

AN ELECTION BEYOND SATIRE

Tom Switzer talks with PJ O'Rourke

Former journalist for *National Lampoon* and *Rolling Stone*, and author of some 16 books including the bestsellers *Parliament of Whores* and *Give War a Chance*, **PJ O'Rourke** (below right) is one of America's leading political satirists—although with the rise of Trump and his circus he says he now feels like an amateur in a world gone professional.

On a recent visit to Australia as a guest of The Centre for Independent Studies, he spoke with **Tom Switzer** (below left), a senior fellow at the United States Studies Centre, on his ABC Radio National program *Between the Lines** about Trump and the revolt against the elites, why he's voting for Hillary, and the outlook for the libertarian cause of small government and individual freedom.

Tom Switzer: Why does Donald Trump upset the sensibilities of so many folks on the right in the US—libertarians, free marketeers, conservatives and mainstream Republicans?

PJ O'Rourke: He doesn't upset my sensibilities. I just think he's an idiot. He wouldn't be the first idiot to be President of the United States, but he's a highly unpredictable idiot.

My libertarian sensibilities are offended not by Trump himself, but by the amount of power that has accrued to the American presidency. Without a parliamentary system our chief executive has a terrible amount of latitude, especially in terms of

international relations—in other words trade and war. I mean he's got the keys to that thingamajig where the button is.

Tom Switzer: Doesn't his selection of Mike Pence as his running mate reassure you that he'd govern in a pretty pragmatic, centre-right kind of tradition?

PJ O'Rourke: There was a Vice President of the United States about 70 or 80 years ago who said that the office of the Vice Presidency was not worth a bucket of warm spit. Honestly, the responsibilities and the authority of the office of the Vice President begin and end with going to the funerals of minor foreign leaders. Major foreign leaders get the President.

Tom Switzer: How come so many so-called experts, indeed nearly every commentator in America and elsewhere, didn't foreshadow Trump's success?

PJ O'Rourke: One thing that we weren't factoring in was that commentators are much too busy watching themselves on television to watch the amount of television that Americans watch. We knew that there was this reality TV show and that there was this Trump fellow on it, but it never occurred to us to watch it. And it certainly never occurred



* *Between the Lines* goes to air every Thursday at 7.30pm. This is an edited version of the transcript. To hear the program in full, go to <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/betweenthelines/pj-o-rourke/7690382>

to us that 390 million Americans were watching it. So Trump came as a big surprise to all of us. But he'd been in every American living room for how ever many days The Apprentice show runs, I don't even know.

That was one thing. The other thing was that he tapped into a pretty grumpy sector of the electorate. I had to figure this out when I did a piece for the BBC Overseas Service during the New Hampshire primaries. I went around and interviewed a lot of Trump supporters. I didn't find that they were supporting him personally in the sense of a man on a white horse who shall save us all. In fact, I'd say to them: 'Don't you think he's a little on the vulgar side?' And they'd say, 'Oh yeah'. And then I'd say, 'Well he seems to have a somewhat tenuous attachment to the truth.' And they'd say, 'Oh yeah, he lies all the time.' So I'd ask, 'Why are you supporting him then?' And they'd say, 'Well we've had it.' It's very much a middle finger vote.

There's definitely a feeling among these people that the political establishment is completely out of touch with their lives.

Often his supporters would start talking about the burden of regulatory issues. There are a lot of small businesses there, a lot of skilled mechanics and skilled labourers. One guy I spoke to owned a gas station, another guy owned a towing-truck company. Then there was a timber-cutter in the logging industry. He was interesting. He had all sorts of problems. As he told me, he has to jump through all these regulatory hoops—environmental this and that, protected wetlands, zoning, road boards and road weights for his truck, and all this other stuff. Yet when he turns on the TV news all the politicians are talking about is transgender bathrooms. As he said, 'We work in the woods. We don't have any bathrooms!'

So there's definitely a feeling among these people that the political establishment—left, right and middle of the road—is completely out of touch with their lives. And they're giving them what for.

Tom Switzer: He's certainly an unconventional Republican.

PJ O'Rourke: He's not a Republican at all. He grabbed the brass ring of the Republican party because that was what he could reach.

Tom Switzer: You may recall that *National Review*, which was Ronald Reagan's favourite magazine, came out with a special edition saying 'Stop Trump!'

PJ O'Rourke: Yes. I knew Bill Buckley, the founder of *National Review* and probably one of the most prominent American conservatives over the past half-century. He'd be appalled by Trump's vulgarity.

But for me, you know there's a thing in international markets known as the volatility index. You can buy and sell fear, you can buy and sell shares in the volatility index. Trump's volatility is simply too high. Now he may turn out to be a harmless bumbler and the inertia of the system may keep him from doing anything stupid, but it's too big a chance.

Tom Switzer: But to be fair, he is resonating with a significant segment of Americans. Francis Fukuyama had a recent piece in the July/August issue of *Foreign Affairs* where he says: 'The real story of this election is that after several decades American democracy is finally responding to the rise of inequality and economic stagnation experienced by most of the population.' He goes on to say: 'Voters have risen up against what they see as a corrupt, self-dealing establishment, turning to radical outsiders in the hope of a purifying cleanse.'

How would you respond to that?

PJ O'Rourke: He's spot on, except that's just one of the factors going on. We're living in puzzling, excessively fast-moving, worrisome times. The technological change that is going on is happening not only at the speed of the electronics that it's based on, but it's also unpredictable. The Industrial Revolution caused tremendous displacement, dislocation, dark satanic mills, and a lot of suffering. But it was sort of linear. Once you'd seen

a railroad, you couldn't have been too surprised by the automobile, which was just sort of a locomotive off the tracks. With the electronic revolution, when you combine that with globalism, you just don't know what is going to happen next.

Put that together with economic stagnation, which is true. Then put that together with the fact that governments—not just in the US but also in Australia and Europe of course—have grown so huge and so clumsy, and have taken on so many duties that they cannot possibly fulfill all of them even if they were geniuses, and they're obviously not.

Then you get the terrorism chaos, which is very frightening. This particular kind of terrorism that we're seeing now—the amount of it and the random nature of it—makes it difficult to see any way of protecting yourself against it. Like that poor priest in France. How? What? Where?

When you put all these factors together it makes for a very unstable environment. People look for easy answers—like some orange-faced fool bellowing that he'll make everything great. And they're no doubt thinking, 'Wow, he'd probably squash ISIS.' But who wouldn't? It's a question of how.

Tom Switzer: Some might say that Trump is something of a global phenomenon. Let's get your reaction to something that former Republican presidential candidate and adviser Pat Buchanan said on the show last year, quote: 'The nationalist parties, the separatist parties in Northern Italy, in France the National Front, in Holland, all over Europe now, they tend to do very well in parliamentary elections. . . All of them have grown dramatically. Very few of them existed at the turn of the century. But it's something that is going on and it's going on here.'

Is the rise of populism and economic nationalism fast becoming the norm in Western politics?

PJ O'Rourke: Well, it's certainly becoming a very big factor. If the terrorism situation keeps going on in Europe as it has been, I think we can expect much more of this. But it isn't limited to Western democracies. After all, Putin is a kind of populist response to the corrupt fools who ran Russia

after the fall of communism. In China, with Xi Jinping, there's a populist element there with his neo-Maoism, which is also a reaction to extreme income inequality in China and the perception that the Chinese government is corrupt—which is an accurate perception.

When people are facing bad problems, especially when they are facing a lot of confusing bad problems all at once, the political results tend to be quite unpleasant. We have of course been through this social experiment before between World War I and World War II, and that didn't turn out very pretty.

Tom Switzer: You're saying in a way that the Brexiters, who supported the Leave campaign in the British referendum, and the Trumpkins, if you like, are pretty much the same people?

PJ O'Rourke: I don't think they are quite the same people. With Brexit, they were facing one really distinct problem. I don't think Brexit ever would have happened had it not been for the uncontrolled influx of Middle East refugees into Europe. I think basically the English looked across the Channel and said: 'If we don't cut ourselves loose from this organisation, we're next'. In that mix, is there a certain amount of racism? Sure. Is there a certain amount of xenophobia? Sure. But is there are certain amount of fear not without grounds?

I don't think Brexit ever would have happened had it not been for the uncontrolled influx of Middle East refugees into Europe.

Tom Switzer: You're a son of the Rust Belt. It's been said that Trump's best path to the White House is to carry all the states that Mitt Romney won in 2012. He has to win Florida, but he also needs to win the industrial mid-West—states like Pennsylvania, which hasn't gone Republican since 1988, Wisconsin which hasn't gone since Reagan won his big landside in 1984, Michigan 1988, and Ohio, your home state, where a Republican who has won the White House has always

carried Ohio. Can Trump turn out enough of these so-called angry white men to win in these states?

PJ O'Rourke: Well, the math would tell us no. But we have been as a group, and I have been as a person, so wrong for so long about all of this that I hesitate to make any predictions. But the math would tell us that Hillary has the voters to make her President. She has large blocs of voters—women, young people, blacks, Hispanics and other minority groups who support her. The problem for her is that she's counting on the votes of groups of people who are rather famous for not voting.

The libertarian case is a little hard to make politically because it's basically saying, 'We'll do less for you'.

Tom Switzer: You're going to vote for Hillary Clinton, am I right?

PJ O'Rourke: I will vote for her if I have to vote for her. Because although I consider her to be wrong about absolutely everything, she's wrong within the normal parameters.

I come back to my point about volatility. Trump is a man with no intellect, no character, never mind the experience and the knowledge; he has no qualification whatsoever to be President. And he's volatile, unpredictable and extremely shallow—shallow to the point of pathological narcissism. It's just too dangerous.

Clinton will be bad. In fact, she may be a good deal worse than bad. But she won't be unpredictable. We're not going to get any terrible surprises from her.

Now I'm hoping that, as you know, we have this odd electoral system that goes state by state to the electoral college. If I wake up on election morning in November and somebody—anybody—is 30 points ahead in my state then I'll have the luxury to go and vote for the Libertarian ticket, which doesn't stand a chance of winning. But I live in a swing state and it may be a tight election. If it looks like my vote is actually going to matter, then I have

to suck it up and vote for Hillary—truly an extra million years in purgatory.

Tom Switzer: Let's talk about the Libertarian ticket. They're headed by Gary Johnson and William Weld, former Republican governors of New Mexico and Massachusetts respectively. Why won't you embrace them?

PJ O'Rourke: I do. I think they're wonderful. I just don't think they stand a chance of winning. I know Mike Bloomberg a little—the extremely popular, extremely effective former Mayor of New York City. He's a political independent, leaning rather conservative, and an enormously wealthy man who built up the Bloomberg business network. He really does not like Trump, and he's had a lot of face-to-face experience with him as Mayor of New York. He doesn't go into specifics but they must be there or else he wouldn't feel so strongly. He never quite said so, but it was obvious and evident that he was looking at running as a third party candidate. But he'd done the numbers and it seemed like anybody who was running to the right of Hillary just increased the chance of Trump getting elected.

So when it comes to the libertarians' chances—you know, Johnson and Weld are not fabulously good campaigners. The libertarian case is a little hard to make politically because it's basically saying, 'We'll do less for you'.

Tom Switzer: But it's a very attractive political philosophy.

PJ O'Rourke: Well, it is to me, but it's not when it comes to bribing voters. Johnson is mostly famous as being a proponent of the legalisation of marijuana and is a little vague. And Weld is well-known for having an extra drink or two, so it's the token tipple ticket.

Tom Switzer: Most libertarians generally support a non-interventionist foreign policy. They're very wary of an ambitious and activist role in the world because it would centralise power at home and build up the power of the state. Now Hillary is a hawk, which explains why so many neo-conservatives like

Robert Kagan support her. Although Trump is a bit erratic, he's less inclined to throw America's weight around the world. Isn't that an attractive feature about him for you?

PJ O'Rourke: Well a couple of things are going on here. Yes, Trump is less interventionist than Hillary, which might be attractive under certain circumstances—especially since intervention like the war in Iraq hasn't gone so well. And yet the rise of ISIS and the spread of this unpredictable micro-terrorism around the globe is giving all sorts of people second thoughts who would normally be in favour of a less interventionist, more mind-your-own-business policy.

Tom Switzer: One of Trump's cards is to say that US intervention in the Middle East has made a bad situation worse, and he's going to make that point hard against Hillary Clinton in the next few months.

PJ O'Rourke: Is there anything that has not made the situation in the Middle East worse? You don't intervene, you get Syria. You do intervene, you get Iraq.

Tom Switzer: Let's conclude on a more philosophical note. We talked earlier about what Pat Buchanan was saying about Trumpism in Europe. We're seeing all these calls for protectionist trade barriers, nationalisation, and a real scepticism about free market capitalism. Are you an optimist or a pessimist about the cause of small government, low taxes and individual liberty?

PJ O'Rourke: I'm pretty pessimistic. I think that in the end smaller government, more personal liberty and more personal responsibility will win out, but only at the price of a crisis before we get there. And no-one wishes for a crisis. Democracy triumphed in Western Europe, but god the price we paid for that triumph.

Become a member and support CIS

Over the next few years, Australia and New Zealand will confront economic and political issues of unprecedented difficulty. Solving these problems will demand energy, wisdom and enterprise of the highest order.

CIS is committed to maintaining and improving economic productivity, political freedom and free enterprise.

Join CIS as a member (see benefits below) and be a part of history, influencing policy in precisely the directions that are now most needed.

	Friend	Associate Member	Member	Donor Member	Sustaining Member
<i>PreCIS</i> newsletter	x	x	x	x	x
Invitations to seminars and special events	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Policy</i> quarterly magazine		x	x	x	x
Occasional Papers (OPs)		x	x	x	x
Research Reports			x	x	x
Invitations to Leadership Lunches					x
Tax-deductibility on donation above the Member rate (in Australia)				x	x

To apply for membership, or to donate, complete the secure online form at www.cis.org.au/join-cis, telephone the Centre on (02) 9438 4377, or email development@cis.org.au.