Literature’s ultimate guide to politics

War and Peace

Leo Tolstoy’s masterpiece is essential reading for anyone involved in government

Two researchers, Macgregor Duncan and Professor Andrew Leigh (now a federal Labor candidate for the seat of Fraser), with time on their hands and research assistance at their disposal, decided to survey the reading habits of Australian politicians. All federal politicians were asked about their current reading, both fiction and non-fiction, as well as their all-time favourite titles. The results were reported in the March issue of The Australian Literary Review.

We should not place too much weight on the findings. Only 89 of the 226 federal parliamentarians responded to the survey (fewer than 40 per cent). Moreover, respondents were openly identified, thus encouraging image-conscious politicians to manufacture answers that would impress with their intellectual gravitas. Among a varied list of authors, most of the usual respectable suspects turn up: in fiction, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Leo Tolstoy, Scott Fitzgerald and John Steinbeck, and, in non-fiction, Winston Churchill and George Orwell. Of individual works of fiction, the most popular selection was Tolstoy’s War and Peace, a welcome choice, and not altogether surprising. Indeed, if one were asked to choose a single novel as essential reading for those professionally involved in government, whether in politics or the public service, War and Peace would easily top the list. Why?

To begin with, Tolstoy, even when read in translation, is arguably the most imaginative creator of lifelike people and social situations. He depicts each of his large cast of characters with astonishing clarity and human sympathy. As he makes them interact, whether in the privacy of domestic life or in wider social settings, we become caught up in their intimate personal feelings, misunderstandings, triumphs and disappointments. No other novelist so directly and movingly captures the emotional richness, both heart-warming and tragic, of which individual human life is capable.

Of classic English novelists, Dickens (a powerful influence on Tolstoy) comes closest in his breadth of human sympathy, though he sometimes lapses into bombast and melodrama. Everyone’s current favourite, Austen, appears narrow and moralistic by comparison. For those made jaded and cynical by public life, Tolstoy’s faith in the positive value and variety of individual human beings and human society provides a powerful tonic. The recent movie, The Last Station, with Christopher Plummer and Helen Mirren, paints an unflattering (and largely accurate) portrait of Tolstoy the man in his last years. But the...
reputation of Tolstoy the artist should remain undiminished.

War and Peace is perhaps not Tolstoy’s most satisfying work of fiction. His other masterpiece, Anna Karenina, accords more, in form and structure, with our literary expectations of what a novel should be like. War and Peace, by contrast, is idiosyncratic, both in scope and content, because it has ambitions not only as fiction but also as history and philosophy. Tolstoy sets out to describe and analyse Russia’s response to Napoleon’s attack, which began in 1805 and ended with Napoleon’s retreat in 1812. Though he concentrates on the personal lives of his central characters, he also includes detailed accounts of actual battles and occasionally interrupts the narrative with philosophical reflections on the theory of history. It is these wider purposes that help give the novel its particular interest for students of government.

In his theory of history, Tolstoy seeks to explain the actions of whole peoples. What led the French to invade Russia or the Russians to repel the French? He rejects the supposed influence of leaders such as Napoleon or the tsar. “Great men” may appear to be shaping events but they are in fact shaped by them. He also attacks explanations that rely on abstract, general causes such as national culture. Instead, he puts his faith in the infinite number of individual actions that make up an inexorable stream determining the movement of nations.

As a philosophical theory, Tolstoy’s view of history is open to serious objections. The political theorist Isaiah Berlin pointed out in his famous essay on Tolstoy, The Hedgehog and the Fox, that Tolstoy never reconciles his acceptance of the concrete reality of individuals with his commitment to the notion of an underlying historical determinism. The best advice for the reader is to ignore his general theorising and instead follow his detailed narrative of historical events, partly fictional and partly based on historical sources. Here, we find some very perceptive and challenging observations on the nature and limitations of leadership and power.

Tolstoy’s main theme is that generals and generalship have almost negligible effect on the outcome of
military battles and campaigns. Fighting is done by individual soldiers whose individual capacity to kill or be killed determines whether the day is won or lost. Adjutants and messengers ride about the battlefield with tactical instructions from the commanding general. But the instructions are typically misunderstood or ignored in the chaos of battle.

In one of the early engagements, the Russians stall the French advance mainly because a small battery of Russian artillery, under a resolute officer, did not receive his superior’s command to withdraw. The continuing fire from the battery’s few guns convinced the French that it represented a much bigger force and dissuaded them from attacking, thus ceding victory to the Russians. Later major battles at Austerlitz and Borodino are replete with similar instances of confusion and accidental outcomes.

Tolstoy encapsulates this theme in the contrasting figures of the French and Russian commanders. While Napoleon issues a stream of orders to his generals, under the illusion that he is controlling events, his Russian counterpart, Kutuzov, hardly stirs during the fighting. Elderly, grossly obese and almost blind, Kutuzov embodies wise generalship. In his headquarters, he is surrounded by the ambitious careerists and strategic experts (many of them foreign émigrés) who are removed from the heat of political realities of the battlefield. Returning briefly to civilian life, he works with the tsar’s leading domestic policy adviser, a highly intelligent bureaucrat who is dedicated to applying rational principles to policy problems but lacks any human sympathy or understanding and ultimately produces nothing of human value. Back once more with the army, Prince Andrei is invited by Kutuzov to serve as aide-de-camp. But he declines any further involvement with high command, opting instead to return to fight in the front line.

Brief summaries cannot do justice to the subtlety (and readability) of Tolstoy’s narrative. His deep sympathy with people of every type saves him from being preachy or didactic. But the underlying message is clear: leaders do not control events; true understanding comes only to those who stand back and observe, not to those who seek to engage and impose their will.

The message is one which today’s public servants could take to heart in their current obsession with leadership and strategic planning. Paradoxically, we have absorbed the lesson from economic theorists, such as Friedrich von Hayek, that economic markets are too complicated to be either fully understood or planned for. But we still persist in thinking that other complex institutions, such as health or education systems, defence forces or universities, can be run successfully from the top. Public leaders surround themselves with strategic consultants who peddle the latest management expertise from overseas, just like the foreign military experts at the Russian army headquarters. With their experts’ assistance, leaders draw up plans, set performance objectives, and attempt to mobilise their subordinates. In the event, the rational-sounding activity at headquarters is often irrelevant to the myriad of outcomes determined by the individual efforts of professionals in the front line. The rank and file certainly need the equivalent of ample provisioning and sound boots. But the rest is usually up to them.

As Tolstoy recognised, the appearance of strategic control is essential for maintaining the mystique of the leader. So we cannot expect ministers or senior managers to admit to their relative impotence. But the rest of us can see more clearly, the further we are removed from the heat of politics and battle. Those going on holiday or a long overseas flight, should take with them a copy of War and Peace. It can be guaranteed to restore their faith in humanity while renewing their scepticism about leadership and planning.