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The Perversions of Political Punditry



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A study of political pundits appearing on US television discovered that they are more likely to be invited back by the TV station if they are wrong in their predictions than if they are right. One reason why the erroneous commentator is re-invited is because they are categorical in their opinions. They do not see the arrows pointing confusingly in different directions, something that real experts are all-too-prone to do. Another cause is that these same experts may express opinions that deviate radically from conventional media wisdom to the horror of TV interviewers and discussion hosts.

I suspect that it is the triumph of the “pundit class” on US television which makes so much of it boring and uninformative. What makes the tedium so irritating is that it is quite unnecessary as Washington is bulging with real experts on almost every conceivable thing.

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But few of them get within sniffing distance of a TV studio where they might say alarming, unexpected and interesting things.

Unfortunately, it is this same pundit class which decides which issues are important and which are not. Many of those who were speaking knowledgably a month ago about the inevitable “Red Wave” and “Republican Tsunami” in the midterm elections are now busy setting the news agenda for the coverage of the presidential election in 2024.

This is a tremendous waste of time since, as has been shown again and again in past presidential elections, too much will occur in the next two years for the results of midterms to be a useful guide. This and other points made above are discussed by James Fallows [here](#).

Beneath the Radar

The election of Benjamin Netanyahu as the next Israeli prime minister at the head of the most right-wing government in the history of Israel should be attracting more intentional interest. Netanyahu has normalised the presence in Israeli governments of fanatical ethno-nationalists.

Proof of this is the appointment of the extreme right wing leader Itamar Ben-Gvir as Israel’s new national security minister in charge, among other responsibilities, of the Border Police who operate on the West Bank. Once a follower of Meir Kahane, the ultra-sectarian rabbi who wanted to strip Israeli Arabs of citizenship, Ben-Gvir used to keep in his house a picture of Baruch Goldstein who massacred 29 Palestinians in a mosque in Hebron in 1994. Two weeks before the election on 1 November, Ben-Gvir waved a handgun in East Jerusalem and encouraged police to open fire at Palestinian demonstrators.

His appointment has appalled many Israelis and American Jews. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the head of America’s Union for Reform Judaism, said on Sunday that giving Ben-Gvir the job was akin to “appointing David Duke, one of the heads of the KKK, as attorney general”.

As for what was happening on the West Bank, even before Ben-Gvir’s appointment, here is an excellent piece of reporting by the admirable *Haaretz* journalist Amira Hass.

Cockburn’s Picks

Britain may be failing in many respects, but it still produces meticulous reports on what went wrong. I wonder how many people read them. From the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) on the uses of British development aid to finance Afghanistan, it

emerges that a large chunk of aid money may have gone to finance the notorious police death squads.

“ICAI reports that £252m used to fund the salaries of the Afghan National Police as part of an international commitment was a ‘questionable use of UK aid’, because the police were primarily assigned to counter-insurgency operations rather than civilian policing. The report acknowledges that UK support for what was primarily a paramilitary police force helped protect Afghan communities from Taliban attacks, but it highlights concerns of police corruption and brutality, including extortion, arbitrary detention, torture and extrajudicial killings. The report found that attempts were made to end police funding, but they were overruled at the ‘highest levels of the UK government’.”

Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).

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