

Fintan O'Toole: President Donald Trump is an authoritarian and anarchist
US president's cabinet is like a punk band with members chosen for inability to perform
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Donald Trump has never been a politician but he has a remarkable degree of experience in one key political activity: breaking promises.

As a businessman he has long been notorious for renegeing on commitments. A *USA Today* analysis last June found Trump has been sued 4,095 times over the past three decades, often by people he had refused to pay for work done.

They ranged from a dishwasher in Florida to a glass company in New Jersey, from plumbers, painters, waiters and bartenders on low wages to highly-paid real-estate brokers and property lawyers.

Deliciously, several law firms who acted for him in such cases had to themselves sue Trump to get their fees. And this is the man to whom 62 million voters are looking to fulfil the biggest promises of all.

To some extent, of course, all presidents disappoint their most ardent supporters. Barack Obama certainly did. But Trump's situation, like everything else about him, is peculiar.

On the one hand, he has unprecedented political strength: his party controls both houses of Congress, controls both the governorships and the legislatures in 32 states and will take back power in the supreme court when Trump appoints an extreme conservative to its ranks.

This very strength, however, adds to the pressure to deliver on his promises: he cannot claim that he is being stymied by liberals in other parts of the US governmental system.

On the other hand, Trump has almost unprecedented political weakness: he lost the popular vote badly, was elected by a statistical quirk (had a mere 77,000 more people in total voted for Clinton in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, she would be president) and takes office with unusually low approval ratings. And this makes it all the more important for Trump that he retains the adoration of his core constituency, what he is still calling his "movement".

If he loses these people, he has no one else to turn to. There is no centre ground for Trump to occupy: he has "his people" or he has no one.

Hostile takeover

We don't yet know the mechanics of Trump's relationship to the Republican party of which he executed a hostile takeover, and this relationship will obviously shape the president's ability to keep his movement together.

How will Trump's promises to protect Medicare and social security, which are crucial to many of his voters, be squared with the Republican party's determination to destroy them?

How will his laudable desire to launch a major infrastructure building programme sit with a party that fought fiercely to stop Obama from doing the same thing?

But the Trump project runs up against even the most fundamental contradictions. Trump is an anarcho-authoritarian. To his fans he is the big man, the Duce, the sole saviour of a nation that is on its way to hell in a handcart. And he will surely deliver on the authoritarian side of his agenda.

Frank Gaffney, an influential figure in Trump circles, has already called for the re-establishment of the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee that, under Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, hunted out alleged communists.

Last month, officials from Trump's transition team asked the department of energy to provide a list of its career officials who had worked on policies to tackle climate change, presumably to root them out too. (The department refused to provide the list but the pressure will surely redouble now that Trump is actually in power.) Obnoxious as all of this will be, it will probably please most of Trump's "movement".

The problem for Trump is that, as well as selling the authoritarianism of overweening government, he is also selling the anarchism of no government.

Trump's administration already looks like a photographic negative in which the things that should disqualify people from a particular office have become their primary qualifications.

The woman in charge of public schools, Betsy DeVos, is an extremist opponent of public schools. The man in charge of public housing, Ben Carson, doesn't believe in public housing. The man in charge of civil rights, Jeff Sessions, has a history of association with white supremacist and racist attitudes. The health secretary, Tom Price, has long opposed public health programmes.

Rick Perry, who will run the energy department, pledged to abolish it altogether when he ran in the 2012 Republican primaries. (He famously forgot that he wanted to do so.) The man taking charge of the Environmental Protection Agency is actually in the course of suing it in an attempt to neuter the Clean Power Plan.

Mike Flynn, Trump's national security adviser and the person who is supposed to be the source of calm and coolness in a crisis, is so notoriously irascible and volatile that he had to be fired as head of the Defence Intelligence Agency. Trump's cabinet is like an extreme in-your-face punk band whose members are chosen precisely for their inability to sing or play their instruments.

This systematic trashing of government may, in the short term, be thrilling for Trump's core supporters. Until, that is, they realise that they are the very ones who most need big government. Anarchism may excite them but actual anarchy will make their lives much worse.

Obamacare repeal

Consider, for example, Trump's promise to immediately repeal the Affordable Care Act – Obamacare. One of the stark findings of research is that people who voted for Trump are much more likely to be in poor health – and therefore to need the very health insurance cover that Trump will abolish. White people who make less than \$50,000 annually have been some of the largest beneficiaries of Obamacare, especially in the Rust Belt and in rural, white Republican strongholds – the very places that supported Trump most enthusiastically.

The coal miners of West Virginia, who became the archetypes of Trumpism, have extremely high rates of disability and ill-health from working in dreadful conditions. The situation is so bad that even Republicans at state level accepted Obamacare because otherwise their health system would have collapsed under the strain.

Kentucky, which is also virulently pro-Trump, did the same thing for the same reasons. There is another health crisis – widespread opioid addiction – sweeping through the white rural communities

that voted for Trump. Together with obesity, it has led to a shocking rise in mortality rates in those areas. These people need government intervention on a massive scale and access to free health care. How will they feel when they realise that “small government” means they’re on their own?

Likewise, who will be hurt most by the dismantling of environmental protections? Working-class people in the pro-Trump Rust Belt. Even with these regulations in place, we have seen the hideous example of Flint, Michigan, where the water supply has been poisoned with lead.

Perhaps many Trump voters didn’t care because Flint is a majority black city. But how will they feel when it’s their children being poisoned and stunted by polluted water because dirty industries have their own best friends placed in the very agencies that are supposed to be regulating them?

And how will people driven into Trump’s arms by justifiable nostalgia for the days of secure union jobs feel when Trump and the Republicans want to destroy many of the protections they still have?

Trump’s own companies have been cited for 24 violations of the Fair Labour Standards Act since 2005 for failing to pay overtime or the minimum wage. It is not surprising therefore that his pick for the department of labour, which implements these laws, is another notorious enemy of such basic protections. Andrew Puzder, billionaire owner of the CKE fast food chain, opposed Obama’s increases in the minimum wage and overtime pay, and is against paid parental leave.

Trump, in campaign mode, promised: “No matter who you are, we’re going to protect your job.” But Puzder, who will actually put Trump’s labour policies into practice, is an enthusiastic proponent of the automation that is the biggest threat to working-class jobs. He wants to have robots serve customers in his fast food chain because “they’re always polite . . . they never take a vacation, they never show up late, there’s never a slip-and-fall or an age-, sex- or race-discrimination case.”

Bonanza for billionaires

Polls showed that more than half of Trump’s supporters want to see taxes on the wealthy increased, and Trump himself promised to “massively cut taxes for the middle class, the forgotten people, the forgotten men and women of this country, who built our country”.

But his actual tax plan will deliver a cut of just 0.6 per cent for the lowest earners, compared with 6.5 per cent for the top 1 per cent and 7.3 per cent for the top 0.1 per cent. It is a bonanza for billionaires, and it will cost the US an astonishing \$6.2 trillion over 10 years, depriving the federal government of the money it needs to actually help Trump’s “forgotten people”.

Even on the white identity politics that are so central to Trump’s appeal, he is very unlikely to be able to deliver. Migration from Latin America will continue, not least because the service and agricultural economies of the US would collapse without it. As for the “threat” of Muslims swamping the US, Trump is trapped by his own rhetoric.

Thanks in part to that rhetoric, Americans have a grossly distorted view of the issue. On average, people in the US think that 23 per cent of the country’s population will be Muslim by 2020 – as against a reality of about 1.1 per cent. The difficulty for Trump is that, having fed this dark fantasy, he has created a “problem” that he cannot “solve” – for the simple reason that it does not actually exist.

Of course, none of this will matter greatly to Trump’s “forgotten people” if he fulfils his most important promise: that decent, well-paid blue-collar jobs are coming back to the Rust Belt. If the steel plants reopen and coal miraculously regains its attractiveness for businesses that have switched to shale gas or solar power, Trump will be the great American hero he already imagines himself to

be.

But if they don't? History has a grim answer to that question. If and when Trump's cheques bounce and it turns out, as so often in his career, that he is not keeping his side of the deal, there is only one place for him to go. He must find someone else to blame. The fault cannot lie with the great saviour.

Trump, as we have seen during the transition, is utterly incapable of changing his rhetoric or admitting that he is wrong.

He knows only one form of defence: attack, attack, attack.

The people whose fragile lives will actually be under attack from Trump's anarchism will be offered, by way of compensation, someone else – someone even weaker – to attack. When they are not paid what they're owed, they will be invited to make someone else pay the price of Trump's failure.