

The folly of making predictions (or, what we got wrong in 2017)

By Sholto Byrnes



Emmanuel Macron: was the joy over his election victory entirely misplaced? AFP

If 2017 was a year of political turbulence and upset, it was perhaps not surprisingly also one in which many predictions proved false. Underlying this in many cases, I would argue, were varied instances of wishful thinking; in others, it was a case of misreading the signs and context, and failing to understand the relevant realities and possibilities. So here is a selection of what the commentariat got “wrong” in 2017.

First, Donald Trump wouldn’t last the year as president. It didn’t take many months before the outrage many felt about Donald Trump’s election began to coalesce into the conviction that he just had to be booted out of the White House. There was a renewed focus on precisely how a president could be impeached. By June, many of his opponents had also started to take great interest in a part of the US constitution of which we had generally heard little – Section 4 of the 25th Amendment, under which a president can be removed for being “unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office.”

Both scenarios were fantasies dreamed up by the large number of anti-Trumpistas who appear to be under the illusion that just because they regard him as unfit to occupy the Oval Office, that means his election was illegitimate. Mr Trump may be an unusual president, but he won squarely according to the rules. And his critics failed to realise that both impeachment and the implementation of this part of the 25th Amendment are essentially political acts, which would require members of Congress to actively want to bring him down, and the terms under which he could be targeted are ill-defined. Both would also need to pass by a two thirds majority in the Senate.

So long as Senate Republicans aren’t reduced to a rump, then, they would be most unlikely to want to alienate the important percentage of voters who still support Mr Trump. If he goes, it’ll be when he decides to leave.

Second, Theresa May wouldn’t last the year as UK prime minister. After the disastrous (for her) result of last June’s general election, the former Tory chancellor George Osborne called Mrs May “a dead woman walking”. The only question, he said, “is how long she remains on death row.” Not long at all, came the response. Surely she couldn’t possibly last through party conference in October? I was asked by one radio interviewer at the time. She has hung on, however, just as I thought she would. The putative challengers for her job were either too flawed, too divisive, just not impressive enough or

too loyal. And why would anyone want to be Britain's premier at the moment – since the end result of Brexit, be it deal, no deal, or not leaving the EU at all, is going to infuriate a huge part of the population? It's a thankless task. Mrs May could be welcome to it for at least the next year or so.

Next, the idea that the far right was in retreat in Europe. After Geert Wilders "failed" to become prime minister of Holland in March, and Marine Le Pen was beaten in the second round of the French presidential election in May, Europe's far-right surge had stalled, we were told. This was a strange conclusion, since Mr Wilders never stood a chance of becoming the Dutch leader in the first place. At best his party had claimed around 25 per cent in the polls, and such was his reputation as an Islamophobe that most other parties had pledged not to go into coalition with him. In fact, since other parties tried to pander to his voters by adopting harsher anti-immigrant rhetoric, Mr Wilders could count it as a partial gain.

As for Ms Le Pen and Mr Macron: the joy over the latter's victory was entirely misplaced. Mr Macron had a terrible result, for once the presidential election was down to the last two, fully 34 per cent of voters opted for Me Le Pen – the highest ever percentage won by the far right in France. The last time a Le Pen (Marine's father, Jean-Marie), reached the final round in France, his opponent, Jacques Chirac won 82 per cent of the vote to Le Pen's 18 per cent. That was a landslide, not Mr Macron's 66 per cent, which looks feeble given the verboten nature of his opponent. Meanwhile, 2017 ended with a far right party having entered the German Bundestag for the first time for over half a century, and another forming a new coalition government in Austria, controlling key portfolios including the interior, defence and foreign ministries. Surge stalled? Not so much.

To end on a more positive note, early last year many were predicting that the reforms spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman would either be thwarted or be slowed to a crawl by the sheer difficulty of effecting change in Saudi Arabia. Prince Mohammed proved the doubters wrong with his decisive moves against corruption; his statements about returning to "moderate Islam"; and the government's bold announcements on plans to let women drive and attend sports events, to allow the return of cinemas, and to issue tourist visas. This was not what critics who wish to paint a forbidding picture of the Kingdom wanted to hear. But as with the other examples above, predictions viewed through a partisan prism may not be good guides to the future. As for this year? If one bears in mind that the extraordinary is the new ordinary, 2018 may not be quite as shocking as 2017 was to many – especially those who still hope to wake up to find the Trump presidency was just a dream.

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