

Courageous must stand up to proponents of 'post-truth' world

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM January 2, 2017

It is a truth universally acknowledged that we now live in a “post-truth” world. But the notion that there was a golden age in which political truth readily triumphed over falsehood is so fanciful as to exemplify the very phenomenon the term “post-truth” describes.

It was, after all, no less a connoisseur of politics than Thomas Hobbes who drew from bitter experience the conclusion that only “such truth, as opposeth no man’s profit, nor pleasure, is to all men welcome” — an observation that seems blindingly obvious but that Hobbes considered sufficiently important to serve as the closing sentence of *Leviathan*, which was published in 1651.

Nor did Hobbes think that those who had power, or aspired to it, would ever hesitate to distort the truth when it served their interests.

“I doubt not,” Hobbes wrote, “but if it had been a thing contrary to any man’s right of dominion, or to the interest of men that have dominion, that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two angles of a square; that doctrine should have been, if not disputed, yet by the burning of all books of geometry, suppressed, as far as he whom it concerned was able.”

Hobbes’s fears were no isolated musings.

By 1712, when Jonathan Swift wrote *An Essay upon the Art of Political Lying*, he had to admit that mendacity had such a lengthy pedigree that “who first reduced lying into an art, and adapted it to politics, is not so clear from history”. What was certain, however, was that lying was an art to which “the moderns have made great addition, applying this art to the gaining of power, and preserving it, as well as to revenging themselves after they have lost it”.

All that was left for Oscar Wilde was to decry that art’s decline into mealy-mouthed routine. When Vivian, the protagonist of a dialogue Wilde published in 1889, announces that he is writing an essay on *The Decay of Lying*, his friend Cyril exclaims: “Lying! I should have thought that our politicians kept up that habit.”

“I assure you that they do not,” Vivian sadly explains, blaming an age with a “monstrous worship of facts”.

“They never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation, and actually condescend to prove, to discuss, argue. How different from the temper of the true liar, with his frank fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain of proof of any kind! After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence. If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once.”

That politics and deliberate falsehood have been constant lovers doesn’t mean, however, that the nature of their affair has remained unchanged over the centuries. The age of print saw censorship come into its own: the subordination of truth to politics by the suppression of rival views.

By the end of that age, the falsifiers had moved from merely suppressing the truth to the conscious dissemination of untruths, with the role of the tsar’s secret service in producing *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* being a high point; but it was radio, which created the first mass publics, that underpinned the emergence of propaganda as a technique of political control.

Going far beyond simple falsehood, totalitarianism’s propaganda machines conjured an alternative world that comprehensively explained the present and foretold the future.

It was, as Hannah Arendt observed, “a lying world of consistency more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself” — a world whose watertight insulation from things as they are spared believers “the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations”.

All that may seem mercifully past. But it remains the case that each stage in the development of communications, no matter how revolutionary, simply casts in new form the unending battle between factual truth and the human capacity to lie.

In that battle, Arendt noted, the liar has a persistent advantage. “Free to fashion his ‘facts’ to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations, of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller. Indeed, he will usually have plausibility on his side; his exposition will sound more logical since the element of unexpectedness — one of the outstanding characteristics of all events — has mercifully disappeared.”

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Those are lessons today’s politicians have learned all too well, as even a glance at Labor’s “Mediscare” and now pensions campaign so clearly shows. But it would be wrong to cast the blame entirely on the liars.

If the truth-tellers lack the courage to say things as they are, how can they criticise Australians for turning to politicians such as Pauline Hanson, who at least offer an air of authenticity: of knowing what they stand for and of being who they claim to be?

Perhaps our political system “can’t handle the truth”, as Jack Nicholson would say. But as Malcolm Turnbull plans for 2017, that is the question he must put to the test.