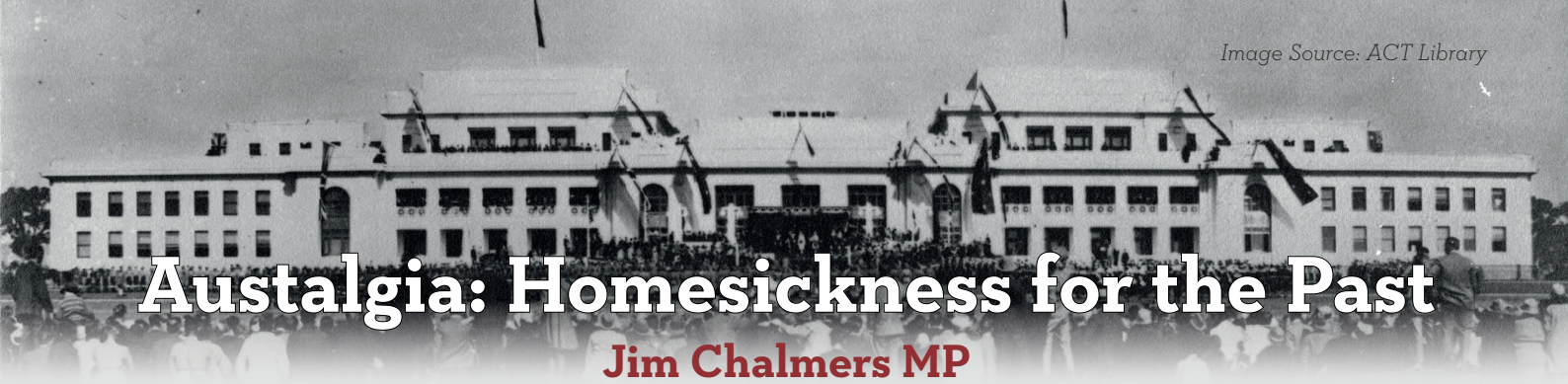

Image Source: ACT Library

Austalgia: Homesickness for the Past

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I grew up in Logan City to the south of Brisbane. In my twenties I was back and forth to Canberra for work. There I learned a bit about being homesick. I got through it, but I knew people who really struggled to succeed in their endeavours because they just wanted so badly to be back home.

Homesickness, I've learned, is mostly a young person's condition. You come to realize that homely feeling of security and familiarity is something you carry with you from your community to another. You don't leave it behind.

Then as we age – and if being elected to Parliament doesn't correlate with middle-life, I don't know what does – there's a different kind of homesickness that threatens the political system's ability to put one foot in front of the other: nostalgia.

Homesickness for the past.

In our case *Austalgia*; a pining for the Australian politics of the 1980s which holds us back from dealing with the challenges of the future.

If our democracy has a crisis, I believe this is it.

Many Australians are familiar with the success of Anna Funder's *Stasiland*: a gripping and forbidding 'horror romance' of the paranoid East Germany of the 1980s. What I'm most struck by is not that horror; it's that in eastern Germany today – and to a degree even in Funder's own telling – so many people miss those days! That's one reason why in trendy Friedrichshain, you can still buy communist coffee, tiny Trabants and t-shirts adorned with socialist work slogans. The Germans (of course) have a word for this: ostalgie.

Then consider David Malouf's amazing novel *Ransom* – a retelling of a fragment of the *Iliad*. The Trojan King Priam's mission to reclaim his son's body from the Greek camp is much more than just an expression of humane spirit – though it's certainly that. What Malouf really highlights is that this action is novel: in a deeply traditional, static, Bronze Age society, the real drama of what Priam does is that it defies the people around him, it is new.

In both cases, change and the new are somehow more frightening than the horror of war, Cold or otherwise.

Funder and Malouf are literary icons. Woody Allen is an icon too if a far more middlebrow and comic one. But in a way, his warm and very engaging study *Midnight in Paris* might tell us even more about how nostalgia operates in Australian politics today.

I think that's because while Funder and Malouf confront nostalgia for unsatisfactory or even sinister regimes, the nostalgia at the heart of *Midnight* is a far more comfortable, maybe seductive, even persuasive one.

If you've seen it you know that the endearing Gil is a contemporary writer obsessed with the Paris of the 1920s; caught up in what his wife's (terribly annoying) friend Paul describes as the 'golden age' fallacy. And here's the rub: the 1920s really were a Golden Age of sorts. For one thing, this is the era when – even if for only a few minutes – Joyce met Proust.

Image Source: Australian Labor Party

What does this have to do with generational change in Australian politics?

If Austalgia is a thing and Australian democracy is threatened by it, this is surely the root of it: there actually was a golden age. There's no denying our democracy did reach a kind of peacetime peak in the years following the 1982 recession. Bob was cunning, Paul was brave, the Cabinet was clever, the bureaucracy was strong; long overdue changes came in a rush and then changes no one had thought of followed hard on their heels. Somehow, responsibility for the 1991 recession evaporated with the years; a final tribute to the political deftness of this remarkable generation.

I first worked for the Labor Party in the early 2000s, during one of those periodic crises in Labor identity. I hope it doesn't sound too blasé if I observe that it feels like there are a lot of years when either the ALP is in crisis, or Australian democracy is in crisis. The early 2000s was the beginning of the mining boom; the beginning of the revenue boom that came with it; but also the beginning of the nostalgia boom.

The nostalgia boom has proved a powerful problem for contemporary Labor, denying its present leadership authority over the achievements of its own recent past. Julia Gillard's speechwriter Michael Cooney – back then, a campus mate of mine; today, head of the Chifley Research Centre – has put a pretty pointed view of the way this worked between 2010 and 2013 in his recent book The Gillard Project:

> *The leader couldn't command stable support in the synods of the caucus, because its human divisions and failures had made it too fallen and impure, and couldn't master the mystical body of the movement, because it remained too perfect and abstract. By day the Labor leader would try to drag this ragged hundred of actual politicians across the desert into Canaan; by night the Labor leader would wrestle the angel of the Labor tribe's dream-vision of its past. Even in victory, she limped away.*

That was then. Today, I have some confidence that if the nostalgia boom isn't over, at least we have passed the peak of its most distorting phase. There is a growing recognition in parliamentary Labor that our job isn't, can't be, to complete or to continue. It always has to be to begin. Nostalgia would lead us to quite the reverse approach.

With that said, this isn't all a left problem. You could argue that while the Liberal political culture is less literary and open, and so the problem is less clearly expressed, their nostalgia for the period 1996-2001 is even more powerful than the Labor nostalgia for election night 1987 or 1993.

Certainly this is the operative framework of the present Government.

If just the politics had changed, meaning that old approaches made old parties less appealing and opened the door to new entrants with fresh solution, this might be a problem only for the political institutions. Busting those open might leave a new space for new ideas.

But that's not what happened. The greater problem I see is not for the political parties, but for Australia; because we are not just suffering a crisis of Austalgia in our politics, but even more consequentially in

our policy.

That famous 'reform era of the 1980s and 90s' didn't just 'end certainty'. By changing the old economy, it ended the need for those very specific changes too: the openness they created, and the global changes of the times meant an entirely new context for policy in Australia.

So much has happened since.

Over the last two decades internet access has grown two hundredfold and speeds have grown one thousandfold. More than 3 billion people globally are now connected to each other. Bulky, expensive, low-performance desktops are decaying in landfill, while light, efficient and powerful handheld devices dominate our homes, public transport and workplaces. And this remarkable breakthrough in digital connectivity is really only a fraction of the technological revolution underway.

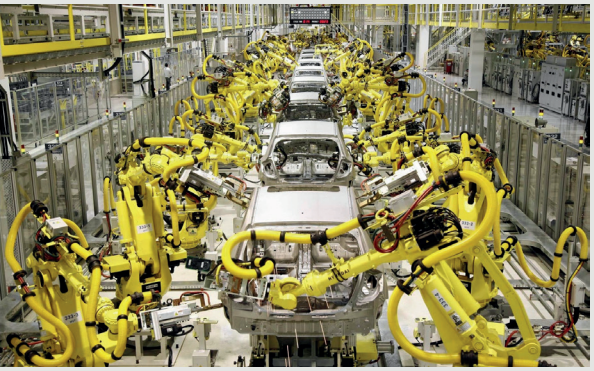

Image Source: Australian Robotics Review

No part of our life is immune from its effects.

In 2015 alone, it is estimated that 200,000 industrial robots will be installed in the manufacturing industry, displacing an even larger number of traditional workers. The Economist has described this rapid technological advance as "The Oncoming Wave" – and it's not just the manufacturing sector that will be hit.

Some Oxford economists have even composed a cheery table, containing the probability of a computer replacing workers in a given profession. The research shows that those jobs which consist mostly of repetitive actions, and identifiable decision schema, are likely to be the first to go. Since these jobs are precisely those on lower wages, this "skill-biased technological change" – as American Professor Alan Krueger has warned us of for decades now – is one of the key drivers of economic inequality. Tyler Cowen describes the future even more chillingly – of a world divided into two groups: those who are good at working with intelligent machines and those who are replaced by them.

In Australia, skills-biased technological change disrupts our industries and workforce, hitting and hurting the suburbs and the hinterland economies of our regional cities hardest of all. That's why Bill Shorten's new policies on computational thinking and STEM teaching are such an important way forward.

Image Source: Vogue Magazine

It was Bill, after all, who pointed out that dramatic change generates plenty of fear and rhetoric of fear: as he put it, people seeing the future as "a dystopian mix of *The Hunger Games* and *Mad Max*". To others, it may be that this mix of robotics, ageing – plus climate change – is more *Westworld, Logan's Run* and *Soylent Green*.

But the big danger isn't fear expressed actively in dystopias and horror romances. It's fear expressed passively in Austalgia, in homesickness for Australian politics past. In the end, Woody Allen's Paul is right: 'nostalgia *is* denial'. And Gil finds his own way, liberated in the present.

It's hard to see any alternative for Australia.