

Mein Drumpf: Hitler, Donald Trump and a shot across the bow for the left.

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The US presidential elections should serve as a wake-up call to parties of the left. It's time to start listening and engaging, writes Ian McAuley.

We're not sure who first said "history doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme", but it's an apt reminder of the similarities between the forces that have propelled Trump into the US presidency, and the forces that brought Germany's National Socialists to power in 1933.

Trump claims, correctly, to be part of "an incredible and great movement".

There is indeed a "great movement". As in the 1930s countries are turning to what may be loosely described as far-right populism, a movement embracing notions of national or racial exceptionalism, a rejection of globalization, and identification of a supposed conspiracy of internal enemies with a corrosive influence on public ideas.

This movement has brought Britain to "Brexit", fuelled extreme nationalism in Russia and Poland, and energised our own far-right populists such as Abbott, Abetz, Bernardi, Christiansen and Hanson.

For the most part foreign governments, including our own, have reacted to Trump's victory with diplomatic politeness in reassuring and soothing terms. It's as if in some Orwellian process of re-writing history his racist, sexist and generally divisive campaign can be airbrushed out of history, and as if the responsibilities of office will transform him into a responsible statesman.

This reaction is reminiscent of the pre-war policies of appeasing Hitler and wilfully ignoring what he had foreshadowed in Mein Kampf.

Ironically, the strongest warnings to take Trump seriously are being voiced by German politicians. Norbert Röttgen, Chairman of the Bundestag's Committee on Foreign Affairs, warns that we must take his statements, idiotic as they seem, as genuine statements of intent. Cem Özdemir of Germany's Greens refers to Trump's ascendancy as "a break from established tradition – the tradition that saw the western powers standing for liberal values".

Unfortunately the rest of the world does not embrace the learning from history as strongly as the Germans. In our world of postmodern "tolerance" it is somehow improper to call Trump a "liar" or to draw on the rise of National Socialism as a parallel for contemporary events.

It's as if we are to regard Hitler as a unique and freakish phenomenon, disregarding other murderous tyrants such as Mao, Pol-Pot, Pinochet and others who may arise. Perhaps it's because, like the child who called "wolf", people on the "left" have been too loose with the term "fascist".

But the parallels are clear. It's hard to miss the way Trump's call to "make America great again", a slogan described by The Economist as "nostalgic nationalism", echoes with the Führer's call to resurrect Germany from the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles. Or to miss the references to Untermenschen (Mexicans are "criminals, drug dealers and rapists") and to traitors in our midst – namely liberals who hold to unfashionable ideas such as a belief in logic, evidence and the truth.

His self-promotion as America's saviour carries a frightening message. Even his showmanship, such as his grand entrances to waiting ecstatic crowds, is reminiscent of the style portrayed in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*.

It is dangerously naive to believe Trump will be constrained by America's checks and balances (in 1933 many Germans believed Hitler would become more responsible once in office). In America the institutions that are supposed to guarantee a separation of powers are aligned in Trump's favour. The Republicans have strengthened their grip on both the Senate and the House of Representatives, and there are vacancies on the Supreme Court.

The path is clear for Trump to become an elected dictator, and, within America's constitutional constraints, to manipulate the voting system so as to perpetuate his tenure (Australians forget that one of our national assets is an independent electoral commission).

To his credit Shorten, while not repeating his “barking mad” statement, has re-asserted his critical assessment of Trump: “The friendship between our nations is strong enough for honesty. I will always call it as I see it. If I see women being disrespected, I’m going to call it out. If I see people being discriminated against because of the colour of their skin or their religion, I’m going to call it out. As the alternative Prime Minister of this country, Australians are entitled to know where I stand.”

That’s a necessary and dignified statement, connecting well with those who might call themselves “progressives”, but appeals to decency do not in themselves win elections, particularly when people are experiencing economic stress.

The economic shockwaves resulting from Trump’s election are likely to intensify the anti-establishment political movements to which Michael Brull in his post-election analysis refers.

I expect that Trump’s taxation policies and permissive attitudes to banks and health insurers will be stimulatory, and could even bring a sugar-hit to the US economy, but such a boost will be short-lived because those policies will not address America’s deep-seated structural problems.

“Globalization” is too easy a scapegoat to distract from the economic wreckage inflicted by domestic policies of “small government”, privatization, deregulation and trickle-down economics.

Brull’s article is an excellent exposition of the Democrats’ failure to capitalize on the failure of neoliberalism in America. It should also be read as a warning to Shorten and to our own Labor Party – to engage meaningfully and respectfully with those who feel, rightly or wrongly, that they have been left behind by globalization.