

Conferencing, Extortion and Political Science 2018: “The Meat Market” of the 2018 World IPSA Congress

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It may well go down as one of the most appalling conferences in the history of the International Political Science Association. The World Congress is one of those hot air events that ventilates academic views in limited circles while shutting them off from actual discussion in the broader community. In this setting, academics with the oxymoronic title of “political scientists” can give the false impression that what they do is both of a political order and scientific. (True politics, more appropriately, is either high art or lowly muck.) Models are exchanged and poured over with pedantry; theories are pondered, number crunching pursued.

The Sunday began poorly. A dear trip from Brisbane’s domestic airport yanked at purse with a certain savagery. Held in the sterile monster that is the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, a string of yellow clad volunteers resembling the youth wing of a fascist movement awaited guests for registration. “That will be \$30,” snarled one of the attendees at the desk, keen to impress with her distinct lack of interest in assisting the newcomers.

That amount, it should be said, was for the conference program, which, for the first time in living memory, had to be paid for. This, despite the hefty sum of \$400 as a registration fee. Another attendant was indifferent, suggesting that, in a world of the smart phone, there was hardly any need for a gratis program *on paper*. “Download the app on your smart phone and then read the program from there.”

This proved to be merely the start. There are numerous stands placed through the Convention centre, but there is no tea and coffee. Delegates and participants are soon stunned to realise that two places in the building offer coffee, tea and juice at some price. The rest is water. There are queues reminiscent of the dying days of the Soviet Union, and many of the offerings at the café are on the lean side. Pre-purchased lunch is a humble sandwich, or a wrap and some fruit, at the princely sum of \$20. Participants are warned that the food outside the centre, along South Bank, is *expensive*.

The opening ceremony is characterised by a formal, if tired resignation, and its setting is a reminder of a Party Congress of gouty officials who clap wearily at the waffle knowing that they must do so. Two aboriginal ladies are retained to do the “Welcome to Country”, Australia’s excuse for an emotional cleansing. School grade descriptions are offered of an indigenous background deemed continuous and living for sixty thousand years. There is

talk about ancestry. The presenters hope to capitalise on the expansive guilt drawn from colonisation and describe how their “welcome to ceremony” events are all part of an extensive circuit. These women are for hire.

An Indian delegate starts to yawn noisily. His wife prods him and chuckles noisily. The dance ceremony begins, men half naked covered in strips of paint. This offers conference attendees the anthropological musings that give a false credence to confected songs and rituals. But the ensemble is certainly catchy in its enthusiasm.

What follows, in contrast, is pompous: string music, adjusted accordingly, with a background montage of images ranging from atrocity to President Barack Obama in the situation room the day Osama bin Laden was gunned down. All in all, the organisers are keen to stifle the life of the participants. There are too many speakers, and the platitudes seem endless.

The actual sessions of the conference – all too many and running in the hundreds – are held in facilities of varying quality, veering between plush rooms of high standard to an open area more akin to those used for detaining refugees. Cheap makeshift partitions mean that noise can be heard from neighbouring panels and sessions. Participants risk pushing these over in leaning on them. Clapping moves with disruptive menace across the spaces. Voices are drowned, and questions cannot be heard. Only realising how such an arrangement would effectively kill any engagement between the participants, organisers decided to scold those who had dared be noisy on the day. On Monday, “Jazz clapping” was suggested as a remedy. The order was not abided by.

Such conferences tend to be acts of phenomenal irrelevance, vacuums of time wasting and motions. The big wigs who change history rarely turn up, and the plenary sessions tend to be vague pokes in the ether of knowledge. The only politician to turn up to the event was a state minister from Queensland who shared a portfolio with multiculturalism, local government and racing, a certain Stirling Hinchliffe. “What’s this racing about?” came a quizzical Glaswegian academic currently working in Canada. Racing, as he found out, was a source of revenue and electoral interest to Queensland politicians.

What matters at such gatherings is its slave, meat market concept, fashioned by years of academic goosing, obsequiousness and envy. Such an international conference as IPSA is self-referential and circular; there is nothing beyond it and not much within it. But the people who do venture to such a gig are in search of solid patronage, and some senior academic figures who feel honoured enough to be chased might condescend to give out their details.

IPSA 2018 in Brisbane was, however, extortionate, dull and indifferent to the actual global chaos that is proving far more interesting. Political scientists lack the science, or the means, to understand the Trump phenomenon. For them, tenuous models of analysis come before evidence; theory before history. They are incapable of understanding the intrusions of radical contingency, and the panels, however diverse, failed in one fundamental respect: accepting the discomforts of reality.

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