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The Silent Revolution

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Who in this room is really, really, REALLY, excited about this year's federal election?

Surely there's someone for whom it's the most important day of the year?

Who'll cook a special meal, have the family over, dress up?

No one?

OK then – let's try this one on: who's really scared – and I mean terrified, frightened for their safety – about this year's federal election?

Does Kevin Rudd strike deep fear in the heart of anyone here?

How about Tony Abbott?

Bob Brown?

Well – you're a cynical lot.

But actually you're representative of the feelings of people who live in democracies worldwide.

In countries where it's not compulsory to vote, the proportion of eligible voters who don't bother is growing election by election.

Over a million Australians, most of them young, aren't registered to vote.

41% of Australians don't trust the government to do the right thing – a similar percentage to other democratic nations.

But have you ever thought that our apathy about democracy is one of its greatest strengths?

You just told me that no-one here is terrified of Kevin Rudd or Tony Abbott.

Sickened – perhaps, exasperated – certainly, but frightened? – no.

The reason why that is the case is that every three years we get to sack one and hire the other; or re-hire one and tell the other, “don’t call us; we’ll call you”

Or perhaps just “don’t call us”

In many ways our apathy and our deep cynicism about politics and politicians of all stripes is democracy’s greatest achievement.

What democracy has done is to take the passion out of politics, to make it as boring as possible, and in passion’s place put the instantly anaesthetic Rudd-speak, the infantile antics of our House of Representatives, and the mindlessly dull processes of Parliamentary debates, inquiries, budgets and cabinet meetings.

But hang on – passion – that’s a good thing isn’t it?

Isn’t it good to be passionate about things?

Well maybe, but passion in politics isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.

Passion in politics gets people killed.

Passion in politics causes famine.

Passion in politics destroys great works of art and culture.

We in this room are the heirs of a 500 year campaign to take the passion out of politics.

As David Malouf has shown, democracy didn’t start to emerge in England until the English language changed into the controlled, emotionless, precise, stiff-upper-lip language that we use today.

Ask anyone who speaks English as a second language and they will tell you how passionless and controlled the English language is.

And it was only with this style of language that our forbears were able to craft a political system that allowed dissent without the risk of ending up in a coffin.

Now, the central symbol of eliminating passion from politics is the election itself.

Think about it – an election is a regular, predictable, and highly stylised revolution.

Think about our last federal election. The Australian people rose up and overthrew their government.

But there was no blood on the streets. No rioting. No regicides. Not even grubby hippies in bad T-shirts.

Wait – scrub that last bit.

So we have found a way to tame and regularise political revolutions.

And make them really, REALLY boring.

We have put process in the place of passion.

And it's process that has allowed us to become wealthy, educated and safe.

It is process that build roads, bridges and powerlines, that makes the trains run on time – except here in New South Wales.

But we've become so apathetic and disengaged that we haven't noticed the silent revolution that's bringing passion back into politics.

And what's the agent of this silent revolution?

Is it a deeply charismatic politician?

Is it a new ideology or religion?

No – it's technology.

This is the agent of the silent revolution that's injecting passion back into politics.

It's the synergy of new and old communications technology, which enables us to interact like never before.

I'm talking about the 346 million blog sites.

I'm talking about 175 million Facebook users.

I'm talking about 75 million twitterers – and growing fast.

I'm talking about Reality TV – a phenomenon made possible by twinning an old technology with a new one – the mobile phone – with its 4.1 billion subscribers globally.

And here's the thing – this silent revolution is not just happening in rich, complacent democracies like Australia.

Two-thirds of all mobile phone subscriptions are in the developing world.

Cable TV has a 95% penetration rate in the Arab world.

And so as long ago as 2003 you had the phenomenon of *Superstar*, the *American Idol* spin-off for the Arab world.

The three semi-finalists were a Jordanian woman, a Lebanese woman and a Syrian man.

When the Lebanese competitor was eliminated, riots broke out in Beirut

In Syria, phone companies installed special phone lines and put up billboards encouraging people to vote for the Syrian contestant.

In Jordan the king ordered the army to vote for the Jordanian candidate.

Remember, we're talking about Syria – a military dictatorship – and Jordan – a sheikhdom.

No one votes in these places – and both countries in the space of my lifetime have killed thousands of their own people to keep their regimes in power.

But more than 30 million viewers watched the finale of *Super Star*, and 4.8 million voted.

But what's all this got to do with politics?

The real effect of technological changes has been on peoples' expectations.

People – whether they live in democracies, dictatorships or sheikhdoms – increasingly expect their views to count in ways that are changing how governments work and think.

This is the silent revolution I'm talking about.

Because not only does reality TV, blogging and the like make people believe their opinions matter and should count – it increasingly makes them opinion entrepreneurs.

It's the belief that their opinions matter that motivates people to invest large amounts of their time blogging, tweeting and posting, with no prospect of monetary reward.

It's the belief that their tastes are important that leads people to post some of their most intimate details on social networking sites for all to see.

It's the thrill that they will be part of a story as it unfolds that helps people endure endless series and spin-offs of *Big Brother*, *Survivor* and *So You Think You Can Dance*?

We have seen this new culture of interactivity begin to affect the way politics works.

We wouldn't be talking about a President Obama without the internet and mobile phones.

We wouldn't be talking about a Prime Minister Rudd without morning TV and YouTube.

Both of these men used new technologies to circumvent – or more accurately to burst through – their own parties' processes of candidate selection – and then to totally dominate their opponents in the election campaigns.

But Rudd and Obama weren't the only ones to use the new technologies. Pretty much all politicians are waking up to their potential.

Rudd and Obama were more successful than the others because they hit on the secret of how to use these technologies to greatest effect.

The secret is that the new media most favours causes that are encapsulated in simple messages.

Why?

In the vast jungle of the internet and the twittersphere, people only pay attention to issues which fire up their passions.

Both Rudd and Obama hit on a cause encapsulated in a simple message: change.

Not just a change of government – a change of politics.

Their message was that they would change the whole system of national politics about which people had become apathetic, cynical and distrusting.

And the medium they used – new ways of engaging people – was an essential part of the message of change, replacement, renewal.

With the new architectures of interactivity, Obama stretched the act of voting from a chore that takes a few seconds on a set day, to a continuous engagement lasting weeks and months.

A continually activated support base is a potent political tool.

It allows a politician to dominate the election process by bringing back passion

And they keep people engaged by promising change – big change.

What they say they can change is the process that's attracted such bad press – core and non-core promises, vested interests, federal-state blame games, bureaucratic bungling and partisan divisions that have made people apathetic, cynical and distrustful.

And they promise they will harness the will and passion of the people – that authentic democratic force – to cut through with a new, passionate politics.

The audacity with which both gained office – remember neither was his Party's lead candidate even a year before his election – has given each a strong sense of self-belief that they are agents of change.

Sounds good, doesn't it?

Finally technology is allowing us to construct direct democracy rather than vote for venal and self-serving politicians.

Well, as the old witticism goes - it might work in practice, but it doesn't work in theory.

The problem is that the politics of passion, the simple message and causes of the permanent campaign, have an inherent tendency to over-reach.

The politics of passion can only work with big causes that inspire hope or anger.

Happy voters don't mobilise – unhappy ones do.

Leaders overreach because they need to inspire followers, while followers invest high expectations in leaders to deliver on their promises.

And this is where the politics of passion collides with the reality of the political process.

Take the protests over the Iranian elections of last June.

Here truly was a movement of the new politics looking for a leader – who eventually emerged in the unlikely and unconvincing figure of Mir Hussain Mousavi.

But it ran headlong into an old politics – the process of brutal repression.

Or take the example of Copenhagen last December.

The Copenhagen Conference of the Parties was turned from a routine consultation into a make-or-break event through the medium of a popular movement.

Influenced by the success of the Make Poverty History campaign, the Copenhagen movement was direct democracy diplomacy – a movement designed to force governments to take action beyond that which they had been prepared for.

And some governments were encouraging this.

The then British Environment Secretary Ed Milliband said, "We do need to be pushed. Political change doesn't happen simply because leaders want it to happen, but because people make it happen."

And so we got Copenhagen – an unholy mix of Bretton Woods and Woodstock.

A meeting of thousands of politicians, bureaucrats, scientists and activists, advocating hundreds of positions and causes, and each trying to outdo the others in the politics of the celebrity stunt.

The problem was that it was going to be hard enough to get a binding agreement just among the world's two largest emitters – America and China.

How much harder, then, was it going to be among thousands of viewpoints with hundreds of positions?

The new politics, based around the new media, has injected passion back into politics.

But the big question is whether the new passionate politics helps or hinders us in dealing with the major challenges we face as a planet.

Then there's the effect of passion on politics.

On the one hand, the new media, which allows people to select where they get their news from, and which chases audiences with controversy and opinion, could end up sowing bitter divisions into our societies.

On the other hand, the raising and dashing of expectations could lead to a deeper disillusion with politics.

But perhaps I'm being too pessimistic here.

Perhaps the new politics can improve the old.

The new politics most engages young people – the very group that is most turned off from the old politics.

The new politics may be forcing undemocratic regimes to become more responsive without the bloodshed and upheaval of a revolution.

Perhaps the new and the old can complement each other rather than compete.

Perhaps the politics of process can be cleaned up, held more to account by the vigilance of the new politics.

Perhaps the politics of passion will evolve in ways that take into account the difficult realities of dealing with big issues.

All technology revolutions are followed by long periods of social experimentation, with unpredictable effects.

This revolution is only just beginning.

It is a genuinely popular revolution – and we all have an obligation to participate, to shape it, and to make sure that the new politics is a better politics.