

Surviving predictions

While predictions made in past years may not have panned out, we still enthusiastically look to what the future may bring.

THIS is definitely the last bold, fearless and totally irrational column about predictions. Promise. Don't all shout hooray at once.

Where to begin? Well, I was right about one prediction. Despite the Mayans and sundry others, the world did not end in 2012. As for my other prophecies a year ago (AJN 20/01/12), the least said the better. No wait. The most said the better. Because, of course, unlike virtually all other pundits and fellow blowhards, I fess up to my blunders.

So let's get to it. Out of 15 specific predictions I was wrong about 11, and right about four. Among my big boo-boos: I was wrong about Barack Obama losing, Julia Gillard resigning, and Collingwood winning the AFL premiership.

But I was right to predict that neither the United States nor Israel would bomb Iran in 2012, Francois Hollande would win the French elections, and that Hamas and Fatah would not hold any elections.

Agreed. No great insight needed for any of those. Which is precisely the point. It's why I first started writing an annual AJN column a decade ago about predicting the future, in politics, economics, international affairs.

As a journalist and commentator who was paid, at least in part, to make such predictions, a two-sided, phenomenon had long puzzled me. First, I was struck by how often, and how consistently, we were wrong in our predictions and how rarely we admitted our mistakes.

Second, while we hardly ever let on about our guilty little secret, news consumers seemed to have, and continue to have, an endless appetite for predictions which they, too, must know are usually wrong.

Some of the answers to the puzzle came in 2005 in Philip Tetlock's landmark book, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?*, which I wrote about in my 2006 AJN column. Tetlock is an American social psychologist who led a 20-year study of 284 experts – professors, journalists, and intelligence analysts – and asked them to make 28,000 predictions about political events. He found the experts were poorer forecasters than “dart-throwing monkeys”. And the more famous the forecaster, the more overconfident and wrong the predictions.

Tetlock has continued his work and has attracted the attention of other psychologists interested in prediction, such as the Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, whose recent book *Thinking Fast and Slow* has been an international bestseller. And political prediction itself became news when New York statistician Nate Silver not only forecast the Obama victory, but accurately predicted the presidential election results in each of the 50 states.

Partisan



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But Tetlock emphasises that it's dangerous to overreact even to pundits using statistical methods. While they have the potential to be right more often because they aggregate data, compared to those who “go with the gut”, the margin for error is always there. He writes: “Silver would either be a fool if he'd gotten it wrong, or he's a god if he gets it right. He's neither a fool nor a god. He's a thoughtful data analyst.”

Which comes back to the point Tetlock made about over-confident forecasters. In his continuing studies he's found that the more modest and self-critical the forecasters, the more accurate they're likely to be.

But “modest and self-critical” doesn't take you far in today's hyper-media world. Editors want strong opinions and “fearless” predictions, and journalists don't have the leisure because they're all a-Twitter keeping up with instant commentary.

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This is relevant for all those who worry about bias against Israel or Jews in the media. Jewish news consumers crave prediction. Anybody familiar with the Israeli news media knows that they have always been far more interested in “What might be?” and “What will be?”, no matter how speculative, than in “What was the case?” Less what happened than what will happen. *Ma Yihyeh?*

I'd argue that Jews everywhere share much of this future-oriented obsession. It's why all the evidence shows that Jews, in Australia as much as in the United States, are the biggest consumers of news and current affairs.

As for explanations, I offer pessimistic and optimistic versions. At one level, the Jewish experience of the past 100 years, and within the living memory of many, has created an often unspoken fear and apprehension about the future. We want to know about the worst that can happen so we can prepare for it. It's a survival thing.

At another level, however, the same experience of Jewish history, read optimistically, reads as a triumph of hope over tragedy. Jews are about hope. We want to know the best about the future so we can prepare for it. It's a survival thing.

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