

## Nick Bryant

### America Today! What is the impact for Australia?

Dr Nick Bryant gave us an outstanding insight into American politics in general and Donald J Trump in particular, drawing on his deep knowledge of US history and his close involvement as BBC's American Correspondent spanning President Trump's first term and also writing for the Economist, New Statesman, Washington Post, Sydney Morning Herald and the Age.

After referring to the Economist's Word of the Year 2024 "Kakistocracy" (government by the least suitable or competent citizens of a state) he wondered whether the word for the next year or two may be "plutocracy" (government by the wealthy) or "anocracy" (part democracy, part dictatorship)!

Nick Bryant spoke of his first meeting Trump at the time of the closure of his Atlantic City casinos, and prior to the 2016 election. He described his demeanor away from the TV cameras as warm, polite, curious, and sensible, becoming bombastic when the cameras were turned on, and boasting "I could make Atlantic City great again".

Trump's win in 2016 was a complete surprise and left the press, confidently anticipating a Clinton victory, struggling to make sense of what had happened! The question then became "As President are we to get the humble or the bombastic Trump?" Soon after beginning his inauguration speech in 2017 it became clear that Trump would adopt his bombastic, slightly crazy style. Trump had appealed to those, particularly white people in the rust belt, who had not previously voted and felt the American dream was dead.

Despite the events of January 6 he re-emerged as the standard bearer of the Republican Party. The subsequent prosecutions further mobilised his support. Trump's populist, nationalist style, his focus on conspiracies, his lack of concern for norms, the law and the Constitution are not different to some of the Presidents who have preceded him. Trump is in fact a product of 250 years of American history. Over many years Americans have shown a preference for having a strong man in charge, someone who will defy the law and even the Constitution when the need arises. While with Trump's recent election it may seem that America is entering new territory, the fact is that America has considerable experience with former Presidents like him. Trump is not an outlier!

Nick expressed particular concern about the chronic divisions America is suffering. He pointed to a range of issues on which there are ongoing arguments including for example the result of the 2020 election! Can the country come together again? Nick thinks the divisions will remain with several states taking on deeper shades of red and blue.

The following are some of the points arising from the Q&A session:

- Murdoch, particularly through Fox News from 1998, has been an important promoter of the Republican Party.
- AUKUS has made it harder for Australia to manage its relations with China, given our increased dependence on the US (which may not be able to deliver on its commitment to supply Australia with nuclear submarines).

- Biden stayed in the Presidential race because he liked being President and didn't think Harris could win. He should have withdrawn earlier.
- The unqualified and, in some cases, weird people Trump is proposing for Cabinet and other key roles in his administration will be responsible for managing huge budgets and workforces eg \$1 trillion and 800,000 people in the case of Health!
- Polling is an inexact science and journalists rely too much on them.
- Civil War is now unlikely. It may have been different if Trump had lost!
- Trump in 2024 is not as lucid and mentally sharp as he was in 2016 – 2020
- Journalists tend to be liberal but try to hide it by giving liberal interviewees a tough time .

Paul O'Sullivan, on behalf of members, thanked Nick for an outstanding presentation.

***Alan Locke***