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The Idiot Reading:

Why the Anglosphere Right Still Thinks There's an Idiot in the White House

Paper 1 of The Divergent Societies series

The Divergent Societies series examines three things happening at once across the late-modern Anglosphere. American politics has diverged from the rest of the West. Western societies have diverged from their own historical foundations. And Anglosphere political classes have converged with each other on a managed-decline trajectory while their countries diverge from their own past. The series asks how this happened, why conventional analysis missed it, and what the structural mechanism actually is.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Outside the United States, Anglosphere conservative parties have spent ten years treating Donald Trump as an embarrassment. The exceptions tell the story. Italy, Argentina, El Salvador, and Japan produced leaders who studied his method, adapted it to local conditions, and won. The United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada produced leaders who kept losing.

This brief argues the misreading is not personal. It is the predictable output of a structure with four parts, and this series gives each part a name. The first is a worldview. Call it the progressive cultural worldview: the educated Western default for forty years, under which faith is private, family is a lifestyle choice, and the West is something to apologise for rather than defend. The second is the apparatus that carries that worldview and rewards anyone who adopts it — the universities, the agencies, the NGOs, the media, the professional bodies. In plain terms it is the establishment; in this series' technical passages it is the institutional infrastructure. The third is

the propagation channels: the professional networks that move the worldview between countries, which is why the same positions surface in London, Canberra, Ottawa and Wellington at much the same time. The fourth, examined later in the series, is the demographic architecture underneath all of it — the family-size patterns that make the whole arrangement rational for the people running it.

Around the worldview and the establishment that carries it sits a defensive function. It is the reflex that fires when something threatens either one, and it runs in three modes. The first is anti-Americanism, used when the threat can be painted as American. The second is aesthetic disgust, used when the threat sits outside the political class's rhetorical norms — this is the mode that processed Trump. The third is improvised contempt: ad hoc vocabularies invented on the spot, used when a threat fits neither of the first two. This brief turns on the third mode. The anti-American story and the disgust at Trump's style were the first two modes doing their work. But the contempt did not stop at Trump. It extended, in freshly improvised form, to figures who look and sound nothing like him. That improvisation is the giveaway. It reveals what the defensive function is actually protecting: not a taste, but a programme.

The deeper finding is this. The reading has survived ten years of contradicting evidence. That survival is itself the point. It shows that the Anglosphere conservative political class has absorbed the cultural standards of the progressive class so completely that it can no longer recognise a politician operating outside those standards as competent — even when the results are visible and on the public record. This is not an analytical mistake. It is a cultural judgement dressed up as one. By the Madisonian standard, a self-interested actor whose policies and electoral outcomes consistently outperform the alternatives is not incompetent. The label tells you about the labeller, not the labelled.

The Prothean Institute holds no partisan position in this context and instead studies what works. Successful operators across the political spectrum — Trump, Meloni, Milei, Howard, Blair, Obama, Australian Labor in 2022 — are studied on the same basis: not to endorse them, but to understand how their methods fit the conditions they operated in and the results they produced. This brief examines the Anglosphere conservative misreading of Trump because it is a significant driver of today's geopolitics. The same method will be applied to other cases in future work.

1. The Establishment That Was Never Contested

To understand why the Anglosphere right cannot read Trump, you have to go back four decades before he arrived.

The forty-year story this section describes is not just background. It is the first and oldest of the defensive function's three operating modes — the anti-American mode, the one that runs whenever a threat to the worldview can be painted as American. Watch it being built. The other two modes are the same reflex finding new targets.

The story has visible roots in the late Vietnam years and the cultural upheaval after 1968. It was locked in through the long capture of universities and major media organisations across the 1980s and 1990s. It reached full strength in the post-Cold War period, when nobody seriously pushed back.

The story that congealed in Anglosphere elite discourse held that the United States was too powerful, too arrogant, too unsophisticated, and too prone to military adventure to be trusted with the role of global hegemon.

Some of this had real elements. American foreign policy did include genuine mistakes. But factual accuracy is beside the point when it comes to how the story worked. It worked as a cultural baseline.

The September 2001 attacks did not interrupt this baseline. Within weeks, European, Australian, and broader Anglosphere commentary had moved from solidarity to a quiet but persistent suggestion that the United States had brought the attacks on itself. The Iraq invasion of 2003 — whatever its merits or mistakes as a decision — was slotted into the existing story rather than judged on its own terms. By the mid-2000s, the educated Anglosphere view of American power had become simple. American power was a problem to be contained. The Obama presidency made that view mainstream. Obama apologised for American power and stepped back from American interests. The educated Anglosphere read this not as correction but as confirmation. America had finally agreed with the diagnosis its Anglosphere allies had been making all along.

None of this would have occurred if the political and intellectual right had contested it. The pattern across the Anglosphere conservative movement — UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada — was two generations of leaders who refused to defend the proposition that American hegemony, including its imperfect and graceless episodes, had produced the most prosperous and least violent international order in modern history despite the obvious truth of this observation.

Conservative politicians outside the United States declined to make this case because, within the logic of their own election cycles, they judged (perhaps correctly in the short term) that doing so was costly. The audience that would have applauded was assumed to be already onside and therefore not worth campaigning to. The result was a cultural landscape in which the anti-American story had no organised opposition. It became, by default, the truth.

By the time Trump arrived, the proposition that the United States was big, arrogant, and stupid had been the unstated baseline of polite Anglosphere opinion for thirty years. Trump did not have to be evaluated on merit.

2. The Aesthetic Verdict

Mode one made America suspect in advance. But mode one is built for a country, not a man. Processing Trump himself took the second mode of the defensive function: aesthetic disgust. It is the mode that runs when a threat presents outside the political class's rhetorical norms — when someone simply does not look or sound the way a serious person is supposed to. Trump triggered it completely. What follows is that mode at work.

When Donald Trump won the 2016 Republican primary, the Anglosphere conservative response was the same as the progressive one. Both treated him as an unfortunate mistake. A vulgar reality television figure had stumbled into a serious job. His positions — on trade, on China, on allies free-riding, on immigration, on the limits of Western military intervention — were not evaluated. They were ignored or worse, assumed to be nonsense because he himself was assumed to be incompetent. The unspoken reasoning was that any position held by a man who looked and sounded like Trump could not be serious.

Conservative commentary in London, Sydney, Wellington and Toronto did not ask whether Trump's diagnosis of American decline might be correct. It did not ask whether his apparent unpredictability might be deliberate. It did not ask whether the political class he was fighting had simply stopped defending American interests against Russia, China, and Iran¹ — and that Trump might be the response to that failure. The conclusion was reached in advance. He was an idiot because he was crude. His policies were stupid because he was an idiot. His winning was a fluke because his policies were stupid.

The way Trump talks settled the verdict. He speaks in short fragments. He repeats himself. He uses words like best and worst and tremendous. He insults opponents by their appearance. He performs unpredictability as a tactic, and he has said openly that he does. None of this is how the Anglosphere political class talks. That class values long sentences, carefully hedged statements, abstract language, and the appearance of cool detachment. The Anglosphere conservative class shares those standards with the progressive class it supposedly fights. They went to the same universities. They read the same newspapers. They want to be taken seriously at the same dinner parties. A politician who does not sound like that does not sound serious to them.

The reading survived Trump's first term. That is the data point worth noting. The Abraham Accords were achieved by an administration the 'establishment' had said could not handle diplomacy. NATO members increased defence spending under sustained pressure the same 'establishment' had said would shatter the alliance. Operation Warp Speed delivered a vaccine on a timeline the same 'establishment' had said was impossible. ISIS lost its territorial caliphate. None of it changed the verdict. The verdict survived because it was never really about what Trump did. It was about what kind of person Trump was, judged by how he came across. The policy outcomes were denied, credited to others, or written off as accidents.

Modes one and two together can look like a complete explanation. If the misreading really is about America, and about the way Trump looks and sounds, the story ends here. The next section is the test of whether it does.

3. The Test Case Generalises

This section is the diagnostic. Each of the first two modes has a limit. Anti-Americanism needs a threat that can be coded as American power. Aesthetic disgust needs a threat that presents outside the political class's rhetorical norms. The test case is a set of figures who fit neither limit — Americans who are not America-the-hegemon, and who present, if anything, more like the political class than against it. If the contempt still arrives, it is not coming from mode one or mode two. It is coming from mode three: improvised on the spot. And what the defensive function has to improvise against is the clearest evidence of what it was defending all along.

If the misreading were really about Trump as a person — how he comes across, how he speaks, how far he sits from the political-class norm — it would be specific to him. The contempt would attach to him as an individual. It would not extend to other administration figures with different presentations. The test is whether it does.

The answer is clear. The same Anglosphere commentariat that has spent ten years dismissing Trump as a vulgar populist now directs essentially the same contempt at JD Vance, Pete Hegseth, Robert F. Kennedy Jr and Elon Musk (while he led DOGE). The four look and sound nothing like Trump, and nothing like each other.

Vance is a Yale Law graduate. He wrote a memoir that was taught at elite American universities. He is a venture capitalist who speaks the language of the establishment intellectual class fluently.

Hegseth went to Princeton and Harvard. He is an Army veteran with a combat record and a polished media presence.

Kennedy carries one of the most famous political surnames in America. He trained as an environmental lawyer at exactly the kind of institution the establishment has spent decades approving of.

Musk is a successful entrepreneur, billionaire and has built himself up to be the richest man in the world from nothing.

None of the four looks or sounds like Trump. None can be called an idiot in the way Trump can.

And yet each is treated by the same commentariat with substantively the same contempt. The vocabulary differs because it must. Vance is dismissed as a hypocrite or a sellout. Hegseth as unqualified or extremist. Kennedy as a crank or a conspiracist and Musk as pursuing a corrupt scheme to access government data. The function is the same in each case. Each is placed outside the bounds of legitimate political discussion. The contempt arrives before the evidence is looked at. The cultural attacks that worked on Trump cannot be used against the others on their own

terms. So different attacks are made up. The improvisation is the giveaway. The contempt comes first and the justification follows.

The contempt is not about how Trump comes across. It is about what he believes. The verdict against Trump always followed from his beliefs, not from his style. When the same beliefs appear in figures who look and sound nothing like Trump, the same contempt arrives. Only the vocabulary changes.

What programme this group carries can be specified independently of how the establishment reacts to it. The inventory below names the parts of the civilisational programme set out in *Lost Coherence* and *Thus Spake Ilos* — the philosophical and religious inheritance the modern political class has set aside — that each of these figures publicly carries.

What do the five share? Each is publicly committed to faith, to family, and to the view that the West has an inheritance worth defending. Trump's second-term administration names the agenda directly — Faith, Family, Freedom — and has built institutions around it. A White House Faith Office. A Religious Liberty Commission. A federal task force on anti-Christian discrimination. Vance is a Catholic convert. He has written about being drawn to Catholicism because it passes virtue down through generations. His political thinking is built on Augustine and on the view that the West faces a fertility crisis. Hegseth is a member of the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches. He has seven children. He sends them to a classical Christian school. He has written a book on what has gone wrong with the education system. Kennedy was raised Catholic and credits his faith with getting him off heroin. He believes the institutions that govern public health and family life have been captured and corrupted. While not overtly religious, Musk is passionately pro-American and free market capitalist.

The five look and sound nothing like each other. The 'establishment' is responding to what they believe. It is not responding to how they present. The reading that says the contempt is about Trump's presentation cannot explain why Vance, Hegseth, Kennedy and Musk get the same contempt when they present nothing like Trump, and nothing like each other. The reading that says the contempt is about what they believe explains it precisely. The establishment is not defending the political establishments taste. It is defending the political establishments programme. The post-Cold War settlement made faith a private matter. It made family a lifestyle choice. It made the West something to apologise for rather than defend. That settlement is what is under threat. That is what the establishment is protecting.

This is the diagnosis Prothean has built across its prior work. *Lost Coherence*² sets out what holds a civilisation together, and how those things have been dismantled across the modern period. *Thus Spake Ilos*³ picks up the philosophical and religious inheritance the modern political class has thrown away and asks what would be needed to restore it. The four figures in the current American administration carry, in their public commitments and in their personal lives,

substantial parts of the programme those briefs identify as missing from contemporary Western politics.

The test cases have made the establishment visible. It is not defending taste. It is defending a programme. The post-Cold War deal made faith a private matter, family a transaction, and the West something to apologise for. Trump, Vance, Hegseth, and Kennedy are the first group with executive power who openly carry the opposite programme. The contempt is the establishment doing what it was built to do.

The negative case: Mike Pence

The clearest proof that the establishment's hostility tracks ideology rather than style or involvement in the Trump project is the case of Mike Pence. Pence served as Vice President for the entirety of the first Trump administration. He was directly inside the project the establishment has since treated as illegitimate. He was substantively involved in the consequential decisions — judicial nominations, regulatory rollback, foreign policy reorientation — that produced the break the establishment has been responding to. By any reasonable measure of policy involvement or ideological position, Pence was as much if not more a part of the project as Vance, Hegseth, Kennedy or Musk are now.

And yet Pence did not attract anything like the visceral hostility directed at the current cohort. He was treated by the Anglosphere political-class commentariat as a conventional Republican of a recognisable type. Religiously conservative the establishment could understand as personal piety. Institutionally polite, performatively respectful of inherited norms. Demographically moderate, with three children, unremarkable for his generation and political register. Bilaterally well-mannered in the international forums where the establishment evaluated him. He fit a category the establishment already had filed under 'manageable conservative'. He could be patronised, and the attacks directed at him were the standard attacks of partisan opposition. They were not the boundary-breaking hostility directed at the current group.

What separates Pence from Vance, Hegseth, and Kennedy is not policy and not even ideology in the narrow sense. It is the kind of conservative each represents at the deepest level. Pence is the recognisable type the Anglosphere right has been producing for the entire post-war period. Religiously private. Comfortable within institutions. Demographically moderate. Willing to compete for office under existing institutional rules without challenging the underlying frame those rules operate within. Howard, Cameron, Harper, May, Sunak, Frost, Dutton, Morrison, Turnbull, Abbott, Romney, the Bushes — all variations on the Pence archetype. The Anglosphere centre-right has produced figures of this type almost exclusively. The establishment accepts them because they do not threaten the direction of travel described elsewhere in this series⁶. They oppose it in style. They operate within it in practice. They fit the tolerance band.

The Vance-Hegseth-Kennedy-Musk group does not fit that band. They want different things. They want a country that has more children. They want a military and a culture rebuilt against the views currently dominant in the institutions. They want serious reform of how public health, science, and regulation and government are run. None of that fits inside the existing system. All of it implies changing the system.

The Anglosphere right has not produced figures who want these things in the entire post-war period. Pence shared the Trump project at the policy level and the establishment processed him without the hostility now directed at the current group. The reason was not policy. The reason was that Pence was the kind of conservative the establishment has known how to handle for forty years. The current group is not. The establishment's hostility tracks this difference reliably. Figures who threaten the system get extreme, boundary-breaking hostility regardless of how they come across. Figures who work inside the system get conventional opposition regardless of how close their policies are to the threat.

4. The Madisonian Cut

Madison's key insight in Federalist No. 51 is that lasting institutions must produce good outcomes from self-interested people, not rely on virtuous ones. Applied to political judgement, the principle holds broadly. A politician should be evaluated by how well their methods fit their conditions and what results they produce. Not by the cultural class they belong to. Not by the way they speak.

Run that test against Trump's performance — distinguishing established outcomes from contested ones, and contested ones from speculative ones — and the verdict is hard to escape.

- On trade and China policy, his administration shifted the bipartisan consensus permanently. The Biden administration kept the tariff architecture and extended it.
- On NATO burden-sharing, his pressure produced the largest sustained increase in European defence spending in a generation.
- On the Middle East, his administration produced normalisation agreements the prior consensus had said were impossible without prior Palestinian statehood.
- On industrial policy, his push to decouple strategically from China is now the working assumption of Western governments that publicly disowned him.
- On immigration, his second-term enforcement architecture has been copied in proposal form by European centre-right parties that previously denounced it.
- On political method itself, his mastery of new media, of attention as a weapon, and of controlling the frame has been studied and copied. Most successfully by leaders the Anglosphere conservative class has been similarly slow to credit. Giorgia Meloni in Italy.

Javier Milei in Argentina. Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. Sanae Takaichi-aligned currents in Japan.

The first-term record came at a price the Madisonian framework should name. The administration was characterised by high cabinet turnover, sustained legal friction, and significant senior-staff churn. These were real costs. They were also, in substantial part, the cost imposed on the administration by the establishment's resistance to it — investigations, leaks, bureaucratic non-cooperation, and personnel attrition under sustained external pressure. The honest counterfactual sharpens the Madisonian point rather than blunting it. An administration with the same diagnostic intelligence, free to direct its full energy at governance rather than at sustained defensive engagement with the institutional infrastructure documented in this series, would have produced a still larger results pattern. The verdict on first-term Trump is not only what he did against the resistance. It is what he did despite the cost of the resistance itself.

The point is not that every Trump policy was correct. The point is not that every outcome attributed to him was caused by him. The point is that the record disproves the “idiot” reading at any reasonable standard. A politician who twice won the Republican nomination against unified establishment opposition, twice won the presidency, rebuilt a major party's coalition along lines he had identified, and produced policy outcomes his successors kept or copied — is not, by any working definition that survives the Madisonian test, an unintelligent operator. The persistence of the reading after this evidence is not analytical and verges on derangement.

A politician whose policies and electoral outcomes consistently outperform the alternatives is not an idiot. The label tells you about the level of derangement of labeller, not the labelled.

The same framework applied without partisan filter identifies a longer list of operators worth studying.

Howard 1996–2007 showed how to hold a coalition together through emotional connection and identity politics that no later Anglosphere conservative leader has matched. He also, across eleven years of stable government, declined to use the institutional power he held to reshape the captured institutions his successors would have to govern within. He handed on an environment more tilted against conservatives than the one he inherited. The Madisonian test on Howard is therefore split. He passed the immediate electoral problem. He failed the longer-term institutional one.

Blair 1997 demonstrated the conversion of a defeated party into an electoral juggernaut by abandoning the aesthetic and policy positions that had become liabilities. He simultaneously locked in cultural and constitutional changes — devolution, Human Rights Act, mass immigration policy — that his Conservative successors proved unable or unwilling to reverse. That is the longer-horizon test passed in the opposite direction.

Obama 2008 demonstrated narrative discipline at presidential scale and the strategic use of personal symbolism as political infrastructure.

Australian Labor's 2022 small-target campaign demonstrated, in the negative direction, that an incumbent vulnerable on cost of living and integrity could be removed by a disciplined opposition with a favourable media that refused to be drawn onto the incumbent's preferred ground. None of these are endorsements. Each is a structural recognition of what the operator solved and, where applicable, what the operator failed to solve. Prothean studies what works because what works, by definition, has passed the Madisonian test. The partisan affiliation of the operator is irrelevant to whether and how that test was passed.

Prothean is politically neutral in its analysis of method, fit, and results. What works is what works. Operators across the political spectrum who have produced lasting political results are studied on the same basis: not to endorse them, but to understand what their success reveals about how political method can work in a captured environment.

5. The Method, and Why It Was Missed

Trump's political method is not hidden. He has described it in print and in interviews for forty years, and it has stayed largely the same. Three elements are worth pulling apart, because each was and continues to be misread by Anglosphere conservative observers who should have understood them.

Cultivated unpredictability as negotiating leverage

Trump has stated explicitly, going back to *The Art of the Deal* in 1987, that he cultivates an image of unpredictability because predictable counterparties are easily exploited. This is not a hidden idea. It is a stated one. It also lines up with well-known findings on negotiation. A believable willingness to act unpredictably gives you more room to bargain. The Anglosphere conservative reading of Trump's tariff announcements, his diplomatic outbursts, and his apparent reversals has been almost uniformly that they reflect impulsivity. Incredibly — the idea that Trump might be acting unpredictable on purpose (when he has told the world he does exactly that) — was never seriously considered.

Direct media as primary infrastructure

Trump's command of social media, his use of rallies as broadcast events, and his treatment of press conferences as combat, is the most important political communication breakthrough since the end of the broadcast era. It has been studied and successfully adapted by Meloni, Milei, and Bukele. It has been not-studied and not-adapted by Anglosphere conservative parties, which continue to operate as though the Westminster press gallery and the broadcast network political

programme are the venues that matter. Prothean's prior work on the small-target strategy⁴ and on conservative emotional communication⁵ has documented the cost of this failure inside Australian electoral politics specifically.

Frame-control as a substitute for fact-control

Institutional fact-checking has been visibly captured along ideological lines. So the skill that matters is no longer accuracy as judged by the captured institution. It is the ability to set the terms on which facts are understood. Trump's facility with frame-control — through repetition, naming, ridicule, and the strategic use of provocation to force opponents to fight on his chosen ground — is a skill that Anglosphere conservative operatives have been culturally unwilling to acknowledge. Acknowledging it would require deploying it. The progressive coalition has been deploying it for decades. The conservative coalition operates as though the rules of the broadcast era still hold.

The Anglosphere conservative right did not fail to learn from Trump because his method was hidden. It failed to learn because admitting his method works would have meant breaking with the cultural class it shares with its opponents. That break was the price of learning. It refused to pay it.

6. The Country Pattern

Across each negative case below there are individual figures and partial exceptions; the pattern that follows describes the dominant party-level posture, not unanimity.

The country-by-country pattern of who learned and who did not is itself a giveaway. It tracks not language or history but how far the local conservative party has been captured by progressive cultural standards.

Italy under Giorgia Meloni is the clearest contrasting case. Meloni came from a political tradition the Anglosphere right had spent decades treating as untouchable. She studied the Trump method. She adapted it to Italian conditions. She governed pragmatically once in office. She is now the most stable centre-right leader in Europe. The Anglosphere conservative parties that distanced themselves from her on cultural grounds in 2022 are now privately briefing their researchers to study her playbook. Argentina under Milei is a more extreme version of the same adaptation. A leader operating in a completely different context, applying the same core principles. Direct media. Refusal of the establishment's cultural rules. Provocation. El Salvador under Bukele has produced the most successful security turnaround in recent Latin American history. The Anglosphere conservative parties that should have been first to give it credit have been slower than the progressive press in reluctantly acknowledging the results. Japan, with a different conservative tradition, has produced political movements that have studied elements of the Trump method and adapted them to Japanese conditions.

The negative cases are the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. In each, the conservative party has spent the period since 2016 either actively distancing from Trump or in studied silence. The latter is the local version of the small-target strategy Prothean has elsewhere identified as a structural electoral failure mode. None of these parties has produced a leader who has effectively challenged the progressive story that dominates public life. None has rebuilt a positive case for Western — specifically Anglosphere — civilisational achievement as something worth defending and fighting for. None has won decisively in this period. The UK Conservatives presided over a fourteen-year decline in their own electoral coalition and were destroyed in 2024. The Australian Coalition lost in 2022, lost again in 2025, and has not articulated a coherent alternative despite One Nation appearing to adopt many of the Trump political tactics and seeing corresponding rise in popularity. New Zealand National governs in coalition but has not changed the cultural register. Canadian Conservatives have spent a decade losing to Justin Trudeau, an opponent who would have been straightforward to defeat by a leader willing to operate outside the captured cultural rules.

*The countries where conservative parties learned from Trump are winning.
The countries where conservative parties refused to look are losing. The
pattern is too consistent to be coincidence and too direct to be anything other
than a verdict.*

7. What the Misreading Has Cost

The Anglosphere conservative class's refusal to study Trump as a serious political force has produced four costs that build on each other. The first is electoral. Parties that decline to update their political method to the new media and attention environment keep losing to parties that have updated theirs. The progressive coalition is not winning by force of argument. It is winning because its operators have absorbed the methods that conservative operators still refuse to acknowledge.

The second cost is intellectual. A political movement that cannot study its most successful contemporary exemplar cannot learn. The Trump presidencies are the biggest available body of evidence on what works against an institutional environment that has been steadily captured over fifty years⁶. To dismiss that evidence on cultural grounds is to choose ignorance over the only available material. Anglosphere conservative think tanks and research operations have, with very limited exceptions, produced almost no serious operational analysis of the Trump method. The progressive equivalents have produced a great deal. Most of it for opposition research. But much of it analytically more useful than what the conservative side has produced about its own most successful operator.

The third cost is bilateral. It is treated separately in companion work. The short version is this. A US administration whose elected leader has been publicly treated with contempt by the political and media class of supposedly allied democracies has predictable Madisonian reasons to downgrade those alliances and to reward the leaders who refused to join in the contempt. Trump's materially warmer working relationships with Meloni, Milei, Modi, and Bukele than with the leaders of Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand are not the product of ideological alignment alone. They are the predictable response of a self-interested actor reading the signals his counterparties have been sending. The hostility from him follows the hostility from them. Not the other way around. The strategic costs — in trade access, intelligence cooperation, AUKUS posture, defence procurement, and tariff treatment — are being paid by the publics of Canberra, Ottawa, Wellington and London. They are not being paid by the political and commentator classes that created the problem. Those classes continue to read the resulting chill in relations as further evidence of Trump's unreliability rather than as the result of their own conduct.

The fourth cost is geostrategic. The Anglosphere conservative parties have refused for decades to defend the proposition that American power is, on balance, a force for good in the international system. The refusal long predates Trump and made the establishment possible. It has left those parties without a positive case to make in the current strategic environment. Prothean has argued elsewhere⁷ that the multilateral order is functionally over. The West's strategic position now depends on coherent leverage exercised by states that understand themselves as having interests worth defending. The Anglosphere conservative parties have accepted the establishment's premise that Western and American power is suspect. So they are unable, in practice, to make the positive case the moment requires. Their political confusion about Trump is the visible symptom of a deeper confusion about the West itself.

8. The Corrective

The corrective is not to copy Trump's style, which is built for American conditions and his specific political identity. It is to study what is actually transferable: the method, not the manner.

Three elements of the corrective are within reach for any serious Anglosphere conservative party that decides to undertake it.

Contest the establishment directly

The case for Western — specifically American — civilisational achievement as a defensible inheritance must be made publicly. It cannot be assumed self-evident and therefore unargued. This requires conservative politicians and thinkers willing to say, on the record and repeatedly, that the post-1945 order produced by American leadership has been the most successful international arrangement in modern history. That its flaws are real but small compared to the alternatives. That its dismantling — by hostile actors, by careless surrender — is a strategic disaster conservatives are obligated to oppose. The establishment persists because nobody

challenges it. Challenging it does not require winning every argument. It requires showing up to the fight.

Study the method

Conservative research operations, parties, and political training programmes should treat the Trump, Meloni, Milei, and Bukele records as primary case studies in operating a successful political programme against a captured institutional and media environment. The cultural discomfort that has prevented this study is the very thing that has produced the strategic loss. The Federalist Society showed, in a different area, what fifty years of disciplined institutional investment can achieve⁸. A matching investment in political communication and control of the public conversation is this generation's equivalent task.

Recognise the Madisonian cut

Serious political analysis evaluates leaders by how well their methods fit their conditions and what results they produce. Cultural commentary evaluates them by how they look and sound. The first is the Madisonian standard. The second is what Anglosphere conservative parties have been doing instead. There is no other plausible explanation for why they have so consistently failed to recognise their own most successful contemporary operator. They are working against their own Madisonian interest. The corrective is recognising that cultural discomfort with a successful political method is not a reason to walk away. It is a reason to question the discomfort.

The Anglosphere conservative parties that apply the Madisonian standard to how they judge political method will be the ones that recover. The parties that keep mistaking taste for analysis will keep losing.

Conclusion: The Establishment, the Verdict, and the Test

Donald Trump is not the cause of the Anglosphere conservative crisis. He is the test of it. A conservative movement that can recognise his method as a strategy, his correct calls as correct where they have been, and his successes as successes — even while disagreeing with his particular style — is a movement capable of operating in the political environment of the 2020s. A conservative movement that cannot recognise these things has absorbed the cultural standards of its opponents so deeply that it can no longer see its own interests.

The establishment that produced the misreading is forty years deep. It was never seriously contested by the parties that should have contested it. The aesthetic verdict the establishment produced has now repeated across two American electoral cycles and multiple Anglosphere national contexts. The factual record disproves it at every reasonable level of confidence. The persistence of the verdict despite being disproved is the finding worth paying attention to. It tells us the institutional and political class that holds the verdict is running on a set of assumptions

that have been captured. That capture has cost it the ability to assess one of the most important political operators of its generation.

The test is not whether one likes Trump. It is whether the political class that supposedly represents the conservative interest in the Anglosphere is willing to apply the Madisonian standard to how it sees the world. The countries whose conservative parties are passing that test are winning. The countries whose conservative parties are failing it are losing. The pattern will continue until the test is taken seriously.

Prothean's standing position, restated: a self-interested actor whose policies and outcomes pass the Madisonian test is not an idiot. The label tells you about the labeller, not the labelled. The cost of confusing the two has been a generation of conservative political defeat. The corrective begins with naming the confusion.

This brief opens a sequence of analyses on strategic lessons available from successful political operators across the partisan spectrum. Two existing Prothean briefs — on the small-target strategy and on the psychology of political decision-making — already work from the same underlying logic as this analysis. Both reference the Trump campaign as a positive contrasting case to the Anglosphere conservative failure modes they document. What this brief adds is the overarching argument. It makes explicit that the Anglosphere conservative refusal to study Trump as a serious operator is itself the strategic problem. The practical lessons available from successful political method — across the political spectrum and across decades — cannot be absorbed by a political class that still lives by the cultural standards of its opponents. The unifying principle of the series is stated above. The institute studies what works because what works, by definition, has passed the Madisonian test. The operators studied — Trump, Meloni, Milei, but also Howard, Blair, Obama, and the architects of successful campaigns the institute may not politically prefer — are studied on the same basis. The point is not which side wins. The point is what method, in what environment, against what opposing pressures, has produced lasting political results, and where the leaders concerned succeeded and where they fell short. The Anglosphere conservative parties that are losing are losing because they are not asking that question. The corrective is to ask it.

Appendix: Notes on the Empirical Record

The brief's central claim — that the “idiot” reading of Trump fails the Madisonian test at any reasonable level of confidence — depends on a record that is publicly available and backed by specific numbers. The notes below tie the main claims made in Section 4 to figures from primary or near-primary sources. The aim is not to be exhaustive. The aim is to answer the cherry-picking objection: the pattern is consistent across areas.

NATO burden-sharing

In 2014, three NATO allies met the agreed 2 percent of GDP defence spending guideline⁹. In 2017 — Trump's first year — the figure was four to six, depending on definition. By 2024, twenty-three

of thirty-two allies met or exceeded 2 percent. In 2025, all NATO members met or exceeded 2 percent for the first time in the alliance's history, and the alliance adopted a new 5 percent target (3.5 percent core plus 1.5 percent resilience) at the 2025 Hague Summit¹⁰. European NATO and Canada increased combined defence spending from 1.43 percent of GDP in 2014 to 2.3 percent in 2025; combined European and Canadian defence expenditure roughly doubled in real terms between 2018 and 2025, from approximately USD 290 billion to over USD 600 billion¹¹. Causation is multi-factor — the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is the largest single contributor — but the trajectory began under sustained Trump-administration pressure that the Anglosphere commentariat had said would shatter the alliance. The alliance was not shattered. The spending increased.

Trade and China policy

Trump-era Section 301 tariffs on approximately USD 370 billion of Chinese imports were not removed by the Biden administration. The four-year statutory review concluded in May 2024 retained every existing tariff line and added new tariffs on USD 18 billion of additional Chinese goods, with rates ranging from 25 to 100 percent across semiconductors, electric vehicles, batteries, critical minerals, medical goods, and steel and aluminium products¹⁴. By the end of 2024, total trade-war tariffs had generated over USD 264 billion in customs duties, of which 64 percent was collected during the Biden administration. The Biden administration's own USTR characterised the tariffs as effective in addressing Chinese trade practices that the original Trump-era investigation had identified¹⁵. The bipartisan retention of the tariff architecture is the empirical record. Whether one approves of the policy is a separate question; the claim that it was the work of a fool does not survive the fact that the opposing administration kept and extended it.

Abraham Accords

Four Arab states normalised relations with Israel in 2020 (UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco) — the first such normalisations since Jordan in 1994 and Egypt in 1979. The accords have survived the 2023–25 Gaza war without any signatory withdrawing¹⁶. Israel-UAE bilateral trade rose from approximately USD 200 million in 2020 to over USD 3 billion in 2024, supported by a free trade agreement (CEPA) that entered into force in 2023 — Israel's first with any Arab state. Abraham Accords countries accounted for 12 percent of Israeli defence exports in 2024, up from 3 percent in 2023¹⁷. Kazakhstan acceded in November 2025; Saudi normalisation discussions advanced through 2023 before being suspended by the Gaza war and have resumed under the second Trump administration. The prior consensus held that no Arab-Israeli normalisation was possible without prior Palestinian statehood. That consensus was incorrect.

ISIS territorial caliphate

At its 2014 peak, the ISIS territorial caliphate controlled approximately 110,000 square kilometres across Iraq and Syria and an estimated population of eight to twelve million¹⁸. The territorial caliphate was declared eliminated in March 2019 following the fall of Baghuz. The campaign was a coalition effort with substantial continuity across administrations, but the faster

pace and changes to rules of engagement from 2017 onward significantly shortened the timeline. The territorial caliphate is gone.

European centre-right immigration convergence

Between 2016 and 2025, immigration enforcement positions across European centre-right parties have moved substantially toward frameworks that were denounced as extreme when the first Trump administration adopted them. The UK Conservative government's Rwanda scheme (proposed 2022, struck down 2023, revived in modified form 2024); Italian centre-right enforcement under Meloni from 2022; Danish Social Democratic immigration policy from 2019 (a left-of-centre case demonstrating the same convergence); German CDU/CSU policy under Merz from 2024; the European Commission's migration pact of 2024 — the policy distance between these positions and the early-Trump enforcement architecture has narrowed materially across less than a decade. The convergence is the empirical record. The denunciation that preceded it was the rhetorical record.

Industrial policy and strategic decoupling

The idea that industrial policy is a matter of national strategy — rather than a market-distorting interference — has become standard across Western governments, including those that publicly disowned the first Trump administration. The CHIPS and Science Act (USA, 2022), the Inflation Reduction Act (USA, 2022), the European Chips Act (EU, 2023), the Critical Raw Materials Act (EU, 2024), and the AUKUS technology pillar all put into practice the idea that strategic supply chains, technology dependencies, and industrial capacity are matters of national security rather than purely commercial concern. This proposition was the operating premise of Trump-administration trade and security policy from 2017. Prothean has elsewhere¹⁹ analysed the leverage architecture this implies in detail.

The pattern across these six domains is consistent. The first Trump administration's diagnostic positions — that NATO burden-sharing was inadequate, that the China trade relationship required structural revision, that the Israeli-Palestinian impasse was not the binding constraint on regional normalisation, that ISIS territory required acceleration to eliminate, that European immigration policy required enforcement, and that industrial capacity in strategic sectors was a security matter — have each been substantially adopted by the actors that initially condemned them. This does not mean every tool the administration used was correct. It does not mean every outcome credited to it was caused by it. It does mean the diagnoses were not those of a fool. The persistence of the “idiot” reading despite this record is the data point the brief examines.

Notes

¹ On the revisionist coalition and the structural condition of Western strategic posture, see Prothean Institute, *The Multilateral Illusion: How the West Chose Comfort Over Reality — and What Comes Next*, Policy Brief, March 2026.

² Prothean Institute, *Lost Coherence: Unified Social Energy, the Monument Problem, and the Structural Conditions of Civilisational Flourishing*, Whitepaper, March 2026.

³ Prothean Institute, *Thus Spake Ilos*, Whitepaper, v3, May 2026.

⁴ On the small-target strategy as structural electoral failure mode, see Prothean Institute, *Winning Through Visibility: Why the Small Target Strategy Fails in a Hostile Media Environment*, Policy Brief, May 2025.

⁵ On emotional communication as the precondition of conservative political effectiveness, see Prothean Institute, *Winning the Emotional Terrain: Strategic Briefing for Conservative Leadership Post-2025 Australian Election*, Policy Brief, April 2025.

⁶ On the structural mechanism of institutional capture and the asymmetric pattern of conservative non-exploitation, see Prothean Institute, *Nothing Left to Conserve: The Structural Conservatism That Keeps Losing the Culture War and the Reckoning That's Overdue*, Policy Brief, April 2026.

⁷ Prothean Institute, *The Multilateral Illusion*, op. cit.

⁸ On the Federalist Society as the demonstration case of disciplined long-horizon conservative institutional investment, see Prothean Institute, *Nothing Left to Conserve*, op. cit.

⁹ NATO, 'Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025)', NATO Public Diplomacy Division, June 2025; Atlantic Council NATO Defense Spending Tracker, accessed April 2026.

¹⁰ NATO, 'Funding NATO', accessed April 2026; 'NATO says all allies to meet 2% defense-spending target this year', Defense News, August 2025; The Hague Summit Declaration, June 2025.

¹¹ UK Government, 'Finance and Economics Annual Statistical Bulletin: International Defence 2025', Ministry of Defence, December 2025.

¹² USTR, 'Four-Year Review of Actions Taken in the Section 301 Investigation', May 2024; 'Biden Administration Finalizes Section 301 Tariff Increases on Some Chinese Goods', Dorsey Client Alert, September 2024; 'Section 301 Tariffs and Proceedings: Recent and Potential Developments', Covington & Burling, December 2024.

¹³ Tax Foundation, 'Tariff Tracker: 2026 Trump Tariffs & Trade War by the Numbers', accessed April 2026; National Taxpayers Union, 'What Have U.S. Officials Learned from Section 301 Tariffs on China?', April 2026.

¹⁴ Middle East Institute, 'The Abraham Accords', backgrounder updated November 2025; UK House of Commons Library, 'Israel and the Abraham Accords in 2025: Five Years On', September 2025.

¹⁵ Institute for National Security Studies (Tel Aviv), 'Five Years On: Are the Abraham Accords Here to Stay?', September 2025; Israel Central Bureau of Statistics trade data, 2024; SIPRI defence trade database.

¹⁶ Institute for the Study of War, 'ISIS Sanctuary Maps' archive, 2014–2019; US Department of Defense, 'Operation Inherent Resolve' campaign reporting, 2017–2019.

¹⁷ Prothean Institute, *The Multilateral Illusion*, op. cit., particularly Section 4 on leverage as the new strategic currency.

About Prothean Institute

The Prothean Institute is an independent strategic research organization dedicated to understanding, preserving, and renewing the foundations of thriving societies.

Our mission is to develop political, cultural, and social frameworks that are closely aligned with the structures, instincts, and emotional patterns that sustain human flourishing across generations.

Our work focuses on:

- Developing strategic whitepapers, policy briefs, and advisory documents to support effective governance and leadership.
- Conducting philosophical, historical, and behavioral analysis of political and cultural trends.

- Equipping leaders with frameworks that connect emotional resonance to rational clarity and practical governance.

At the Prothean Institute, all policy recommendations and strategic analyses are grounded in strict standards of evidence and the reality of real-world conditions and human nature. Idealism, where entertained, is explicitly noted as distinct from core analysis. We reject abstractions disconnected from reality and seek to equip leaders with tools that work in the world as it is — not as we might wish it to be.