

Margins to Mainstream: Changing Populism in Australia and Japan

Populism is a specific technical term regarding the use by elites and active minorities of expressive rather than instrumental politics to obtain their aims. It is not the same as the desire of politicians to be popular although at times it may appear to merge with that understandable aspiration.

The comparative analysis of this paper suggests that populism has moved from margins to mainstream. Once associated, in several often different cultures, with rural and labour opposition to elites, frequently linked with conservative nationalism and with scapegoating minorities, and with the 'big man' as populist leader, it has moved to centre stage.

In Australia, once rural populism (eg the League of Rights, Pauline Hanson) and labour movement populism (eg early 20th century anti-bank, anti-fat man attitudes, and more specifically NSW premier Jack Lang) and later state premiers as populists, has been supplanted by a situation whereby John Howard has become a mainstream populist, an 'ordinary man' populist leader for changing times.

In Japan, where populism was articulated particularly by such LDP politicians as Ishihara Shintaro, Governor of Tokyo and Suzuki Muneo, it has more recently found expression through a variant of celebrity populism unusual in Japan, personified by 2001-2006 Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro.

Similar developments have occurred in other advanced countries, both the rise of anti-immigration right wing populist leaders and minority parties (Haider, Austria, and parties in Denmark, Switzerland and the Netherlands), and the tendency for mainstream leaders to utilise populist strategies and tactics, and even pursuing a kind of media or celebrity populism (in the latter sphere eg Bush, Blair, Berlusconi, Raffarin, Sarkozy).

This paper aims to raise the question of whether contemporary populism is fundamentally different in Australia and Japan given different historical and political/ideological/social contexts or whether instead 'we are all populists now'? Or as the dramatis personae of politics change will this rhetoric retreat to backstage or offstage?

Perhaps now in Australia and Japan local forms of populism and nationalism provide convenient responses to the stresses and strains of globalising change? Or perhaps because the tabloid media has remade the people's understanding of politics in mass societies in which most people have little chance to 'make a difference' the business of politics is refracted through populist lenses? In research, as in government, questions come more readily than answers.