to people, democracies have a definite advantage in tackling its fickle effects. The openness of democracies ensures that their experts, leaders, journalists and citizens can make intelligent judgements that warn of actual or imminent dangers. Such public warnings have more than heuristic value: they mark off the unusual ability of democracies to guard themselves against bad luck and bad outcomes, and possible collapse.

The other thing easily shown is that vibrant democracies, because they contain means of public monitoring and opposition to power, enable individuals and groups to criticise the behaviour of their governments, businesses and NGOs when faced with out-of-the-blue disasters at home. The public outcries against the Bush administration's incompetent handling of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, fuelled by the revelation that the chief of the Federal Emergency Management Agency was a political appointee and not formally qualified for the job, are a poignant example.

The irony is that such outcries make democracies unusually vulnerable to the charge of hypocrisy, to accusations of double standards levelled publicly by independent monitors, citizens and opposition political parties. Leaders and governments are lambasted for not doing what they said they would do, or are slammed by claims that their actions are too slow or at odds with acceptable standards of justice. When things become acute, charges of incompetence and hypocrisy hurled at the powerful can fuel embittered resistance, sometimes to the point, as last happened during the 1920s and 1930s, where democracies commit 'democide'.

Confronted by cataclysm, panic grips the political elite. Backed by powerful propertied interests and enjoying some measure of public support, the political class concludes that democratic power-sharing is a costly waste of time, ineffective in resolving the crisis and ill-suited to their interests.

Unluckily for democracy, the forces of cynicism and brute power are victorious.

IF DEMOCRACIES FACING sudden disasters at home are vulnerable to democide, how do they fare when facing disasters abroad? The rule is that they are always confronted by a dilemma: if they do nothing they are accused publicly of negligence; whereas, if they choose to act, for instance by dispatching troops or NGO personnel and aid parcels, they become targets of public criticism, allegations that they have contributed to delays, confusion, cock-ups, corruption and loss of life.

This fickle rule certainly applies whenever democracies by their actions or inactions inflict or worsen heartbreaking disasters on other countries and regions. President Bill Clinton's public apology for the failure of the United States to intervene in the Rwandan genocide confirmed this.

Democracies are not disaster-proof. There are times when democracies get things badly wrong. Their early warning systems fail, because they are switched off or defective or pointed in the wrong direction. When for such reasons democracies are blind to the hidden or obvious signs of sudden disaster, either at home or abroad, their panicky political elites can lapse into denial by marching down the road of violence, especially when these same elites themselves begin to feel the pinch of the disaster.

Israel illustrates what can happen when governing elites react against the effects of a sudden catastrophe – the 1948 war and the forcible establishment of the Israeli state – by acting to crush all counterclaims by force, in the process attempting (in May 2009) even to ban public use of the Arabic word for catastrophe, *nakba*, used commonly by Palestinians and others as a description of the 1948 events and their ruinous aftermath.

Such public acts of denial and violence play into anti-democratic hands. They succour the view, traceable to the writings of Carl Schmitt, that disasters spawn breakdowns of law and order that can be repaired only by political means which draw their strength ultimately from the deployment of violence. The priority given to military strategy by the United States after the recent Haiti earthquake is a textbook example of this view, which supposes that

emergency situations triggered by sudden disasters demand the suspension of democracy. When devastation strikes, or so it is said, only fools continue to believe that enemies – looters, rioters, criminal gangs, local armies – can be treated as citizen victims, as friends and partners in need of compassion.

The commonsense principle that not all theft is criminal, or that squatting and scavenging are the only way people can survive disasters, is dismissed as claptrap, as a pretext of disorder. Emergencies are said to require tough action. They prove that the ability to distinguish between friend and enemy, and to act forcefully against opponents, is the essence of politics. Disasters make plain that when the world is ripped apart, life becomes a jungle of disagreements and violent conflicts. Disasters reveal an ugly truth: human beings are devilish creatures who are easily driven by force of circumstances to commit devilish acts. That is why those charged with conjuring order from chaos know the true meaning and importance of sovereignty. Sovereigns are those (as Schmitt said) who decide things in exceptional circumstances, who aggregate unto themselves an awful prerogative: the unrestrained power ‘publicly to dispose of the lives of human beings’.

The argument that political order must trump all other priorities during sudden disasters is clear, but unconvincing. Speedy restoration of civil order often depends upon helping citizens, without delay, to organise themselves into groups dedicated to helping themselves. Civil society against the state is an old slogan, but it sometimes has great purchase in sudden disasters.

When the world crashes down on their heads, people often display great resilience by building self-reliant networks. In Istanbul, squatters elect governments that decide planning and zoning regulations. The illegal markets of Lagos are run by self-governing associations of traders. Women living in Kibera, the largest mud-hut community of Nairobi, pool their scarce money through ‘merry-go-rounds’.

During the early days of the Haiti disaster, the slogan ‘Courage, Mon Frère’ was widely circulated through the battered slums of Port-au-Prince. The same pattern was evident in the earthquakes that struck San Francisco in 1906 and Mexico City in 1985. Governments under these conditions proved to be worse than useless. Paralysed by panic, corruption and heavy-handed

incompetence, they jeopardised the lives of their people, as happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when New Orleans citizens trying to rescue their fellows were forced repeatedly to outmanoeuvre police so that they could steer their boats into flooded areas.

Whenever governments misbehave in this way, citizens suddenly find that their fears sprout wings. Defying predictions of chaos they band together, confident in their ability to act together, amicably, generously, as if to confirm the eighteenth-century predictions of William Godwin and others that society could live without political authority. For hours, days and sometimes weeks, civil society outgrows and overthrows state institutions. Amid the earthly hell, the spirit of solidarity prevails.

IT IS NOT always true that disasters afford tastes of paradise on earth; sadly, their sudden strike triggers almost unimaginable mayhem and suffering that rarely come rapidly to an end. The catastrophe lives on inside the victims. Survivors of disasters are often gripped by feelings of confusion, demoralisation and hopelessness. These feelings cut deep, often connecting with earlier disturbing events in their lives. When that happens, individuals are damaged twice over by disasters. Not only are their loved ones lost, their everyday routines wrecked, their possessions destroyed, their homes ruined. Their bonds with others are permanently damaged, sometimes to the point, as happens in severe trauma, that individuals become chronically mistrustful of others.

ARMIES AND POLICE forces are ill-equipped to tackle this damage; so, too, are authoritarian regimes, which force people traumatised by disasters to handle their burdens in private, as best they can, their traps shut by bribes, police harassment and media blackouts. What's done is always done, of course. Yet one way in which living democracies can help heal wounds is to engage in a politics of remembering disasters – and of coming to terms with the follies, arrogance, violence and ruinous effects they unleash on people. The great advantage of democracies is that they are much better equipped to carry out this kind of repair work. Only under democratic conditions can citizens freely

carve out spaces in which they can remember, work through and overcome the traumas triggered by the disasters they have suffered.

Sometimes this rule is observed superficially, or by means of sly humour. ‘Democracy,’ the American comedian Johnny Carson once quipped, ‘is the eagle on the back of a dollar bill, with thirteen arrows in one claw, thirteen leaves on a branch, thirteen tail feathers, and thirteen stars over its head. This signifies that when the white man came to this country, it was bad luck for the Indians, bad luck for the trees, bad luck for the wildlife, and lights out for the American eagle.’

Carson meant it. His joke carried a sting in its tail, especially for people trapped in situations where they feel victimised by unnecessary extra suffering. The ongoing work of the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal and the action of bereaved American citizens who organised themselves after the 9/11 attacks into a coalition for the purpose of forcing Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice to testify before the 9/11 Commission, despite her initial refusal to do so, are recent cases in point.

Every other record that we have of disasters and their traumatising effects, including the terrible long-term violence suffered by indigenous peoples at the hands of their conquerors, shows that people have powerful inbuilt drives to organise and make sense of their experience of catastrophes, to give them meaning, to explain their causes and effects, to bind themselves to disasters by drawing parallels and making links with what came before their onslaught.

Making public sense and alleviating the pain of disasters is near impossible under anti-democratic conditions. Only democratic mechanisms – public apologies, truth and reconciliation tribunals, investigative reports like the Goldstone Report on the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza – can sustain that long, harrowing but necessary process.

IS IT TRUE, as has often been said, that democracies are fixated on the present and blind to the future? How good are they at forecasting potential threats and assessing their veracity? And when it comes to the practical business of handling slow-fuse disasters, such as the long-term, irreversible damage to our biosphere, how competent are they, compared with other political systems?

The topic of bad luck, future catastrophes and democracy is badly neglected in the literature on democracy. The reasons for the lamentable silence are not simply practical, a matter of democrats failing to note or to catch up with events. The silence runs deep, down into the wellsprings of anti-democratic political thinking.

The principal version of such thinking heaps doubt and suspicion on democracy because it is said to suffer from congenital incompetence, a slow-wittedness that stems ultimately from its dependence upon the ignorance of a fickle people. Among the earliest and best-known versions of this suspicion was Plato's rejection of *dēmokratia*. He likened it to a ship of fools sailing into treacherous unknown waters, without a captain or navigational equipment for plotting its position.

From the perspective of this ignorance argument, let us call it, democracy is a slowpoke way of making decisions that at some point naturally result in foolish outcomes, even unmitigated disasters. Modernist versions of the same argument echo loudly through Adam Ferguson's complaint that 'every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future.' The same complaint is evident in Disraeli's remarks against the 'fatal drollery' of democracy; in Mill's anxiety about the age of 'superficial knowledge' and the coming despotism of ignorant public opinion; and in Weber's clever line of attack on democracy in representative, parliamentary form.

Weber's rejection of democracy is especially interesting, if only because it is today so often parroted by people unaware of his bigger (and highly questionable) argument about a global trend towards bureaucracy. The trend, which began in Europe, is peculiar to modern times and irreversible, Weber explained. Complex and risky problems are best defined, handled and resolved by technically sophisticated experts and officials in large-scale organisations. For reasons of administrative efficiency and effectiveness, large corporations managed by executives are now just as much an 'iron necessity' as bureaucratic command in the field of electoral politics, government administration and military strategy. Winning wars, fighting elections, fending off market competitors and competently administering government all require top-down rule, the concentration of the means of power into the hands of a few people. Weber acknowledged that skilled, devoted, cool-headed political leadership remained important; and he recognised that elections, political parties and

parliaments could serve as training grounds for new leaders. But the old democratic vision of self-government by citizens and their representatives was now utterly exhausted. ‘Such concepts as “the will of the people”, “the true will of the people”, have long since ceased to exist for me,’ he told a former pupil. ‘They are *fictions*. All ideas aiming at abolishing the dominance of humans by others are “utopian”.’

Recycled versions of the ignorance argument are still alive and well today. Democracy is said to be heavy-footed, reactive, too dependent upon give-and-take procedures, and hence unable to galvanise effectively and efficiently to solve slow-fuse disasters in the making. Most voters are interested mainly in lining their own pockets, so infecting democracies with myopia. Blame is also pinned on democratic mechanisms for their incompetence, their notoriously inefficient and ineffective mechanisms for handling rotten luck and rotten outcomes.

Democratic incompetence is then usually contrasted with the efficiency and effectiveness of alternative ways of making decisions, such as the ‘smart power’ allegedly employed by the government of contemporary China. ‘There is little debate heard in Beijing from op-ed pieces, television talk shows or think-tank forums,’ writes Kishore Mahbubani, ‘but there is nevertheless a remarkable ability to think outside the box, particularly with respect to long-term planning.’

He adds: ‘The typical time horizon in Washington hovers somewhere between the daily spin for the evening talk shows and the next election cycle. In Beijing the clear focus is on where China wants to be in fifty years in order to avoid a repetition of the two centuries of humiliation China experienced before finally emerging as a modern power.’ When formulating effective responses to climate change, for instance, democratic impulsiveness and fumbling are reckoned inferior to Chinese smart power, whose acumen and deftness are said to be steeped instinctually in ancient wisdom. ‘The pool of historical wisdom that China can turn to is enormous,’ says Mahbubani, who goes on to praise the present leadership of China for its ‘flexibility’, ‘better professional diplomacy’, ‘geopolitical acumen’ and unusual propensity for ‘keeping a low profile’.

Such nation-centred claims in support of smart power sound rather like those of Edmund Burke, two centuries ago, in defence of landed oligarchy. It is just possible that in spite of their spuriousness (China’s obstructive behaviour

at the recent Copenhagen conference on climate change was dumb, not smart) these claims will be infectious, partly because they effectively expose major intellectual weaknesses in the inherited stock of reasons used in defence of democratic openness.

MANY PEOPLE ARE today surprised to find that past arguments for democracy sound so antiquated, or downright embarrassing, as when the citizens of ancient Athens commonly justified *demokratia* by identifying it with the power and glory of their empire. The subject of disasters forces us to rebuild a boat at sea, to come up with fresh justifications of open communication that make a real political difference in handling cataclysms. Open communication has vital functions during sudden catastrophes. But does democracy make a positive difference when responding to slow-fuse disasters?

Consider the problem of 'strategic misrepresentation' in large-scale construction projects. The euphemism used by planners and planning researchers refers to the way incompetence, long delays and substantial cost escalations typically plague multi-billion-dollar projects, such as new transportation systems, military hardware procurement schemes, giant dams, nuclear-fuelled electricity generation systems and the reconstruction of war-devastated zones. It is as if these and other mega-projects are jinxed by an in-built 'disaster gene' that makes them prone to massive cost overruns and serious shortfalls in benefits to citizens.

Oddly, despite their inefficiency and ineffectiveness, large-scale projects continue to multiply across the world. This 'megaprojects paradox' is explained not just by technical breakthroughs, corporate profit, political power and public prestige.

Strategic misrepresentation also plays a vital role. In plain English: the champions of megaprojects usually lie. Guided by self-interest, the promoters of such projects deliberately conceal risk factors by misinforming governments, publics and the media about the true costs and benefits of projects, in order to get them approved and built. Only democratic openness can stop them in their tracks – so rescuing large numbers of people from the clutches of possible long-term disaster.

The implications are clear: far from operating as a brake on efficiency and effectiveness, as is often claimed, democracy is their vital precondition. And, contrary to a long line of observers, the old griping about the myopia of democracies is losing its grip. The age of monitory democracy no doubt gives a voice to those – cynics, opportunists, stallers and otherworldly abbots – who despite all contrary indications cling to the presumption that everything will turn out well. Yet in the face of reckless projects (Gunns' proposed Bell Bay Pulp Mill is a good bad example) and slow-fuse disasters, such as those fuelled by 'oiloholic' policies, monitory democracies are slowly but surely fostering a sense that life must be lived forwards, that democracy is an exercise in living on the edge of future time, and that voting for posterity is legitimate, and often necessary.

THE PUBLIC SCRUTINY of power is vital for dealing with another source of slow-fuse disasters. No account of the relationship between democracy and long-term catastrophes can be plausible unless it examines the disaster-prone effects of uncontested power. The link is often concealed by people's fascination with powerful men with balls. In the early years of the twenty-first century, there are signs everywhere of a lingering fascination with action-man leaders. In the long run, whatever their achievements, these men always fail. Their arrogance gets the best of them, if only by tempting them into blind and foolish mistakes.

Hubris is the greatest challenge facing any system of concentrated and uncontested power, as the official report on the behaviour of the Bush administration after the invasion of Iraq reminds us. Commissioned by a Bush appointee, the report charts the serious failures of a \$100 billion so-called reconstruction project resisted by hostile Pentagon officials and ruined by elementary ignorance of Iraqi conditions, bureaucratic turf wars and spiralling violence caused by worsening local conditions.

There are many lessons to be learned from the disasters of the Iraq invasion, but the one from this report is obvious: democracy is the best available early warning system. Those who ignore that axiom try to wield power freed from the 'burden' of comment and criticism and compromise. They may believe absolutely in the moral and political correctness of their own actions, or in the harmonious

effects of annually rising GDP and democratisation. They may suppose that God blesses their power, or that most people can be seduced by turning displays of power into show business. But they are always deeply mistaken.

Power-holders who have little or no sympathy for the rough-and-tumble of democracy, understood as the ongoing public scrutiny, chastening and humbling of power, may accuse it of speaking in tongues. They may say that it produces far too many conflicting points of view that are in any case not of equal worth. They may conclude that open public scrutiny devours far too much precious time, that it breeds confusion, dissent and disorder; or (as is said so commonly in China) that it violates the principles of the Harmonious Society.

In China, smart-power advocates insist that democracy threatens the proven ability of the state to raise standards of material wellbeing and to improve the quality of people's lives. That is why they indict their opponents for plotting chaos, resistance and 'counter-revolution'. It is why, as well, they insist that social harmony requires forceful leadership and intelligent government unconstrained by the vices of party competition, useless parliaments and querulous civil organisations that represent nobody save their own interests, or the designs of 'foreign' powers.

MEASURED IN HISTORICAL terms, most of these well-worn claims are designed to distract attention from the brute fact that in practice power which is unaccountable can have crippling effects, especially in circumstances in which the powerful fall in love with their own judgements. When that happens, the radius of their circle of advisors shrinks. They denigrate, push aside or disappear their critics, and generally become dismissive of all evidence and opinions that run counter to their own views. Silo thinking sets in. They begin to talk hot air; policy failures and enforced retreats either go unrecognised or are interpreted, falsely, as triumphs.

Four decades ago, the American psychologist Irving Janis labelled such behaviour 'groupthink': the tendency of decision-makers operating in group settings to ignore counter-evidence in the interests of keeping their power, towing the line and getting things done. Janis showed how groupthink

played a fundamental shaping role in the fiasco of the American invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs.

A theory of democracy and disasters needs to extend this point, partly by drawing upon more recent examples of political decisions and non-decisions protected by groupthink, among them the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the negligence of many democratic governments in allowing banking and credit institutions to regulate their own affairs, unhindered by objections and fears that the large-scale ‘leveraging’ of risk in money markets would result eventually in giant market bubbles, whose bursting, as the world now knows to its cost, led to a great recession.

Policy bumbles damage the lives of a growing number of people; for a variety of reasons to do with technological scale, mobility of capital and communicative abundance, their global footprint is widening. These world-wide policy failures drive home the painful truth of the old proverb that fools never differ – that power unchallenged by early warning systems is dangerous, because its vulnerability to groupthink makes it blind to its own dependence upon a universe of great complexity, dangerous unknowns and perilous unintended consequences.

The proverb could be put more succinctly: hubris based on groupthink is the curse of publicly unaccountable power. Or more succinctly still: when devil’s advocates go missing, saints commit sins. The only known human cure for their transgressions, which sometimes have deadly effects, is the free circulation of differing viewpoints, courageous conjectures, corrective judgments, checks and balances, the institutional humbling of power.

Robust public scrutiny of power is the wisest way of handling complexity. It is the friend of efficiency and effectiveness, the best means of coping with uncertainty and anticipating, recognising and avoiding mistakes, or of acting to prevent the Big Mistake. That is why, when thinking through the subject of disasters, hubris is a problem for democracy – and why remedies for its malignant effects are constantly needed.

AND SO WE come full circle to Donald Horne’s *The Lucky Country* and its concern with the vices of thoughtlessness, political incompetence and

arrogance. When weighing up the odds that Australia in the mid-1960s would pull itself together by rejecting second-rate leaders for whom mindless hubris was a way of life, Horne listed the virtues that would be needed to ensure the survival and flourishing of a country that had so far enjoyed, against all odds, gamblers' good luck.

Half a century later, his list remains interesting, for more than antiquarian reasons. Among the prime virtues were the cheeky cheerfulness of country people, 'who acknowledge the possibility of catastrophe – from flood, fire, plague or drought, or the collapse of markets'; widespread public commitment to democratic values such as open-minded, non-doctrinaire tolerance, unpretentious manners and justice for underdogs; and young people's rejection of the prevailing bad habit of speaking of Asia and the Pacific in outdated Eurocentric terms. A visceral scepticism of citizens towards political pomp, social authority and the reckless domination of nature stood highest on Horne's list of virtues. 'It may be the most pervasive single influence operating on Australians,' he noted, before adding a prediction: 'A sceptical people like the Australians is more likely to achieve change organically than by cataclysm: things move along more or less comfortably in their own directions, without the horrifying personal disasters of more catastrophic societies.'

Given that bad luck cannot be wished or legislated away, and that sudden and slow-fuse disasters are coming, as surely as night follows day, might it be that no-nonsense scepticism, commitment to fair play and resilience in the face of bad luck are exactly the kinds of twenty-first-century public virtues that will empower democracies like Australia, by giving them a definite edge on their authoritarian opponents?

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References available at [www.griffithreview.com](http://www.griffithreview.com)

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