**Beware of democracy’s retreat behind walls**

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Across the world, a new type of democracy is taking shape – one barely worthy of the name. This is the era of barricade democracy.

Consider this: nearly three decades ago the then United States president, Ronald Reagan, challenged the former Soviet Union to dismantle the Berlin Wall it had built to divide Communist East from Western democratic Europe.

"Tear down this wall," Reagan urged. The challenge soon turned into reality and when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, so too did the Soviet empire.

In its place, Western-style democracy marched forth, promising to spread its bounty of freedoms and rights to everyone around the world.

Three decades on and US presidential hopeful Donald Trump tells his growing mass of supporters: "Build that wall."

Trump's signature slogan for his 2016 presidential campaign refers to his pet plan to divide the US from Mexico with a 3200 km wall.

Trump may seem to many to be a political outlier and a policy buffoon. But on the issue of building walls to separate whole countries, he is not alone.

Democracies the world over have become obsessed over the past decade with building a multitude of walls, fences and barriers behind which they are steadily retreating.

Individually, they can seem like a valid response to shutting out a particular perceived or real risk or threat.

The US wants to keep at bay illegal immigrants spilling out from northern Mexico, as well as that nation's vociferous drug trade.

Israel is constructing a 700 km wall to encircle the Palestinian West Bank and insulate itself from what it sees as a deeply alien culture.

India – the world's largest democratic nation – is busily throwing up a 3800 km barrier to surround Bangladesh and segregate itself from what it regards as a growing source of terrorism and smuggling.

Walls and fences are now snaking their way around the borders of European Union democracies. These include those built by Greece and Bulgaria to cut off crossing points from Turkey, as well as a four-metre high razor-wire fence constructed by Hungary along its border with Serbia.

In short, these walls are not one-offs, but a defining phenomenon of our times.

British historian Timothy Garton Ash recently highlighted the irony of Europe building walls less than 30 years after celebrating the end of Communism's fortress mindset. He pointed out how some of today's walls are being constructed in symbolic terms via the populist, fear-laden rhetoric of European leaders calling for extreme immigration barriers to "keep Europe Christian".

But the foundations of barricade democracy are being dug much deeper and being excavated on a much bigger stage than just Europe.

In nearly every so-called "advanced" democracy around the globe we are seeing the erection of ever-more elaborate legal walls aimed at comprehensively rooting out perceived enemies and isolating "them" from "us".

At the softer end, there are stricter visa requirements and multiple security checks by the growing legions of border protection forces. At the sharp end, barricade democracy is defined – as in the case of Australia – by draconian laws to keep asylum seekers "out" by withholding basic legal rights and forcing them into offshore detention camps.

Then there are the burgeoning cultural walls of intolerance – the spread of values that consider "outsiders" such as refugees as being less than human and therefore unworthy of Western freedoms and rights.

The most profoundly disturbing aspect of this new era is that democracies are increasingly turning this fortress mentality against their own citizens.

Today's world of internet technology and unprecedented people movement makes all walls potentially porous. This in turn renders everyone "inside" the barricade a potential threat. So our governments feel compelled to unleash extraordinary levels of citizen surveillance and internet spying on us.

Security agencies and local police forces are increasingly hardwired to see community protest and debate – vital to a full and properly functioning democracy – as potential national security risks.

The biggest irony, however, of our rapid transition to barricade democracy is that it is being driven by forces that we in the West have set in motion.

The globalisation of Western culture and market economies over the past two decades continues to be the biggest "pull factor" for much of the surge of people movement – legal and illegal – into the West. It has also spawned the anti-West terrorist blowback that feeds the ever-growing paranoia now dominating democratic politics, as well as supplying the immediate pretext to erect walls.

In sum, rather than acknowledge that we have a responsibility to deal rationally and maturely with these new challenges and threats we have set off, our political discourse endlessly obsesses about how to build more walls to keep them at bay – or to hide our eyes from their profound human consequences.

Future historians will mark this era as one of rapid diminishing of Western liberal democratic values. Why? Because it is one thing to respond in a defined, proportionate way to the threat of a terrorist attack or spikes in people movement. But it is another to subvert individual freedoms and rights – core tenets of Western liberalism – to a new insatiable and illiberal god of collective security and order.

The rare breakouts of humanity, such as Germany's en masse acceptance of Syrian refugees, should remind us of one big difference from 1989: The walls of barricade democracy might be lowered from time to time, but not for very long. And the chances of their being torn down in the name of freedom are practically zero.

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*This story was found at:****http://www.smh.com.au/comment/beware-of-democracy8217s-retreat-behind-walls-20160312-gnh9j8.html***