

# THE SYDNEY INSTITUTE ANNUAL DINNER LECTURE

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- 
- SPEAKER:** THE HON MORRIS IEMMA MP (Premier of New South Wales)  
**DATE:** Thursday 25 May 2006 \*\*Bookings from 11 May only\*\* **TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm  
**VENUE:** Mallesons Conference Room, Level 60, Governor Phillip Tower,  
1 Farrer Place, Sydney  
**TOPIC:** *to be advised* \*\*NOTE CHANGE OF DATE\*\*
- 
- SPEAKER:** MARK LEIBLER AC (Co-Chair, Reconciliation Australia)  
**TOPIC:** *Reaching Reconciliation: A Journey for all Australians*  
**DATE:** Monday 29 May 2006 \*\*Bookings from 15 May only\*\* **TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm  
**VENUE:** Museum of Sydney Theatre, Corner of Phillip & Bridge Streets, Sydney
- 
- SPEAKER:** ELIZABETH FLETCHER (Author, *Women in the Bible*)  
**TOPIC:** *De Coding The Da Vinci Code*  
**DATE:** Wednesday 7 June 2006 \*\*Bookings from 31 May only\*\* **TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm  
**VENUE:** 41 Phillip Street, Sydney **LIGHT REFRESHMENTS SPEAKER:**
- 
- SPEAKER:** DR CASSANDRA PYBUS (Academic & author – most recently *Black Founders: the unknown story of Australia's first black settlers* [2006])  
**TOPIC:** *Race Relations and Early Australian Settlement*  
**DATE:** Wednesday 14 June 2006 \*\*Bookings from 1 June only\*\* **TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm  
**VENUE:** 41 Phillip Street, Sydney **LIGHT REFRESHMENTS**
- 
- SPEAKER:** DR JOHN HIRST (Academic and author, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* [Black Inc 2006])  
**TOPIC:** *In the Middle of the History Wars*  
**DATE:** Monday 19 June 2006 \*\*Bookings from 5 June only\*\* **TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm  
**VENUE:** 41 Phillip Street, Sydney **LIGHT REFRESHMENTS**
- 
- SPEAKER:** JULIE OWENS MP (ALP Member for Parramatta, NSW) &  
DR DAVID BURCHELL (Author, Senior Lecturer, University of Western Sydney)  
**TOPIC:** *Can the West be Won Again? Labor and Sydney's Western Suburbs*  
**DATE:** Monday 3 July 2006 \*\*Bookings from 19 June only\*\* **TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm  
**VENUE:** Dixson Room, State Library of New South Wales, Macquarie Street, Sydney
- 
- SPEAKER:** MICHAEL L'ESTRANGE (Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade)  
**DATE:** Thursday 6 July 2006 \*\*Bookings from 22 June only\*\* (NOTE REVISED DATE)  
**VENUE:** Mallesons Conference Room, Level 60, Governor Phillip Tower, 1 Farrer Place,  
Sydney  
**TOPIC:** *to be advised* **TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm
- 
- SPEAKER:** THE RT HON MALCOLM FRASER PC AC CH (Prime Minister of  
Australia 1975-1983)  
**TOPIC:** *Remembering Robert Menzies*  
**DATE:** Monday 17 July 2006 \*\*Bookings from 3 July only\*\* **IME:** 5.30 for 6 pm  
**VENUE:** Museum of Sydney Theatre, Corner of Bridge and Phillip Street, Sydney
- 
- SPEAKER:** THE HON. JULIE BISHOP MP (Minister for Education, Science & Training  
and the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women's Issues)  
**DATE:** Wednesday 19 July 2006 \*\*Bookings from 5 July only\*\* **TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm  
**VENUE:** Mallesons Conference Room, Level 60, Governor Phillip Tower,  
1 Farrer Place, Sydney
- 
- SPEAKER:** PETER DEBNAM MP (NSW Liberal Leader)  
**DATE:** Wednesday 11 October 2006 \*\*Bookings from 27 Sept only\*\* **TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm  
**VENUE:** Clayton Utz Conference Room (Level 30), 1 O'Connell Street, Sydney

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THE

# Sydney Institute

## QUARTERLY



*ISSUE 28,  
VOL. 10, NO. 1,  
MAY 2006*

**GERARD  
HENDERSON** on  
Leunig, ducks and  
The Age

The ABC and the  
culture wars – with  
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**STEPHEN MATCHETT**  
on the lament of the  
Moral Middle Class

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**MEDIA WATCH** tackles  
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Brett, Andrew Jaspan,  
Melanie La'Brooy and  
Crikey's Charles  
Richardson

*Published by  
The Sydney Institute  
41 Phillip St.  
Sydney 2000  
Ph: (02) 9252 3366  
Fax: (02) 9252 3360*

*with Gerard Henderson's*

# *MEDIA WATCH*

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Cover Design by D T Graphics

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Layout and typesetting by DT Graphics Pty Ltd,  
202A Lyons Road, Drummoyne 2047.  
Tel: (02) 9719 1424 Fax: (02) 9719 1415  
Website: www.dtgraphics.com.au

The views expressed in *The Sydney Institute Quarterly* are those of the designated authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of The Sydney Institute or of its governors.

Registered Print Post No : PP255003/02934

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## ARCHIVES – AND MR WHITLAM

The Howard Government has had considerable success in implementing its economic and foreign policy agenda. However, it has been much less successful in what some have called the culture wars. Witness, for example, the Coalition's inability to reform the ABC and SBS public broadcasters. The Howard Government, for a time, even lost control of the National Museum of Australia – despite the fact that this was its own creation. And then there is the National Archives of Australia (NAA).

It is a long-established tradition that, towards the end of each year, the NAA releases the Cabinet Records of 30 years ago – with an embargo that nothing can be mentioned in the media until New Year's Day. So, in December 2005, the Cabinet Records for 1975 were released – with an embargo that was lifted on the morning of 1 January 2006. No problems there. But a difficulty has occurred due to the NAA's apparent inability to prevent former Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam from effectively taking over proceedings for the release of the 1973, 1974 and 1975 Cabinet Records. In 1973 and 1974, historian Ian Hancock was invited by the NAA to preside over the release of Cabinet papers under the 30 year rule. However, in 2005 Mr Hancock declined the invitation on account of his concern about Mr Whitlam's role in the previous two years.

The point here is that Cabinet Records are government documents. They are not the personal papers of one-time prime ministers who led governments. Gough Whitlam does not seem to accept this. And the NAA failed to assert its authority in the matter. For example, when the 1975 Cabinet Records were released to the media (on an embargoed basis) on 13 December 2005, Mr Whitlam effectively took over proceedings – even to the extent of issuing his own documents. They comprised (i) a note from the former prime minister justifying his own actions of three decades previously, (ii) a summary of his government's (alleged) initiatives in domestic and foreign policy, (iii) an entry from the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* about a deceased journalist who was killed in East Timor, (iv) a (hearsay) document by a man who declared that his uncle – (the then Governor of New South Wales) – had opposed Sir John Kerr's decision to dismiss the Whitlam Government in November 1975, and (v) an extract from a memoir which alleged that John Kerr drank too much alcohol. And more besides – including Mr Whitlam's own release of some of former Governor-General Paul Hasluck's papers.

This is a total perversion of the release of Cabinet Records. Yet NAA officials took no action to prevent Mr Whitlam's performance – and even advised the media that his own documents were protected by the embargo. This was not the case – since they were not official records. Sure enough, when journalists reported on the 1975 Cabinet Records on New Year's Day, the official documents were intermixed with Mr Whitlam's (self-serving) personal documents. It was unprofessional as that. The National Archives of Australia should be able to do better.

# LEUNIG'S DUCKS AND DRAKES

Gerard Henderson

The leftist cartoonist Michael Leunig – or Leunig as he prefers to be known – sets the culture at *The Age*. So much so, that the Thought of Leunig (as in TOL) bestraddles Australia's most left-wing newspaper. In fact, Leunig pervades *The Age* – from New Year's Day to Christmas Day, with much TOL in between.

## LEUNIG'S DAY – FROM NEW YEAR TO ANZAC AND ON TO CHRISTMAS

It's New Year's Day. Open up *The Age's* 2006 Calendar – which is provided gratis, inserted in the paper. The calendar is by Leunig, of course – each month from January to December. It's all very modern, in a post-modernist Leunig kind of way. January depicts a woman (with teapot, of course) telling a man: "Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life and to get started we'll make a list of all the silly things you did yesterday". Turn to August – and the (ironic) message is that we all need the monarchy "otherwise we are condemned to live with the drab ceaseless banality of the rich, the famous, the powerful and the glamorous always being shoved in our faces". The familiar Leunig alienation theme, no less. Turn to October – Leunig republishes his drawing depicting over a score of fascists, replete with the Nazi salute, marching past a smiling face on a banner. As in fascism prevails, in our midst. Or something like that. And now turn to December and the drawing is of lotsa ducks (more of which later).

It's Australia Day. *The Age* (26 January 2006) leads its "Special Australia Day Edition" wrap-around with – you've guessed it – an essay by Leunig titled "A picture of innocence". The writing is obscure – as is the post-modernist style. But Leunig's message is essentially a lecture that Australia does not meet *The Age's* cartoonist's ideals:

**While Australia Day many evoke feelings of national unity and the uniqueness of our shared condition, it could well also provide a moment to contemplate the fact of our precious diversity and matters we do not hold in common.**

There follows a Leunig style lecture about peace-in-our-time, which offers just a little hope for the Vale of Tears in which Leunig believes we live:

**The spirit of place enters reliably into us over generations and can be relied on to distinguish us, console us and slowly but surely heal the scars of political misadventure, hubris and corruption. If only we have sufficient openness and innocence to allow it.**

Or, rather, if only we listened to the TOL.

It's Anzac Day (or near enough). This time Leunig appears in written format on *The Age's* Opinion Page (*The Age*, 23 April 2005). The lead tells the story – Leunig wants to warn us all about "the danger of militarism". Good timing, eh? The first paragraph gives an idea of what is to come:

**We live in a national culture that glamorises soldiers, yet the sight of a military uniform with its obvious connotations of morbidity and violence provokes in me the question: "What sort of person is attracted to the killing professions?" Army recruiting advertisements beg the same question.**

Leunig maintains that John Howard looks at the members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and "sees courage, decency and goodness in professional soldiers – all those 'best and finest' qualities". So what does Leunig see? Well, *The Age's* leading in-house leftist "cannot help but also see the possibility of perversity, emotional sickness and a latent murderous impulse". Then Leunig's thoughts turn to Anzac Day:

**Anzac Day brings this question strongly to mind because I am asked each year to remember the soldiers who fought and to spare a thought for them, which I always do, but that's where the trouble starts because before too long questions arise and I try to imagine what sort of men would volunteer to invade a far-off land and perpetrate such murderous violence against its inhabitants. The mind can travel a long way in a minute's silence.**

He has in mind "Australia's part in the invasion of Turkey in 1915". Leunig seems totally ignorant of the fact that members of the ADF enlisted in 1914 to help Belgium and France resist the German invasion – initiated by the nationalist Kaiser and the militarist German High Command. In the event, the ADF first went to war against Turkey, Germany's ally. It is simply false for Leunig to allege that young Australians volunteered to invade Turkey – the overwhelming majority probably would not have

known where the country was. In any event, the ADF was entitled to enter into combat with Germany's ally. Precisely what is Leunig suggesting – that in 1914 Germany should have been allowed to conquer Belgium, France and Russia and more besides? Alas, it seems so.

In his pre-Anzac Day rant, Leunig also declares that it "feels somehow obscene, bizarre and shameful" to commemorate the men and women of the ADF who have served, and are serving, in Iraq. There is reference to "young ADF people in uniform, photographed with the leering, beer-juggling Prime Minister". And Leunig concludes his Anzac Day Lecture with the comment:

**At the end of the day, as Socrates said: "All wars are fought for money."**

Now, did Socrates ever say this? Leunig provides no source. And, if Socrates did make such a comment, what is the lesson for our times? Is Leunig really saying that the war against Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany was "fought for money"? Yep – that is precisely what he is saying. And *The Age* thought that Leunig's Anzac Day thoughts were so important that it gave the cartoonist space to write on the Opinion Page. How about that?

It's Christmas. *The Age's* Christmas Edition (23-24 December 2005) leads its Page One with the message:

**Christmas Edition  
Season's Greetings To All Our Readers  
Free Wrapping Paper Designed By Leunig**

Buying your new best friend a Christmas present? Wrap it in Leunig – per courtesy of *The Age*.

That was Christmas 2005. On Christmas Eve 2001 Leunig also appeared in words on the Opinion Page under the heading: "We should all try to love bin Laden, for Christ's sake." In a typically pompous piece of writing, Leunig commences his Christmas message with an introduction to a poem from circa 500 BC.

**As a Christmas gift, I offer firstly this translation by Stephen Mitchell of a passage from Lao Tsu's Tao Te Ching – it's an ideal gift for the man who has everything, or thinks he does.**

It's yet another TOL unilateralist pacifist message commencing with the refrain: "Weapons are the tools of violence/ all decent men detest them." Oh yes, all decent men would have laid down their weapons and, instead, resisted the Nazis with, say, ducks. Really.

Now, your radical Islamist Osama bin Laden is not a man who would detest weapons, surely. After all, he thought it a you-beaut idea to order suicide/homicide

bombers to capture commercial aircraft and to fly them – and the men, women and children kidnapped on board – into the World Trade Center on what the Americans call 9/11, (i.e. 11 September 2001). Yet Leunig believes that he can identify with the weapon-loving bin Laden. So, in *The Age* on 24 December 2001 he came up with the idea of finding a place in our hearts for the radical Islamists in our midst, who want to murder those who are opposed to them – Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Wrote Leunig:

**After the recent clouds of propaganda and the fierce demonising of our so-called enemies, and seeing as it's Christmas, I wonder – can we love them, perhaps even briefly. I think we must try to and I know we can, but where it can't be done or won't be done, may we at least refrain from hating them so morbidly as Lao Tzu has suggested? Can we lay off a bit?**

**Mercy, forgiveness, compassion. These are great treasures. If you don't use them you lose them. Sooner or later we all need to give and receive these precious gifts. Might we, can we, find a place in our heart for the humanity of Osama bin Laden and those others? On Christmas Day can we consider their suffering, their children and the possibility that they too have their goodness? It is a family day, and Osama is our relative.**

Leunig's naivety is staggering. He really believes that Osama bin Laden – who, as even the leftist Robert Fisk has acknowledged, wants to establish a caliphate throughout the world governed by shariah law – would really like us to remember him on Christmas Day. Fair dinkum.

And now for a Leunig special event. It's the Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony in Melbourne – Wednesday 15 March 2006 – the commencement of what will become a most successful international event. However, the opening ceremony at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) confuses many Australians and non-Australians alike. The *Opening Ceremony Souvenir Program* gives an idea of what is to come. Turn to Page 28 and it's all about Leunig ducks – under the title "The Boy on the Bay":

**Michael Leunig is one of Australia's best-loved artists and the humble duck is one of his most popular motifs. It is featured in his paintings, poems and cartoons. Leunig sees the duck as an evocative image – it is playful and full of life. In *The Duck Poem*, Leunig encourages us to be open to the arrival of new and surprising**



possibilities in our lives. This simple yet heartfelt poem has provided us with enormous inspiration in developing tonight's performance.

So there you have it. The TOL provided the inspiration for the Commonwealth Games' Opening Ceremony performance. There followed in the program the text of *The Duck Poem*, in full – which commences: "With a bit of luck/A duck/Will come into your life." How cute. As the (toy) duck entered the stadium, Leunig's voice was heard reciting *The Duck Poem*.

### A COMMONWEALTH GAMES DUCK-UP

It turns out that Leunig's duck is at the visual centre of the Opening Ceremony of the XVIII Commonwealth Games. A small boy appears in the stadium along with – you've guessed it – a toy duck, on a leash. The duck will lead the boy on what is presented as a "fantastic adventure". As the program notes advise, the boy (plus duck) "journeys across the sweeping landscape of his dreaming imagination", meets young people, "finds himself at the centre of a mad and hysterical rescue mission", is saved from drowning by a young woman – as we all reflect on "the traditional people of this region". Eventually Aboriginal "elders pass the boy a glowing orb – a gift of knowledge". And so the event continues, in its confused way. Eventually the boy departs the stadium – by now, however, the toy duck has become a real duck. How about that?

Even some readers of *The Age*, who are Leunig fans, would have found the message of the Opening Ceremony hard to fathom. What hope, then, for Melbournians who do not buy *The Age*? Or for Australians who live outside of the Commonwealth of Nations – in, say, far away Scotland or Jamaica or Nigeria, or India? As Matt Price put it (*The Australian*, 16 March 2006):

**The decision by Commonwealth Games organisers to book-end the three-act theatrical segment of the opening ceremony with appearances by Michael Leunig's whimsical figure proved confusing to spectators and TV viewers unfamiliar with the Melbourne cartoonist's work. "Did it have something to do with bird flu?" asked a bewildered New Zealander. "Was it based on a May Gibbs character?" wondered a bloke from Brisbane. "What's with the duck?" asked a fellow from South Africa.**

Earlier David Zolkwer, the Englishman who masterminded last night's MCG Show, said Leunig's *Duck Poem* had been the



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inspiration for the opening ceremony. Melbourne youngster Sean Whitford was accompanied by a large toy duck at the start of the first segment, *Boy on the Bay*, and left the arena carrying a live Pekin breeder to end the theatrics and usher in the athletes' parade. "The duck is a symbol for a boy's journey." Zolkwer explained. "This is a boy's dream and he can do whatever he wants to."

Writing in the *Courier Mail* (16 March 2006), Mike Colman was more scathing:

**The Marx Brothers used to do a skit titled "Why a duck?" After seeing it and the explanatory notes to last night's opening ceremony, several times, I'm still not sure of the answer to that question. Apparently the MCG version of the duck sketch had something to do with Michael Leunig, a Victorian cartoonist... As to the relevance to the rest of Australia, let alone the rest of the Commonwealth and a worldwide television audience estimated by Channel 9 head-counters as more than a billion, that remains a mystery. Still, no doubt on the strength of last night's show they will be lining up in Calcutta as we speak to buy the latest Leunig calendar....**

Even some *Age* writers were less than enthralled with the Leunig centred Opening Ceremony. Ross Warneke (*The Age*, 28 March 2006) described its message as "confusing" and specifically identified "Michael Leunig's duck" at the centre of the confusion. But, not surprisingly, Leunig thought his duck stole the show. He commenced an article in *The Age* (16 March 2006) with the refrain that he is more interested in ducks than in games:

**I must confess that I love ducks more than I love sport, it is my hope that one day Australia will be known as a nation that is duck mad rather than sport mad. My dream came a gleeful step closer to reality last night when I saw the duck appear centre stage in the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games. Not only that, there were also an encouraging number of duck moments, and more than a few duckisms were spoken and sung during the great extravaganza at the MCG and beyond. Where there's duck there's hope.**

Leunig then recounted how it was at the same MCG – at the time of the 1956 Olympic Games – that he experienced one of his "early duck epiphanies". Leunig related how he was in the crowd with his school friends during the final of the 10,000 metres

on 23 November 1956 – which was convincingly won by the Vladimir Kuts. Leunig reported that Kuts (he incorrectly called him "Kutz" on two occasions) "crossed the finish line, laps and laps ahead of his nearest rival". In fact, he won by about seven seconds (around 50 metres) – with Hungary's Jozsef Kovacs second and Australia's Allan Lawrence in third place. Leunig is inclined to exaggeration. If Kuts had won by, say, three laps he would have finished over three minutes ahead of his nearest rival.

A reading of *The Age* article reveals that Leunig was not so much inspired by Vladimir Kuts' athletic achievement, but, rather, by the fact that he represented the (then) communist empire:

**The Cold War was at its coldest, Russian tanks were in the streets of Budapest and our leaders warned us of the evil Communist empire coming to devour our homes and our loved ones. The Communists were the terrorists of yesteryear and even 10 year-old schoolchildren had been well drilled in the business of fear. Yet here they were, as athletes, as large (and small) as life: the evil Russians, brazenly wearing red singlets, would you mind, for all to see, and not an armed commando in sight to keep an eye on them. It was incredible. It was edgy, spine-tingling stuff.**

Leunig proceeded to relate, accurately, how the MCG crowd in 1956 gave Vladimir Kuts a huge reception for his great achievement on the track. However, Leunig chose to read much more into the occasion than the result of a 10,000 metres world championship event:

**It was a miracle. As the Russian humbled himself to the people in acknowledgement and gratitude, it was clear that there had been some amazing release of hope and innocence from the crowd; some spontaneous moment of liberation from all the fear-mongering and grim propaganda. I was proud of my country. It had been a great moment for sport and a tender moment for humanity. In some mysterious way, Vladimir Kutz [sic], in my child's heart, had become the duck; the little direction finding duck that had appeared most innocently and unexpectedly to show the way forward.**

Duck's off – for the moment at least. Now it is time for some facts. Vladimir Kuts did not represent Russia at the Melbourne Olympics. Rather, he ran for the Soviet Union – which was established by Lenin and Stalin after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. What's more, Vladimir Kuts was not Russian.

He was born in Ukraine, which was forced into the Soviet Union by the military might of the Red Army in 1919.

And now it's back to (Leunig) fantasy time. A 10,000 meter "Russian" athlete, in a red-singlet, was the inspiration for Leunig's duck. According to the (young) TOL, Vladimir Kuts "appeared" at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956 to "show the way forward". But did he?

Soviet (not Russian) tanks crushed the Hungarian Uprising in October 1956 – shortly before Vladimir Kuts' magnificent achievement on the track at the MCG. Hungary – and the rest of Eastern Europe – remained under communist dictatorship for a further two decades. Eventually European communism imploded – partly due to the pressure put on the Soviet Empire by the Western democracies (led by the United States and Britain) during the Cold War and partly due to the courage of East Europeans who resisted communist totalitarianism. The unsentimental fact is that ducks had nothing to do with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the downfall of the Soviet Empire.

Interviewed by Virginia Trioli on ABC Sydney Radio 702 on the morning his *Age* article appeared (16 March 2006), Leunig made no reference whatsoever to Vladimir Kuts. Rather, he declared that he did not want to "give the game away" as to what the duck-stream-of-consciousness at the Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony was all about. Indeed he declared "the more mystery the better" but declined to say precisely who the mystery was "better" for. Surely not the TV audience in Scotland, Jamaica, Nigeria or India?

Virginia Trioli, who recently left her role as presenter of ABC Radio 774 in Melbourne to present the morning show on ABC Radio 702 in Sydney, introduced Leunig to her Sydney listeners in somewhat flattering terms:

**In Melbourne everyone knows (you know) about the Duck. The Duck is, in the sense, our real soul – the best of what we should be and perhaps (you know) the second [sic] that walks beside us.**

So, there you have it. According to Ms Trioli, the Duck is Melbourne's "real soul". The bizarre interview concluded – as it had begun – with a duck focus:

**Trioli: I guess the lesson we should take away – and the moral if there is any – is that if you spy a duck, if you see a duck, just try and make a quiet personal connection because it just might make you feel a little happier.**

**Leunig: [laughing] Exactly, it might make sense of everything else [Trioli laughs] when you look the duck in the eye.**

**Trioli: Look the duck in the eye and have the duck look back.**

In the same segment, Virginia Trioli also spoke to ABC journalist Lex Marininos and to *Daily Telegraph* columnist Richard Zachariah. Both criticised the Opening Ceremony. The former said that the TV commentators were "as clueless about the content as everyone else". The latter, who was present at the MCG, said that the occasion did not work for the audience at the stadium.

Richard Zachariah, who worked with Leunig in Melbourne in the late 1960s and early 1970s, had quite a different tale on the evolution of the Duck. He told the following story. Apparently Zachariah and Leunig covered a Boxing Day Test Match at the MCC. And, apparently, on this occasion Australian opener Keith Stackpole made nought – a "duck" in cricket parlance. To report the event, Zachariah and Leunig purchased a duck, photographed it, and depicted a mock-up of Stackpole plus duck on the first page.

In the event, Leunig fell in love with the duck and took it home – where it was killed by a neighbour's dog. And so the story goes (or went). Thereupon Leunig went into grieving and stayed away from work for a week. Soon after returning to his newspaper office, a duck began appearing in Leunig's columns. How frightfully interesting in that – according to Richard Zachariah – Vladimir Kuts had nothing to do with the gestation of the Leunig Duck. Nothing whatsoever. Who knows? Who cares?

## **A CERTAIN INCONSISTENCY**

This, alas, was not the only Leunig story for the year. In September 2005 Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. By February 2006 this had become a matter of international controversy with radical Islamists violently demonstrating against Denmark in the country itself as well as parts of Europe, the Middle East and Africa. On 7 February 2006 *The Age* editorialised on the matter:

**Only a greater commitment to sensitivity and understanding on all sides can counter self-fulfilling predictions of a clash of civilisations. Newspaper cartoonists are in the business of being provocative, as *Age* readers will know. Rarely, if ever, have they provoked such a response as have 12 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that were drawn at the invitation of Danish broadsheet *Jyllands-Posten* and first**



published on September 30. The sacrilegious images were calculated to offend Muslims – the paper was drawing attention to self-censorship under threat of extremist reprisals – and the outrage has now spread worldwide in a dispute that touches on everything from freedom of speech and religious tolerance to stereotyping and extremism.

The *Age* has not published these cartoons as a matter of editorial judgement, a position supported by this newspaper's cartoonists. The Danish cartoons were neither insightful nor effective, just stereotypical smears. At the level of content, there was little justification to run them. Even given their curiosity value, such material carries a responsibility to consider whether the point of publication outweighs any likely offence. Having the freedom to publish does not mean we must publish to prove it...

The *Age*'s handling of this issue reflects a long commitment to good intercommunal relationships, which is the bedrock of Victoria's multicultural success story. This is one of the great challenges of globalisation, which must necessarily be met at community level. Media and individuals of goodwill can have no illusions about its importance.

Fine sentiments, indeed. The only problem, from *The Age*'s perspective at least, turned on the fact that its British born editor-in-chief Andrew Jaspan and his editorial team apparently did not bother to check what the newspaper had said on similar issues in the past. 1997, for example. In late 1997, controversy arose in Melbourne following the decision by the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) to show Andres Serrano's photographic work *Piss Christ* – depicting the figure of Christ on the Cross, with the crucifix standing in a bucket of urine. *Piss Christ*, get it?

Not surprisingly, this image offended many Christians. The (then) Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr George Pell, was unsuccessful in a legal action he took to have *Piss Christ* withdrawn from the NGV's exhibition. However, the exhibition was closed following two physical attacks on Andres Serrano's work.

*The Age* supported the NGV's right to show *Piss Christ*. On 10 October 1997, *The Age* actually editorialised that the image of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* was "warm and soft". Clever, eh? The paper conceded, however, that "the work is doubly insulting to those with religious sensibilities" and

acknowledged that "*Piss Christ* is a sacrilegious work in that it desecrates a symbol that many people consider deeply sacred". Nevertheless, *The Age* declared its support for the exhibiting of *Piss Christ*. Then on 14 October 1997 the newspaper went so far as to editorialise that there was a need to limit the criticism of controversial art:

**Could there have been a worse outcome to the controversy over Andres Serrano's photographic work *Piss Christ*? It is difficult to imagine one. The attacks on the work and the National Gallery of Victoria's decision to close the Serrano exhibition have moved the issue far beyond a mere debate over censorship; this is now a question of how loudly violence and illegality speaks in our society and how our institutions respond to brute force. On the evidence so far, it has to be said that the gallery and some of Serrano's most vigorous opponents have reacted poorly.**

On Sunday, the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr George Pell, produced a disappointingly muted response. He told *The Age*: "I understand the sense of outrage that has prompted these attacks on the image and I repeat my support of peaceful and legal protest only." This was not good enough... It is incumbent now on the opponents of *Piss Christ*, including Dr Pell, to comprehend that indicating that they "understand" why these attacks have taken place only serves to underscore the need for limits in the discussion of such a controversial work. Unfortunately, too many of the opponents of Serrano have been unwilling to acknowledge that these limits are essential in a free and tolerant society.

## **A CURLY ONE FOR LEUNIG**

So, in 1997 *The Age* supported exhibiting the work of an artist which it acknowledged was offensive to Christians and called for Christians, who were critical of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, to understand "the need for limits in the discussion of such a controversial work" – i.e. they should self-censor any expression of their disdain. But in 2006 *The Age* opposed the exhibiting of the work of artists which it acknowledged was offensive to Muslims and made no call for the critics of this work to limit their criticism in any way. What's more, this time round, *The Age* stated that its editorial position was supported by its cartoonists – including Michael Leunig. On 11 February 2006 it published Leunig's take on the issue:

Some very vile and vicious things are done in the name of freedom. Mischief and bad motivation attach themselves, surreptitiously and parasitically, to noble ideas. We've seen a lot of that lately. I note, without surprise, that a couple of prominent Australian media personalities who loudly advocated the Iraq war and who have publicly called for my internment, and that I be taken down because of my cartooning freedom, are now vigorously championing the rights of the Danish cartoonists. Very suspicious!

I am also suspicious of the motivation behind the commissioning of the famous Danish cartoons. I suspect that hatred may lie at the heart of the matter, even though hatred is a condition the West increasingly disowns. The anti-cartoon riot story, as ugly as it is, must surely be the consequence not only of a handful of dull cartoon clichés, but of the accumulated anger resulting from the humiliation, persecution and suffering inflicted on Islam by the West. The cartoons are taunts, probably deliberate, to an aggrieved and traumatised spiritual community who feel at the mercy of the West's contempt, ignorance and ruthless military might.

Any cartoonist with a heart or a conscience (from whence good cartoons come) would not mock or taunt such a group in this formally transgressive way... Public cartoon ridicule is properly dumped on the slick and the mighty, the officially powerful, on our own smug mob, on the triumphant ones protected by the helicopter gunships and offices of state.

Leunig did not name the names of those who he claimed have "publicly called" for his "internment". Probably because no one has made such a call. However, he did indicate his opposition to "very vile and vicious things...done in the name of freedom" and distanced himself from mockery and taunts while maintaining that "public cartoon ridicule is properly dumped on the slick and the mighty".

## LEUNIG'S "AUSCHWITZ 1942" AND IRAN

Once again, fine sentiments indeed. The only problem was that Leunig has often breached such standards in the past. In early 2002, the then editor-in-chief of *The Age* – Michael Gawenda – refused to publish a Leunig cartoon. It consisted of two drawings. On the left-hand side of the drawing, a

male figure with a Star of David on his back is depicted entering "Auschwitz 1942" – the gates of which display the message "Work Brings Freedom". On the right-hand side, a man wearing a Star of David is depicted entering "Israel 2002" – the gates of which display the message "War Brings Peace". Leunig's message was obvious – the Jews who run Israel today are just like the Nazis who ran the Auschwitz death camp in World War II. Really. Leunig claimed at the time that Michael Gawenda "just didn't get it" (ABC TV *Media Watch* 6 May 2002). But the evidence indicates *The Age's* then editor-in-chief fully understood Leunig's meaning.

In fact, Michael Gawenda's decision to pull Leunig's cartoon did not prevent its widespread distribution – since in May 2002 the ABC TV *Media Watch* program placed the drawing on its website, where it remains today. No surprise, really.

And so it came to pass that, following the Danish cartoons controversy, the Tehran based newspaper *Hamshahri* – which is close to Iran's militant Islamist government – commenced a competition to find cartoons on the Holocaust which are most insulting to Jews. This despite the fact that the Christian broadsheet *Jyllands-Posten* has no connection with Jews or Israel. Lo and behold, Leunig's "Auschwitz 1942/Israel 2002" drawing was entered in the Iranian anti-semitic competition and immediately made the short-list. The *Hamshahri* newspaper was later to describe Leunig's "nice" cartoon as offensive to the Jews (see Justin Norrie's report in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 2006).

The only problem was that Leunig did not enter the competition himself. His immediate response was to accuse his political opponents of setting him up. On the morning of 14 February 2006, Leunig was interviewed by Jon Faine on ABC 702 in Melbourne. He did not bother to consider why the powers-that-be at *Hamshahari* had judged his "nice" cartoon suitably anti-semitic. Not at all. Rather, Leunig threw the switch to self pity and blame – as the transcript demonstrates:

**Leunig:** You know, I've been set up, horribly, maliciously. And to me it denotes what it means to stand up against this conflict and this warlike sort of state the world is in and, you know, it's difficult to take that stance in the public arena.

**Faine:** Do you think you might know who's behind the hoax? Don't name anybody. But have you got in your mind any theories?

**Leunig:** Um, yes. I've had a few emails recently, kind of anonymous emails, you

# Decoding the Da Vinci Code

It's taken the world by storm – Don Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* - and is now a record breaking movie. But how much is fact and how much fiction? As the Christian churches try to get their view of the "Code" across, Elizabeth Fletcher in Sydney, author of *Women in The Bible*, has set up a website link that counters the central thesis of Brown's book.

Hear the facts at the Sydney Institute.

**SPEAKER:** ELIZABETH FLETCHER  
(Author, *Women in the Bible*)

**TOPIC:** De Coding The Da Vinci Code

**DATE:** Wednesday 7 June 2006  
**\*\*Bookings from 31 May only\*\***

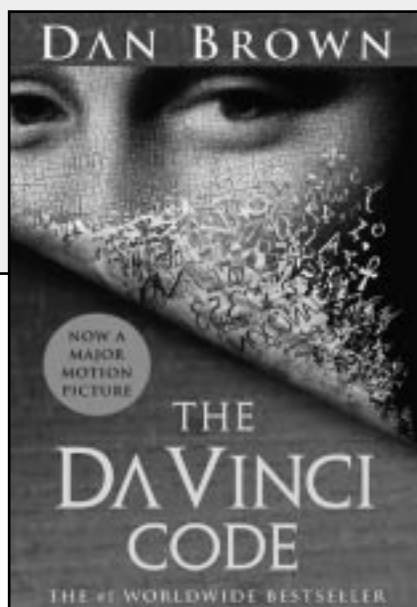
**TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm

**VENUE:** 41 Phillip Street, Sydney  
LIGHT REFRESHMENTS

**RSVP:** (02) 9252 3366 or email

**ENQUIRIES: PH: (02) 9252 3366  
FAX: (02) 9252 3360**

**OR mail@thesydneyinstitute.com.au  
WEBSITE: www.thesydneyinstitute.com.au**



know, taunting me to enter this competition - saying come on, you'd be a natural, said one of them. You know, these taunts come at me all the time and, look, it could be any number of people. There are a number of columnists and bloggers who have been particularly hateful to me for quite a long time and have suggested all sorts of hurtful and hateful things towards me. And, you know, the mind jumps towards all these kinds of people. But I must refrain from imagining anybody in particular. It could be, it could be a kid.

Leunig vamped up the paranoia when talking to journalist Katherine Kizilos. On 15 February 2006 in the *Sydney Morning Herald* she reported Leunig as saying:

**I have gotten used to dirty tricks, dirty tactics, from the pro-war lobbyists. It's a very personal attack against me. They want it proclaimed for all to see that Leunig is a friend of Muslim terrorists. They want to further caricature my position, to distort my position.**

## A TEAPOT DRIVEN PARANOIA

It turned out that the decision to send the Leunig cartoon to *Hamshahari* had nothing to do with what the cartoonist depicts as "columnists and bloggers... particularly hateful" to him or with what he terms "pro-war lobbyists". Not at all. Step forward young freelance journalist Richard Cooke who is an occasional contributor to *The Chaser's* satirical website. He told Katherine Kizilos (*The Age*, 16 February 2006) that he did not send Leunig's cartoon to the *Hamshahari* competition direct. But – falsely depicting himself by email as Leunig – he provided the Iranian newspaper with the website of the ABC TV *Media Watch* program. Richard Cooke said that he regretted what he had done but also commented that he was "unsympathetic to the sentiments in the [Leunig] cartoon".

On 15 February 2006 *The Age* provided Leunig with space in its Opinion Page to respond to the hoax. His piece was written before Richard Cooke outed himself as the hoaxter. In what is best described as verbal sludge, Leunig emoted at large about the incident. He declared: "You see, I've had more than a gutful of hostility and hate mail in the past three years, all because I have resisted the rise of fascism – the idea of war". So, once again, Leunig equated a decision to go to war with fascism. Overlooking, once again, the fact that fascism (in both Germany and Italy) was actually defeated by military might and not by cartoonists urging peace in our – or their – time.

In his *Age* emotive, Leunig even spoke of how – in this cartoon induced trauma – God came to his assistance. Yes, God.

I emailed the Iranians and asked them to remove the cartoon... and then, after a glass or two of water and a little prayer as my feet left the floor, I slumped into the dear, sweet bed and lay my battered conk on the lovely old pillow of forgiveness. Gently, as I lay there in the lamplight with my beloved, a CD played a little hymn to me: it was the Trapp Family Singers: “Abschied vom Leben” (upwards away from life), they sang and I was reassured that if all this killed me then leaving might be a blessed relief, and not so bad after all....

Sleep came but then faltered about 3am, so I rose in the solemnity of this grim hour and wandered out into the brilliant moonlight to see if God was out there in the paddock somewhere. Yes, God is there. I wandered back inside and in a reckless moment I opened the laptop lying on the kitchen table and went to the Iranian website. Lo and behold, the cartoon and the fake words were gone and God came in from the paddock and placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. An email popped open: it was the Iranians. They were courteously apologising, they had been co-operative. They cared.

How about that. In one of the most self-indulgent pieces of writing published in Australia this century, Leunig: (i) dismissed his critics as pro-fascist, (ii) claimed that God was on his side and (iii) thanked supporters of the brutal militant regime in Iran for their courtesy (to him), for apologising (to him) and caring (for him). How self-indulgent can you get?

What was missing from Leunig’s account was any regret for the fact that the professional anti-semites in Iran had judged his “Auschwitz 1942/Israel 2002” cartoon as suitably anti-semitic. Nor did he attempt to address the evident double standard in his work. According to the TOL, it is wrong to mock and taunt Muslims but, apparently, quite okay to mock and taunt Jews and Christians. Leunig’s taunting of Jews who support Israel is a matter of public record, following the international coverage of the *Hamshahari* incident. Followers of his work in *The Age* would know that the cartoonist frequently draws Christ on the Cross in a manner which many Christians would find offensive.

Michael Danby, the Federal Labor MP for Melbourne Ports, put the matter well when he wrote to the *Crikey* newsletter on 16 February 2006:

The Danish cartoons were designed to offend Muslims. The Leunig cartoon was designed to offend Jews – all Jews, not just Zionists, fanatical or otherwise. I represent an electorate with more Holocaust survivors and their families than anywhere in Australia. I am myself the grandson of German Jews who died in Auschwitz. To see the Nazi genocide of six million people compared with the actions of the democratic government of Israel in defending its population against terrorism, and to see this comparison made by someone who has never had to face either of these situations, from the comfort of his olive groves in Euroa, is deeply offensive to me, to the people of my electorate of all political stripes, and I am sure, to the majority of Australians.

## MICHAEL GAWENDA’S REPOSE

Unlike *The Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* did not publish Leunig’s self-indulgent apologia. But both papers printed a comment on the controversy by Michael Gawenda – formerly *The Age*’s editor-in-chief and currently the Washington based correspondent for the Sydney and Melbourne broadsheets. He commenced his Opinion Page article (16 February 2006) by distancing himself from the hoax. But he went on to criticise the cartoonist for failing to understand just how offensive his cartoon (which appealed to *Hamshahari*) really was:

**It is, of course, a terrible thing that someone submitted the Michael Leunig cartoon that I had refused to publish, when I was editor of *The Age*, to the worldwide Holocaust cartoon competition run by an Iranian newspaper. I can understand Michael Leunig’s dismay. What I’m not sure of is just what, beyond the fact that someone pretended to be him and entered this cartoon - his cartoon - in a competition, he was dismayed about...**

**In his public comments, Leunig has said nothing at all about this competition, how vile it is, how racist, how it shocked him that anyone would ever think that he would have anything to do with such an outrageous campaign.**

Michael Gawenda pointed out that, instead, Leunig has focused on “his victimhood” and how “people have been nasty to him”. He commented that if the cartoonist is going to brand his opponents as pro-war and pro-fascist – then he should expect that his views “are invariably going to draw passionate responses – from people, incidentally, who do not have Leunig’s

public platform and public support. Michael Gawenda continued:

**Leunig is a renowned and celebrated cartoonist, as well paid as any cartoonist, or journalist for that matter, in Australia. He is loved by many people who consider him a genuine Australian genius. So this sense of victimhood can be hard to understand. And to take.**

## LEUNIG - CLEVER AS A DUCK?

In an extensive interview with Henry Benjamin (*Australian Jewish News*, 17 February 2006) Leunig denied that he was anti-Semitic or anti-Israel. He asserted, however, that he just might be too clever for his readers. Really. According to the TOL:

**It's possible that I can overestimate the intellectuality of my readers. I have been trying to get my message over without deliberately being offensive. But it seems it is the cartoonist's lot to be misunderstood.**

Readers of *The Age* are not fools – nor are the radical Islamists in Iran. Leunig's message in his "Auschwitz 1942/Israel 2002" was not misunderstood because he overestimated the "intellectuality" of his readers. Not by his critics in Australia. And not by his supporters in Iran. Leunig was equating the Nazi Holocaust with Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. That's why *Hamshahri* described his cartoon as "nice". For Leunig to maintain otherwise is to engage in denial.

Little wonder that Leunig believes that he is more intellectual than his readers. After all, he has experienced a soft media along with an adoring fan club. At the end of her interview with Leunig on *Talking Books* in 2004, Caroline Baum declared: "Well, we need our prophets". It is not clear in what sense Leunig is a prophet. (Caroline Baum's interview with Leunig was shown on "Talking Books" program on the *Ovation* Pay TV channel on 17 April 2006).

In her interview with Leunig on the ABC *The Spirit of Things* (2 July 2000), Rachael Kohn commented: "Your cartoons relentlessly show up the personal sense of loss in selling out to materialism. Like the one that starts 'Keeping with the Joneses' was very stimulating; that's a wonderful cartoon". Leunig replied "thank you".

The fact is that Leunig is not involved in keeping up with the Joneses. On any objective analysis, Leunig is well ahead of the Joneses. He is one of Australia's most highly paid journalists and lives in what has been described as a "beautifully restored home" on a farm near Euroa, Victoria (see Paul Connolly

"Leunig's Retreat", *Sunday Life*, 21 November 2004). Apparently the Leunig home is well equipped – except for the absence of a television. Mr Curly's creator does not like TV. But he seems to like his art performed for TV – at the MCG as least.

There are many such double standards. For example, Leunig has made his fortune out of newspapers – since graduating from the leftist Monash University student newspaper *Lot's Wife*, to the ill-fated *Newsday*, to the leftist *Nation Review* and on to *The Age*. Yet he told Terry Lane in 2000 that he does not like newspapers (ABC TV 2 *Shot*, 21 March 2000) and in his book *When I Talk To You* he maintains that newspapers create "enormous anxiety and distress".

Then there is the matter of child care. Leunig has placed on his website the text of a profile written on him in the *Good Weekend* (13 February 1993) by Janet Hawley. There he told the story of the break-up of his first marriage and how he "hated" leaving his two young children following his "mid-life-crisis". Fair enough. Life's like that. However, just two years later came Leunig's 1995 cartoon "Thoughts of a Baby Living in a Child Care Centre" – when he berated mothers for leaving young children in child care. Who knows? Perhaps some children are in child care because single mothers (whose husbands have left home) need the services which child care provides? Also Leunig overlooks the fact that families earning less than his substantial income may depend on two incomes. In 2004 Leunig told George Negus that his two children from his current marriage "are educated at home". (ABC TV *George Negus Tonight*, 6 May 2004). Most Australian families could not afford to do this – even if they favoured home schooling.

Then there is the paranoia. Leunig has spent a lifetime mocking others. But he is enormously sensitive to criticism himself. In 2003 he told Larry Schwartz:

**I've found the last couple of years difficult in some regards because I've had a lot of hostility. I've encountered difficulty with editors, condemnation in letters pages, hostility from other columnists, including Clive James, who damned me publicly in a piece in the paper.**

**(The Age, 23 November 2003).**

All Clive James did (in a piece first published in *The Guardian* on 16 October 2002) and reprinted in *The Age* on 21 October 2002) was to criticise Leunig's idea that we should find a place in our hearts for Osama bin Laden on Christmas Day. Clive James' complete reference was as follows:

**On Christmas Eve, in the Melbourne Age, another pundit, Michael Leunig, called for a**

national prayer for Osama bin Laden on Christmas Day. "It's a family day," Leunig explained, "and Osama's our relative". It is not recorded whether the aforesaid Osama, sitting cross-legged beside his Christmas tree somewhere under Afghanistan, offered up a prayer for Michael. He might have done: after all, they were on first-name terms.

That's it. But, to the oh-so-sensitive Leunig, this criticism was a declaration of hostility. What was Clive James supposed to do – simply ignore Leunig's evident naivety because the cartoonist cannot readily accept criticism? Apparently so.

These days Leunig considers himself a theologian (see "Leunig on the Loose", *HQ Magazine*, July/August 1998). Somewhat pompous, don't you think? So much so that he now writes prayers. Those who saw the British Trestle Theatre Company's production *State of Bewilderment* in 1992 will recall the very real sense of bewilderment experienced by the audience as various Leunig characters – including Mr Curly, Vasco Pyjama, Teapot Man and the Duck, among others, cavorted around the stage for what seemed like hours – for no apparent reason. It was self-indulgent theatre, par excellence.

## THE SAGE OF EUROA – AT PRAYER

The same can be said of Leunig's most recent book of prayers – *When I Talk to You: A Cartoonist Talks to God* (HarperCollins, 2004). The book is long on self-importance and pomposity but short on theological belief. As the title implies, Leunig is much more interested in telling God what to do than in hearing God's message. For example, in one poem Leunig re-works Christ's words on the cross to God the Father viz: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Then Leunig places himself in Christ's position and prays: "Father, do not forgive them for they know precisely what they do". Leunig has in mind "those destroyers of earth's beauty and goodness", "those betrayers of nature's love" and "those greedy, pompous people". In short, Leunig has instructed God not to forgive Leunig's enemies. How convenient.

Leunig even lectures God about the state of the world. This prayer demonstrates Leunig's essential alienation – in particular, his disillusionment with democratic politics, economic reform, even science:

**God help us. With great skill and energy we have ignored the state of the human heart. With politics and economics we have denied the heart's needs. With eloquence, wit and reason we have belittled the heart's wisdom. With sophistication and style, with science and technology, we have drowned**

**out the voice of the soul. The primitive voice, the innocent voice. The truth. We cannot hear our heart's truth and thus we have betrayed and belittled ourselves and pledged madness to our children. With skill and pride we have made for ourselves an unhappy society. God be with us. Amen.**

Amen, indeed. There is Leunig – along with Mr Curly, Vasco Pyjama, Teapot Man and, of course, the Duck – living the kind of lifestyle that the overwhelming majority of all Australians can only dream about. Yet Leunig advises God that "we have made for ourselves an unhappy society" and, in the process, "pledged madness to our children". Just imagine, then, how much unhappier Leunig would be if – say – *The Age's* financial payment failed to arrive each month.

What does God think about all this? Alas, we are not told. It seems that Leunig is so focused on talking to – or, rather, at – God that he has not bothered to listen to anything God might say to him.

In his introduction to *When I Talk to You*, Leunig goes on at some length about – you've guessed it – ducks. He writes that "the duck...can be seen as a symbol of the human spirit". It is notable that, in Leunig's belief system, ducks embody the very values that Leunig is publicly committed to – i.e. "nature, instinct, feeling, beauty, innocence, the primal, the non-rational and the mysterious unsayable".

The end of the introduction portrays a bare-headed man kneeling before a duck. He looks a bit like Teapot Man – but without the teapot. Leunig's commentary describes the image:

**A person kneels before a duck and speaks to it with sincerity. The person is praying.**

The symbolism suggests that we should all pray to Leunig Himself – as the embodiment of the duck.

It is a truly remarkable achievement that The Prophet of Euroa and The Philosopher of *The Age* has travelled so far with his insubstantial thoughts. And it is truly ironic that it has been the mullahs in Iran who have provided Leunig with his inaugural reality check.

## POSTSCRIPT:

On 10 February 2006 the ABC Managing Director wrote to the ABC *Media Watch* program instructing it that the ABC has decided not to publish the Danish cartoons. The letter is on the ABC website. Yet the ABC Managing Director has not withdrawn Leunig's Auschwitz 1942/Israel 2002 cartoon from the ABC website.





# THE ABC OF POLITICAL BIAS

Douglas Kirsner

The proposition that the ABC is politically biased towards the left will come as no surprise to readers of this journal. With good reason, one never hears charges of right-wing bias levelled against the taxpayer funded broadcasters, the ABC or SBS.

Political bias can be gauged through measuring the systematic distance from the average voter's views. How much are non-left positions represented on the ABC? Or the right or centre of the ALP? These views constitute the approach of the vast majority of the community. Yet the ingrained culture of ABC journalists, especially in News and Current Affairs, has all the diversity of the range from soft to hard left and their programs reflect this ingrained cultural attitude. Yes, they criticise whichever government is in power, but this is because their ideology is way to the left of both major political parties.

A former producer and reporter for *4 Corners*, Gordon Bick, admitted as much in a letter to *The Age* on 24 January 2006:

**Governments continually condemn the ABC's left-wing bias and yet without the ABC there would be little account for the government's decisions. It is necessary and essential for the ABC to be always left of centre - whichever government is in power.**

Just 11 days after, Bick defended his claim that the ABC should always be "left of centre" in a decidedly curious way. On 4 February 2006 he posted the following comment on the [majorityrights.com](http://majorityrights.com) website:

**My letter in *The Age* (24/1/06) regarding "bias" in the ABC seems to have been misinterpreted by some. In particular, one person suggested that I had advocated a "left wing bias" (meaning support for the Labor Party) in current affairs programs. I don't. I have stated that in any interview with government, the journalist should take a stance of being "left of centre, whatever government is in power". By this I meant that in any interview with either the**

**Liberal, Labor or other party, the interviewer should take an opposing stance. In interview [sic] anyone from the Liberal Party then a left of centre approach should be made, with a Labor Party spokesman then an interview should adopt a right of centre stance. I do not and never would suggest that the ABC should take either a left wing or right wing bias. The ABC should not adopt any party preference.**

So, according to Bick, "right of centre" can really mean "left of centre". As Humpty Dumpty might have said, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less". This is a blatant misuse of language. The problem remains that the ABC is always to the left of everybody in government or out of it, except the Greens.

It is quite erroneous to think of Labor – at least Hawke-Keating-Beazley Labor — as "left" compared with the ABC. The reason that the ABC has upset governments of all colours is that it is to the left of all mainstream parties and the Australian population. When Senator Michael Ronaldson asked the (then) ABC managing director Russell Balding in the Senate Estimates on 13 February 2006 about Bick's statement, Balding claimed that he had never heard of Bick. This was strange because just five days earlier (8 February, 2006) Balding had written to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The West Australian* criticising an article by Gerard Henderson, which had included the Gordon Bick quote. Balding's letter was published in *The West Australian* on 9 February 2006 but was not printed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The left bias so suffuses the ABC that those within its culture probably find it hard to detect their partiality. Instances abound. For example, David Hicks receiving a heads-up on *4 Corners*; or sympathetic interviews with Hezbollah sympathisers and on to a seemingly endless supply of anti-Israel documentaries (a genuine exception being the recent three part series which refreshingly told both sides of the development of Arab-Israeli negotiations). ABC journalists persist in using the word "terrorists" to describe attacks on civilians everywhere in the world except in Israel where they invariably use the term "militants" to describe homicide bombers.

Eighteen of Richard Alston's complaints about *AM's* anti-American bias in relation to the Iraq war were finally upheld by the Independent Complaints Review Panel in 2003 and a further four complaints were upheld by the Australian Broadcasting Authority in 2005. By any measure this is a substantial number of complaints to be upheld against one of the ABC's

flagship current affairs programs. The Panel found evidence of serious bias by the presenter or reporter in relation to 12 individual broadcasts about the war in Iraq, cases of breaches of an ABC editorial requirement for reporters to refrain from “emotional language or editorialisation”, and a case of inadequate identification of sources.

## A CONFORMIST CULTURE

Why is there such systematic bias? Is it because ABC management favours the left? Or because program journalists do? Cultural issues go to the root of what is wrong with the ABC. Whether management is efficient or not, the major problem is with the conformist culture of the institution. The default option is set as a cultural mindset, way to the left of mainstream political parties and the median of the population. If “diversity” means gays, Muslims, feminists and Aborigines – and not Liberal, Labor, conservative and social democrat – why not? The fact that the one program on the ABC that challenges the orthodoxy by exploring conservative and liberal views is called *Counterpoint* can be taken as an admission of the ABC’s virtual political monoculture. The bias often works through leaving one side entirely out – for example, explaining that suicide bombers carry out their acts because they are so desperate, while there is no explanation as to why Israel defends itself in the way it does. The culture is so entrenched as the default option as to be virtually unnoticeable to those within it. The idea of the ABC as fearless purveyor of the criticism of the establishment melds with that of being on a higher moral level than the “*hoi poloi*”.

In studies of the 2001 Federal election and the impact of the boat people, Swinburne University sociologist Associate Professor Katherine Betts found that eight of nine occupation categories, ranging from trades to managers, adopted a similar view that the boats should not come – whereas the ninth, consisting of broadly teachers, social workers, academics, social professionals and journalists, took the contrary view and supported their being admitted.

A new class has emerged with growing tertiary education that has been described and discussed by Katherine Betts in revealing articles in *People and Place* (in 2002 and 2004). This class of social professionals, often living in the inner city, are often referred to derisively in terms such as the “chattering classes” or the “latté” or “chardonnay set”. Because of the implicit criticism involved, it is unfortunate that the major change described by these terms is frequently ignored because it is often dismissed simply as abuse hurled by “right” wingers onto “left” wingers.

In fact, this new class of social professionals has an identity that has risen in tandem with the widening and increasing extent of tertiary education that has become normal mass education instead of elite education. This has occurred in an increasingly globalised world of more and more rapid changes across many sectors. The old left emphasised economic reforms to help the working class while the new “left” focuses on issues such as refugees, multiculturalism, reconciliation, civil liberties, etc. This new class of social professionals includes teachers, academics, public servants and welfare workers who adopt distinct ideological positions and values that serve as social markers for the new class.

This class has much in common with the unfortunately ugly term, “bobos” (bourgeois bohemians) whom David Brooks has described in the United States. In a *New York Times* article (“Bitter at the top”, 15 June 2004), Brooks has described two “aristocracies” within the educated new class which are in bitter conflict with each other: “The members of the aristocracy of mind produce ideas, and pass along knowledge. The members of the aristocracy of money produce products and manage organisations”. Brooks points out that the number of people with degrees has doubled in the last 30 years: “As the educated class has grown, it has segmented. The economy has produced a large class of affluent knowledge workers - teachers, lawyers, architects, academics, journalists, therapists, decorators and so on - who live and vote differently than their equally well-educated but more business-oriented peers.”

Professionals and managers can be distinguished. Where professionals tend to vote Democrat; the managers who work for corporations, brokerage houses, real estate and banks are inclined to vote Republican. Brooks suggests that “the contest between these elite groups is often about culture, values and, importantly, leadership skills. What sort of people should run the country? Which virtues are most important for a leader?”

## THE KNOWLEDGE CLASS

The knowledge workers value leaders with university skills, involving digesting large amounts of information to “discuss their way through to a nuanced solution” – whereas managers value simple, straight-talking leaders who are good at managing people as well as ideas. The “knowledge-class” social professional group is an important segment within the new educated class that Betts describes who have more distinct values that increasingly set them off from the “aristocracy of money” and the general public. This segment includes ABC journalists and reveals an important cultural issue – why those among the “aristocracy of mind” segment of the new

educated class are often so blind to their own prejudices.

The authority structures within universities, journalism and education are very much on the side of the left, or at least of the knowledge workers that Brooks describes. In the US, for example, where studies have been done, professors are at least ten times more likely to vote Democrat than Republican. Surveys of US journalists reveal that the overwhelming majority vote Democrat and that the majority are self-identified as left of centre. A study of Berkeley academics showed an overwhelming 9 to 1 ratio of Democrats to Republicans. I am not aware of similar studies in Australia, but anecdotally Australia is at least as left-wing.

Although this new class of social professionals is very much a numerical minority in the electorate, they have important power positions. They are not a “power elite” in the sense of having direct political power like politicians, but they have much influence on language, on working with the symbolic and the way we use it, and the way we think about and conceptualise issues. They have no direct political power but they are the “intellectual elite” and have special power in taxpayer funded universities, schools, public service departments and communications. They have a large degree of influence over the many students they teach and are themselves reinforced through the media that they work in and exercise control over. There is a noticeable homogeneity among this class who often mix almost exclusively with each other and reinforce each other ideologically. There is a lack of real diversity in such a conformist culture. Diversity (race, multicultural background, sexuality, etc.) is one thing but intellectual and even political diversity is quite another.

It would be interesting to know the political leanings of journalism academics in Australia. But there are informative studies about the orientations of Australian journalists. The 2005 book *Barons to Bloggers: Confronting Media Power* edited by Jonathon Mills (for which ABC Board chairman Donald McDonald wrote the preface) contains the results of a 2004 RMIT survey of 129 media workers in Australia. When Senator Michael Ronaldson raised this survey with the ABC Managing Director, Russell Balding, in Senate Estimates on 13 February 2006, Balding said he knew nothing of either the book or the study.

The study is revealing. When asked to rate their political attitudes, 55 per cent of the media workers said they were either left or small “l” liberal, 36 per cent said they were centrist while just 9 per cent

described themselves as right-wing or conservative. The book also reveals journalists’ approach to political bias in the ABC. When asked, “Which is the most politically partisan media organisation in Australia?”, 40 per cent thought News Limited the most biased. But 25 per cent of them considered that the ABC was the most biased media organisation in Australia, making it second only to News Limited in being regarded as the most biased Australian media organisation.

Although this new class holds much sway in the ABC and SBS, its influence is mainly confined to the “quality” broadsheets in other media because they are privately owned. Fairfax newspapers are able to adopt a new class ideology precisely because they target the same new class as their readers. *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* have far smaller circulations than mass circulation *Herald-Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* tabloids.

The problem is that in fact the ABC does not have mechanisms in place to establish whether they are fulfilling their charter in terms of balance, impartiality and diversity. The ABC constantly asserts its neutrality and that programs are balanced at least “over time”. But it does not provide the evidence to support such assertions, which suggests that it has no way of knowing whether they are true. The ABC needs to explore and implement techniques for measuring and evaluating balance.

As has been previously suggested by members of the government and others, the ABC needs to proactively monitor its programs through an independent office that can assess what is actually happening. The office needs to assess the presentation of a diversity of viewpoints. It needs to ensure the division between news and commentary/editorialising. Although most ABC journalists are thoroughly professional in their approach, they operate within a narrowly confined political and cultural milieu.

## REAL BALANCE NEEDED

I am not suggesting that the ABC become a monochrome centrist institution. But there needs to be real balance, impartiality and diversity and a clear difference between news and commentary which tend to blur too often. There needs to be many sides, not one. Funded by the taxpayer, ABC’s *Media Watch* keeps the non-tax payer funded media honest. It is soft on SBS and the ABC. One recent exception that proves the rule is that it was critical of the ABC’s only centrist to right program presenter, Michael Duffy, for not disclosing on *Counterpoint* the funding of the Cato Institute. Duffy had interviewed a Cato Institute staffer who presented findings against “green”

climate change claims. This may be fair enough but why does it happen that *Media Watch* does not criticise the left at the ABC – or anywhere?

But does the ABC complaints procedure assure balance? There have been many instances of bias but the complaints procedure seems custom-made to deflect them. The complaints procedure is generally part of the problem, not the solution. I have submitted many complaints to the ABC and most of the time I am fobbed off in very legalistic ways. First complaints are made to Audience and Consumer Affairs; they can be appealed against to the Complaints Review Executive which is also part of the organisation itself, and then there can be appeals to the Independent Complaints Review Panel if the complainant is not exhausted by this time. Apart from its being moderately difficult to find out how to file a complaint, it needs dedication and commitment to follow-through or even, once burned, to repeat making complaint about another issue. The ABC points to the relatively small number of complaints about political bias but ignores explanations as to why this is so. Could it be because of how difficult it is to make a complaint? Or how a complainant is rejected? Or what the point is anyway in terms of outcome? Or how many people audit the program if they are used to its coming from a certain viewpoint?

How is the ABC confident that it is meeting its obligation of impartiality? It needs to ask: “How are we impartial? How do we treat certain issues?” This needs to occur over a range of programs over time. “How can we ensure that we can’t be accused of bias in such circumstances? Would a disinterested observer think that the ABC takes one editorial position or another over a range of programs over time?”

Clearly, the way of establishing this is by monitoring these programs over time. An independent office supervised by the ABC Board would aim at ensuring that the ABC complied with its own charter, code of conduct and other relevant policies. The ABC is now reviewing its editorial policies but the major problem is not the policies themselves but their implementation.

An evaluation office would assess programming for accordance with the ABC policies of fairness, balance, impartiality, etc by sampling programs and assessing the raw data. It would need to work out appropriate techniques for the measurement and assessment of balance since the ABC shows no evidence of having any mechanisms in place for measuring whether there is or is not balance across its large range and number of programs. Without such mechanisms, the ABC cannot back up claims

that there is balance over time or across the range of its programs. Defenders of the ABC establishment often claim that the government is always trying to muzzle the ABC. Mostly, however, it could be argued that, with the exception of Richard Alston, they basically try and ignore the ABC.

## AN INCREASING INFLUENCE

The Coalition has won four elections without the ABC’s help. Perhaps it would stir up a battle that the government doesn’t feel it has to win. Many of the audience don’t support the government anyway. John Howard speaks directly without intermediaries so that he cannot be distorted. The problem for the government, and in fact the mainstream ALP, is that in the medium to long term, the ABC will influence the electorate in their way of thinking, not so much directly (since the ABC is the new class talking to the new class) but indirectly largely through the medium of teachers, academics and others in the social professional class with clients in the general community. As more and more of the population are involved with lifelong education, the influence of the ABC will increase. Culture change in the ABC is essential for it to fulfill its own charter of balance, impartiality and diversity. The ABC Code of Conduct states:

**The ABC is committed to providing programs of relevance and diversity which reflect a wide range of audience interests, beliefs and perspectives. In order to provide such a range of views, the ABC may provide programs which explore, or are presented from, particular points of view. The ABC is committed to providing programs of relevance and diversity which reflect a wide range of audience interests, beliefs and perspectives.**

It is in the long-term interest of the mainstream parties and of the community that such policies be implemented and that there is genuine diversity and no ideological hegemony in public broadcasting.

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# BATTLE FATIGUE IN THE GENDER WARS

Anne Henderson

Employing one of her characteristic quips, at page 97 in *Are Men Necessary? – When Sexes Collide*, Maureen Dowd opines that “Feminism lasted for a nanosecond, but the backlash has lasted forty years”. As in much of Dowd, this has some truth while fundamentally oversimplifying a far more complex reality.

The publication of *Are Men Necessary?* has certainly set off a noisy conversation along the media chains, off and online, from New York to Sydney. Not simply in regard to assessing the failings or otherwise of feminism, but also the literary foibles and strengths of the *New York Times*’ only female *op ed* columnist, now the central focus of the whole debate – Dowd herself. None of which can be bad for book sales or Dowd’s ability to attract readers for her newspaper.

The *AMN?* conversation has been both welcomed and derided by women. Dowd’s style of analysis is chatty and unscientific at the same time as being clever and ironic. She is a columnist not an academic. Her views are well scripted but random; they rely much on personal experience; they make little attempt to get beyond the privileged, upper crust of eastern seaboard USA intellectual circles; they mostly ignore the experience of countless women who live outside this ambience save for Dowd’s iconic, now deceased, mother and some housemaid aunts of a half century before who, according to Dowd, had greater opportunities to gain husbands than an Alpha woman like the modern Dowd.

Not surprisingly, reviews and discussion of *AMN?* have come largely from women writers, and have been mostly critical. As an exponent of women’s issues, Dowd’s often confused and contradictory observations have made her a prime example of where feminism has gone wrong – as well as right.

In terms of what Dowd discusses in her book, as Carolyn See at *The Washington Post* put it, the issues she raises are “yesterday’s news”. Dowd is not seminal in any sense of the word. Indeed, for her contemporaries (she is 53), reading *AMN?* is a depressing experience. Until it is remembered the book is more about Dowd and her ilk than all women.

Any fifty something woman making it through chapters like “How Green is My Valley of the Dolls?” or “How to Set Your Bear Trap in the Mink Department of Bergdorfs” might be saddened to think the debate has come full circle. She might even, for a nanosecond, wonder if nothing has changed or been affected by the women’s movement in half a century. And, without remembering what her own daughters and grand daughters are achieving, think a woman’s experience is all back to vanity, dating and estimating the worth of life through her ability to “catch” a bloke.

The nanosecond over, however, she will quickly get beyond Dowd’s superficial satire to realise that, as Katha Pollitt wrote in *The Nation*:

**It’s a myth that my generation and Dowd’s were a unified band of sisters forging ahead in our sneakers and power suits. By many measures young women today are far more independent than we were – more likely to finish college and have advanced degrees, to work in formerly all-male occupations, to have (or acknowledge having) lesbian sex, to refuse to suffer in silence rape, harassment, abuse. ... I know young women who’ve made the finals in the Intel science contest and worked on newspapers in Africa, who’ve had sperm-bank babies alone or with other women, who play rugby, make movies, write feminist/political/literary blogs, organise unions, raise money for poor women’s abortions.**

For all that, Pollitt does admit to being somewhat depressed about where feminism is at as the twenty-first century takes off. Dowd does have a point in her contradictory, pun ridden froth – young women have sent the compass point reeling in their raunchy porno tolerance levels or what Dowd calls travelling in an “arc from fighting objectification to seeking it”, at an extreme the Paris Hilton factor.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, Dowd does speak for many women in her apparent, unrequited craving for a male soul mate, either to marry or share the future with. A craving which, incidentally, is a complete contradiction of the question she writes under, rhetorical or not - “are men necessary?”. Obviously, for Dowd and many young women like her, the answer is yes.

But the Dowd view that a clever woman loses her appeal for the average male can be challenged on many levels – as others have written, Dowd herself gets lots of what she calls “dates” and from very desirable and challenging men. Her allure in many ways is not only her good looks but her uniquely influential position as Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and acquaintance of the rich and famous. She is in denial to suggest otherwise.

No, it is not lack of “dates” that gets in the way of the clever woman’s aspirations. It’s becoming a mother.

What feminism has not been able to answer has been the instinctive revival in many young women of the urge for the nurturing experience of mothering. Many such women continue to pursue careers – but very few who choose motherhood find they can take to the heights of ambition their male counterparts do.

A man can ignore his body clock (does he have one?) while women are realising it's a choice of career or motherhood, and certainly not both if a woman expects to traverse the heights of most CEO levels in business or politics. A woman is seen to be trying to serve two masters if she is both mother and one hundred per cent career focused – and we all know a man cannot serve two masters!

Wait too long and the body clock says too late; start young and miss the opportunities to scale real heights at the office or in the corporations. Indeed, many workplaces still assume that a woman who marries will not be reliable – that at some stage she will want to go part time while she “starts” a family. No amount of affirmative action or assistance from governments for child care has been able to solve this one. Even in the political sphere, how many safe parliamentary seats are “handed” to women candidates, married or unmarried, in the way they are to aspirational young men? Not many – if at all.

For that forty years of backlash Dowd refers to, feminism has been fighting on at least two fronts – not a good way to win a campaign. Extreme positions in some of the feminist champions has irritated not only male opponents but a considerable number of intelligent women. On one level this should not be unexpected and an array of views is healthy in any debate. However, in some cases the extremism and over prescriptive messages from the sisterhood diehards has been counterproductive. This has made it possible for anti feminist tracts, like *Women Who Make the World Worse* (Sentinel, 2006) by Kate O'Beirne, reasonable reading at times.

O'Beirne's claim that “the modern women's movement is totalitarian in its methods, radical in its aims and dishonest in its advocacy” should not be taken too seriously, but it does contain some truth. A lot of what O'Beirne argues can be supported.

The feminist movement in the USA looked the other way as the Monica Lewinsky scandal tore at the White House. And this in spite of its high priestess of sexual harassment Catherine MacKinnon having declared: ‘If sexual harassment expresses the pervasive reality of normal relations between the sexes, and if these relations express unequal social power, then the feelings and practices that emerge are not reasons that the practices should be allowed. They support and evidence the discrimination.’

If the women's movement wonders why younger women aren't as interested as they might be in feminism, it should look no further than its double

standard support of Bill Clinton over Monica Lewinsky or at its exaggerated view for decades of the physical or psychological “equality” of male and female in all manner of issues whether body mass or wider interests.

There is no doubt, affirmative action and heroic efforts by 1970s and 1980s feminists helped forge valuable inroads for women in the workplace. But so also has the freed up lifestyle for married women thanks to modern artificial birth control and the greater availability of flexible workplace conditions – both contributions by men.

The current indifference of younger women at going further along the feminist track may be the result of thinking they have all they need right now by way of equal opportunity with their male counterparts. It may also be that the doctrinaire approach is no longer so attractive; that the complexities of managing personal relationships, work, career and the myriad of life choices they confront are more than enough for Generation X or Y - without adding political action to the list.

Younger women are telling their 1960s and 1970s mothers that they want to be “girls” after all. Twenty somethings, as illustrated in Rebecca Huntley's *The World According to Y – Inside the New Adult Generation* (Allen & Unwin 2006), are more interested in generational gaps than gender gaps. Former latch key kids from feminist families are getting married and taking on parenthood at much younger ages; young women are opting to be stay-at-home mums. It could just be a new round in an eternal cycle, or reaction against the status quo of an earlier generation, or wanting what has been denied – even so, feminists should be wondering.

At the same time, the single lifestyle for women has become raunchier and more risky. *The Sydney Morning Herald's* “Sam and The City” has just announced there has been nearly a thirty per cent rise in women cheating on their partners since 1970. As Maureen Dowd sees it, the bedroom is now our stage for adventure. And young women, having been told to take risks like men do if they want more of the action, are turning into nymphettes and bimbos to horrify traditional feminists. The sort of horror Helen Garner exhibited about the female students in her book *The First Stone*. Older feminists now seem to react as if they had created a Frankenstein. How strange that the women's revolution has not changed the world of men so much as changed women to live life more and more the way men do.

Yes indeed – take Maureen Dowd for starters.

*Anne Henderson is Editor of The Sydney Papers*





# AUSTRALIA'S BLACK SETTLERS

Historian and writer Cassandra Pybus has studied the black convicts among the first fleet settlers – profoundly complicating our understanding of race relations in early colonial Australia. Most of these black founders were originally slaves from America who had sought freedom with the British during the American Revolution, only to find themselves abandoned and unemployed in England when the war was over. A new and disturbing look at the origins of Australia.

**SPEAKER: DR CASSANDRA PYBUS**  
(Academic & author)

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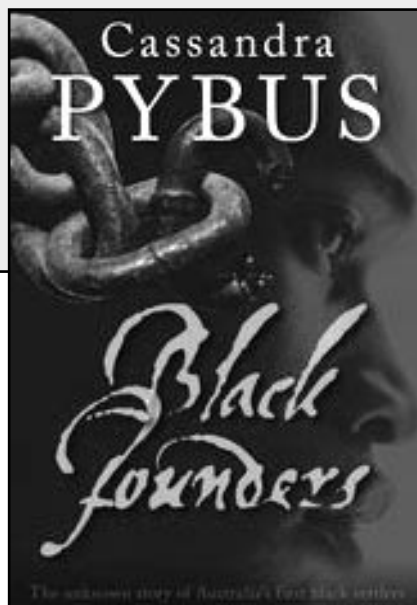
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# ABC GIVEN GREEN LIGHT

Geoffrey Luck

In March 2006, ABC management issued a triumphant press release: the Independent Complaints Review Panel had not upheld a complaint that a program on Papua New Guinea was biased and slanted, intentionally and effectively, to denigrate the Australian Trusteeship 1945-75. The Panel, it said, could find no breach of the ABC's Editorial Policies or Code of Practice in relation to the charges of factual inaccuracy and biased reporting. But the press release did not by any means tell the whole story. And the findings it found so favourable may well prove to have been a pyrrhic victory for the ABC.

## TUNNEL VISION OR REAR VISION?

Last August, in the pages of this Journal, I outlined the charges I had laid against a Radio National Hindsight program: *Papua New Guinea: Nation State or Failed State?* Produced by the Social History and Features Unit as the second of a six-part series entitled *Rear Vision*, it declared its objective as setting out "to examine the history of Australia's relationship with our nearest neighbour". In its allotted 55 minutes it did nothing of the sort. I suggested that, in its distortions of history, the motivation of the program was to initiate a revisionist post-modernist view of Australia's Papua New Guinea experience – in the same way many academic historians had distorted the history of Aboriginal/white contact.

As my detailed complaint to the ABC explained, the program, taken in its entirety, was designed to lead the listener to conclude that Papua New Guinea's current crises were due to dereliction of duty and responsibility by Australia and Australians in the so-called colonial period. Nowhere were criticisms balanced by contrarian views which could have put a different complexion on events. By its selection of contributors and editing of their interviews, the program makers created emotional and sensational distortions of the truth. The overall picture was of murdering patrols, patronising *kiaps*, racist attitudes, education and development ignored, constitutional confusion, and an unifying rapid exit by Australians at independence.

I had cited 15 areas of the program which aggregated to this distorted view. Some were opinions and interpretations of events and trends – novel, controversial views, yet unchallenged. The central

agent of the Australian administration, the *Kiap*, had been dismissed sneeringly as a romantic figure of mythology. But there were more important objections to deliberate untruths and errors of fact.

Prime Minister Michael Somare, who ought to have known better and probably did, (but it suited his book as he was interviewed while still angry with Australia over the shoes incident), had lashed out with: "Australia at independence only produced six university graduates; they were trained in Australia and Australia did not leave anything either about tertiary education or higher education for us at the time." I pointed out that the University of PNG had been established in 1965, ten years before independence, and graduated its first students in 1970, five years before the Australian flag came down. The University of Technology had begun teaching in 1967. High schools had been established from the 1950s on.

Even more ludicrous statements by Dr Helen Hughes were allowed to go to air: "Australia failed to provide primary education for PNG or to establish a central Department of Education". I named three Directors of Education I had known who presided over educational development from the 1950s on. Hughes was also brought on to provide a skewed simplistic interpretation of the Bougainville crisis. These included the statement that the giant copper mine had employed no locals. His recent death has reminded everyone that the leader of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, Francis Ona, a trained surveyor, was originally employed at the mine, like many of his Panguna people. And Hughes provided "evidence" of endemic racism with an irrelevant anecdote about beer at a Port Moresby bar.

I had believed that any reasonable person listening to the program would have perceived its negative tone. There was no acknowledgement whatsoever of achievement, of personal or national dedication over half a century to the task of lifting Papua New Guinea from its stone age origins. The ABC initially (and insultingly) treated my complaint simply as "feedback". It aggravated the situation by claiming in its response that the program "examined a range of viewpoints on the impact of colonisation on Papua New Guinea", something it so obviously did not. It was then forced to accede to my demand that an expanded complaint which I provided be referred to the Independent Complaints Review Panel.

## A CODE OF DISABUSE

Fast-forward to a telephone call in mid-March this year, ten months after the program was broadcast and 160 days from the time the ICRP formally accepted my complaint for investigation. (It is required to report within 60 days.) An unidentified clerk in the Panel's offices enquired whether I had received the findings on my complaint – they needed

to be able to advise the ABC. I had not. Perhaps naively, I believed this was a courtesy call, so that the ABC could be advised of the outcome simultaneously. I was rudely disabused when a package arrived the next day containing the ICRP report – under cover of a letter from the Managing Director of the ABC, Russell Balding. He had received the findings nearly a month earlier. He had therefore had time to get his staff to prepare the press release referred to earlier, and kindly enclosed a copy.

If I had felt insulted by the Panel's lack of courtesy, I was depressed on reading its 17-page report. Four of its pages were devoted to a forensic legalistic analysis of relevant sections of the ABC's Code of Practice and its Editorial Guidelines. This clearly showed the influence of the Convenor (Chairman), The Honourable Michael Foster QC, a former Judge of Appeal of the NSW Supreme Court.

Foster is one of three new members appointed in a reconstruction of the Panel in May 2005, which the ABC, in a burst of publicity claimed to have made it more efficient and more independent. Of the other two members, Susan Brooks had professional experience in compliance and regulation (but none as a broadcaster or journalist), while the third, Jane Singleton, was a former ABC broadcaster. The balance of the troika, touted by Managing Director Russell Balding as "an expert and disinterested panel", had thus been tilted decisively towards legalisms.

As a result, and perhaps not surprisingly, the Panel's conclusions could scarcely be expected to be based on the "reasonable man or woman" test. And they do not. These were the foundations of its decisions:

- ABC programs, other than News and Current Affairs, are exempt from requirements of "balance" and "impartiality".
- In non-news programs, there is no obligation to present contrary points of view, to "balance" opinions or introduce other arguments.
- Failure to do so "does not ...reveal any fundamental bias in the program".

There can be no argument that the ABC's Code of Practice can be interpreted to reach such conclusions. But the Panel's considerations then strayed into Alice in Wonderland territory when it tried to establish what is "factual" and what "factual content" means. It was faced with the fact they were not defined in the Code. (It recommended the Code should be re-drafted.)

So they borrowed a definition that "'factual content' envisages the type of content which is easily verifiable". Pretty obvious. The definition went on: "expressions of opinion, implications and inferences do not constitute factual content and are not subject to the requirement of accuracy".

And that sentence gave the Panel the basis for rejecting my complaints that errors of fact, allowed uncontested in the program, were evidence of its bias. So, for example, the edited excerpts containing the false statements of Michael Somare and Helen Hughes did not need to be subject to the test of accuracy or truth.

Clearly, turning its back on the truth of such matters must have given the Panel a slight twinge of conscience, for it wrote: "These parts of the program might have benefited from a less accepting approach to these contributions." But then it stiffened its resolve and declared: "...the passages complained of should be categorised as expressions of the participants' viewpoints, rather than containing factual content requiring effort to ensure its accuracy."

The ICRP's findings prove that there are lawyers, and then there are jurists. Any law student would know from their study of the judgements of Lord Denning, that most lucid of thinkers, how to go about a complaint such as this. Denning's approach was always to decide the natural meaning of a statute, examine the evidence and then use logic and commonsense to cut through to the essence of the issue. It is inconceivable that Denning would have failed to base his findings not on a narrowly applied interpretation of the Code of Practice, but on the impact of the *Hindsight* program as a whole.

So why, when the ABC told the Panel that it had interviewed each of the five guest speakers used in the program for 20-25 minutes, did the Panel not demand to hear the complete interviews? Anybody with any knowledge of journalism would know that what "goes on the spike", that is, discarded, is vitally important in understanding how fairly the excerpt finally used, has been selected. The excerpts used in the program show every sign of having been expertly selected, and juxtaposed, to exclude all but pejorative views.

The ABC also revealed that the interview with a sixth speaker, Josephine Abaijah, was junked, considering her contribution a side issue. Why did the Panel not audition this tape also, to decide whether the ABC was telling the truth? Were Dame Abaijah's views contrary to the program's line?

The Panel did not appear concerned that the ABC contradicted itself repeatedly in trying to defend itself. Its first response was: "It was not the intention of the program or the ABC to provide a definitive examination of the history of the relationship between Papua New Guinea and Australia." But in response to the Panel's enquiries, it changed tack: "In structuring the program, the program makers had several objectives: **to coherently tell the story of Australia's participation in PNG**; to look critically at Australia's role in the process of decolonisation; and to examine the post colonial era." No reasonable person could believe that the program was either

coherent, or told "the story" of Australia's participation in PNG.

The reason for this was revealed in another part of the ABC's response to the Panel. It candidly admitted that the only people who had been considered as contributors to the program were academics. The program makers' research gathered material from local newspapers, journal articles and media reports "to get a sense of who was writing and commenting on the topic". They also identified "relevant academic material, including the leading historians, economists and so on". There was no thought given to any of the thousands of people with practical experience in Papua New Guinea.

Can any benefit come from this sad episode which, apart from its grave demeaning of the Australian trusteeship, has exploded the competence and the appropriateness of the ABC's so-called Independent Complaints Review Panel? I believe it has shown a way forward – if the government, and more especially the Board and its Chairman are willing to grasp the nettle. The core of the problem lies in the carefully and cutely worded sections of the Code of Practice, a rule book which is supposed to keep programs such as the *Hindsight Rear Window* series honest. In effect, as this case has shown, these sections make it impossible to prove the bias that is apparent to the average listener. The Panel has just given the green light for bias to the makers of all such programs.

News and Current Affairs programs are bound further by Editorial Guidelines, requiring them to be "balanced and impartial". Now, all that is needed is to apply these same guidelines to general programs. These are its main points:

- The ABC takes no editorial stand in its programming
- Every reasonable effort must be made to ensure that the factual content is accurate and in context.
- Balance will be sought through the presentation, as far as possible, of principal relevant viewpoints on matters of importance.
- The commitment to balance and impartiality requires editorial staff to present a wide range of perspectives and not unduly favour one over the others. But it does not require them to be unquestioning.

If these guidelines had been applied in the judgement of *Papua New Guinea: Nation State or Failed State?* the program would have been hanged, drawn and quartered.

**Geoffrey Luck was an ABC journalist for 26 years, for seven of them the ABC's senior journalist in Papua New Guinea.**



## CORRESPONDENCE

Your commentary headed “Lousy, sexist, drunken, crooked, bully dead” in *The Sydney Institute Quarterly* (Issue 27, January 2006) both appalled and saddened many old friends and colleagues of the late Tony Curtis.

Journalist Curtis died aged 69 in retirement on the Gold Coast last year. It is apparent that part of your commentary was based on a mis-reading of a warts-and-all but not unfair obituary written by one Graeme Leech and published in *The Australian* on 7 October, 2005. The obituary referred in part to Curtis’s often misplaced sense of humor. It concluded with a paragraph: “Curtis was canny with money and made several property investments that kept him comfortable. He was on the board of the old Journalists’ Club in Sydney’s Surry Hills, which was sold for re-development. Any inquiries about what fees he earned from the sale were met with an enigmatic smile.”

So far, so good. It was part of Curtis’ modus operandi not to deny unfounded rumors that made him appear heroic; such as how much he made the previous night in a poker game he never attended, or, what he picked up on a big punt on a racehorse he never backed. His attitude was generally: That’s for me to know and you to find out. But on the basis of that tongue-in-cheek aside in *The Australian’s* obituary, your commentary concluded: “It seems that he acquired a large amount of money when the Journalists’ Club was sold – merely by virtue of the fact that he was a member of the Club’s board – but refused to reveal the amount. This implies a gross lack of accountability at best – and dishonesty at worst.” That statement is a slur on the other members of the six-man board and is without foundation concerning Curtis or any other directors of the then board.

Let me set the record straight. For most of the 1990s until the Club went into self-liquidation on 8 October 1997, Curtis was a director and later vice-president of the Club. During the same period, the late Jim North (a former NSW president of the Australian Journalists’ Association and a more honest man I’m yet to find) was president of the Club and I was treasurer.

The Club had been sliding into tough times for some years, due to declining patronage following the closure in the late 1980s of Sydney’s two afternoon papers (*The Sun* and *The Mirror*) and, worse, the progressive elimination of our hearty-drinking, late-night blue collar members – the typesetters, compositors, stereoplacers and pressmen. Most of their jobs disappeared with the rapid arrival of computer-driven production.

The final blow was the enforcement of new fire safety rules for licensed club premises. That forced the Club

initially to enter into a mortgage over our freehold in what turned out to be a vain effort to begin complying with expensive building modifications. In 1996, the board determined to seek a merger with another club, a move ultimately endorsed by an unwilling membership. In the same year, we negotiated the sale of the Club building to Winterton Constructions for \$1.4 million, on the basis of 10% down and the balance on settlement around the end of the 1996-97 financial year. Because of sharply declining revenue, the Club had to seek an early settlement at a discounted sale price of \$1,289,000 on 21 March, 1997, with a leaseback from the new owners until 30 June 1997. This was necessary to meet such urgent payments as licensing fees, insurance and group tax.

Jim North and I were largely responsible for all the financial negotiations; the other members of the board unanimously ratified our proposals for later endorsement by the members. There is no way Tony Curtis got anywhere near the money and the same goes for the rest of the board. My signature appeared on any major cheques drawn. In the upshot, what was left of the Club was merged into the NSW Sports Club after liquidator Ferrier Hodgson was appointed at the request of the Journalists’ Club board on 8 October, 1997.

It might also be illuminating to know that for some years in the 1990s, Tony Curtis was a trustee representing employees on a News Ltd staff superannuation fund. Curtis was a mate and colleague for the best part of 40 years and in that time I never found him to be either mean or dishonest.

David Haselhurst,

*Journalist, The Bulletin, and ex-treasurer of The Journalists’ Club.*

I accept what David Haselhurst has written concerning the financial state of the Journalists’ Club – before and after it went into liquidation. In my reference to Tony Curtis in the last “Media Watch” segment, I only referred to what Graeme Leech had written about the late Mr Curtis’ time on the board of the Journalists’ Club. I did not make – and did not intend to make – any reference to any other member of the board (living or dead).

*The Sydney Institute Quarterly* is always willing to run corrections. However, I did not regard Graeme Leech’s comments about Tony Curtis as tongue-in-cheek. Consequently, the implication in his obituary should also be corrected in *The Australian* (where it was originally published) as well as *The Sydney Institute Quarterly* (where it was quoted).

On a personal matter, I would encourage any journalistic types who are about to depart this earthly world to arrange for some “friend” other than Graeme Leech to write their obituaries. Mr Leech damns with very strong damns.

- Gerard Henderson

# BOOK REVIEWS

John McConnell

## THE HOWARD FACTOR: A DECADE THAT TRANSFORMED THE NATION

Edited by Nick Carter

Melbourne University Press :

Published in association with *The Australian*.

2006, pb, rrp \$29.95

ISBN 0 522 85284X

ISBN 978 0 52285 284 4

John Howard's tenth anniversary as Prime Minister acts as a reminder that there were times when his prospects of regaining the Liberal leadership, let alone securing the office of Prime Minister, appeared remote. Even John Howard in 1989 likened his prospects to "Lazarus with a triple bypass." Now, he is the second-longest serving Prime Minister of Australia.

John Howard's decade in the job of Prime Minister from 1996 has coincided with some profound changes. Islamist terrorism has transformed national security considerations. And globalisation pressures increasingly challenge conventional economic and trade policies, domestic taxation structures, management and work practices.

Federal Labor leaders during the Howard decade (Simon Crean, Mark Latham, Kim Beazley) have been reluctant to advocate continuing economic reforms of the sort initiated by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. Nor have they embraced the foreign policy/national security approach of Tony Blair in Britain.

John Howard, meanwhile, has won four successive federal elections. He has continued down the path of economic reform. Undoubtedly, economic prosperity has been crucial to his success. He has committed

military forces to the War on Terror. Australia enjoys very close relations with the Bush Administration.

The government has entered into a number of free trade agreements including one with the United States. In recent years, the Howard Government has improved relations with Australia's neighbours, expanded immigration and revised national security legislation.

Initially, John Howard's grip on the role of Prime Minister seemed decidedly shaky. He appeared to be awkward and uncomfortable at times. His foreign policy gaze tended to focus towards traditional allies and overlook regional leaders. He displayed more confidence than is justified in the view that Australia's history and geography are compatible.

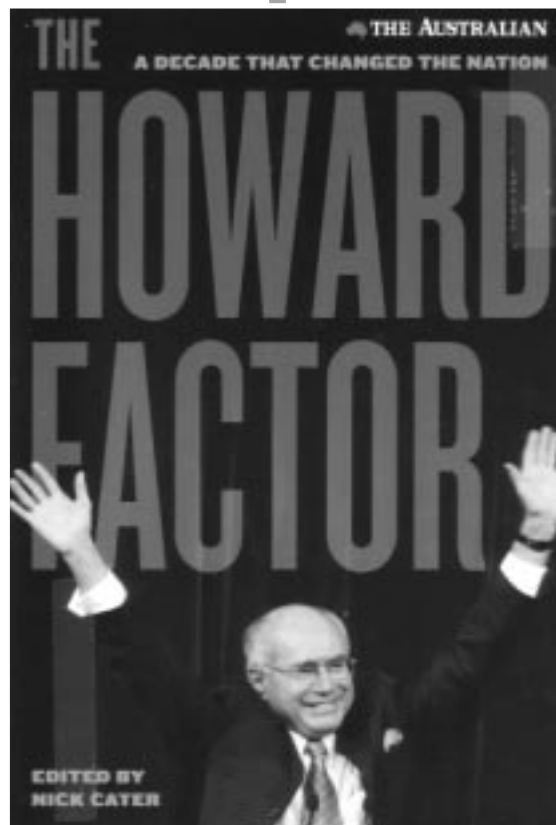
But significant changes have occurred in the past few years. Australia's developing relations with Indonesia and China may well become important legacies of the Howard years.

The Howard Government has a number of achievements to its name, especially in the area of the economy. An enduring change associated with his government, John Howard said recently, is that we have ceased to engage in a "perpetual seminar about our self-identity". Arguably, an authentic modern-day and comprehensive Australian vision is yet to be articulated. It is likely to rejoin the agenda post-Howard.

John Howard has been a cautious and pragmatic politician in office. Many members of the "intelligentsia" despise him for being so ordinary. Yet there is nothing ordinary about his commitment to task. He has earned a place in the top rank of significant Liberal

and national leaders.

To mark the tenth anniversary of John Howard as Prime Minister, Melbourne University Press in conjunction with *The Australian* newspaper has released *The Howard Factor : A Decade That Changed The Nation*. Twenty journalists and staffers have contributed generally balanced and informative assessments of the Howard years.



Paul Kelly's perceptive piece presents John Howard as a 24/7 party politician. The PM lives a permanent campaign. He provides a very personal synthesis that blends the roles of prime minister, de facto Head of State, economic manager, war leader and cultural commentator. He is a Prime Minister in continuous dialogue with the public. Talkback radio is his specialty.

While John Howard brings continuity rather than discontinuity to the office of Prime Minister, Paul Kelly argues that there are aspects that make John Howard an innovator and a change agent. Ministers owe responsibility to the Prime Minister rather than to the parliament or party. The Prime Minister is the arbiter of whether ministers are serving the public well. As ministers gain in power, departmental heads assume more responsibility. The National Security Committee has become the most influential cabinet committee.

Dennis Shanahan says there are two John Howards. One is a caricature. It derives from the frustrations experienced by Howard's opponents: "This Howard is divisive, a master of poll-driven wedge politics, a 1950s conservative, too old, inflexible, out of touch with modern Australia, anti-Asian and anti-immigration." Then there is the complex character successfully steering the Coalition government for a decade.

Matt Price comments on the range and intensity of the insults John Howard has had to endure: "Howard has been abused, lambasted and written off. He has weathered gibes about his teeth, his eyebrows, his bottom lip, his height...his wife, his lack of sporting prowess, his voice and the...morning walk."

Cartoonist Bill Leak deplores John Howard's "ordinariness". He extends his disappointment to the electorate. We are "smaller, meaner and less attractive" now. Funny how often Howard critics or Howard haters indulge in exaggeration and revel in making harsh judgments about the Australian people.

Alan Wood identifies the Howard Government as "a high-taxing, big-spending government" He is disappointed – justifiably so in my opinion – with the

Howard Government's inability to date to deliver more fundamental tax reform. He believes that the past decade will be seen as a golden age for the economy.

Mike Steketee highlights NATSEM findings. Family payments have helped to raise real disposable income between 1997 and 2004 for the lowest quintile of families.

George Megalogenis evaluates changes in the mix of households in the tax free club. In another chapter, he notes that the European component of our overseas-born population has fallen below 50 per cent. The overseas born now represent a quarter of the total population.

Industrial relations remains heavily regulated despite recent labour market reforms, Brad Norington points out. Some machinery has been dismantled. But new layers of complexity have been added.

Kate Legge explores how the white picket fence imagery of traditional family values has not confined John Howard as much as some might have expected. Imre Salusinszky evaluates John Howard's linguistic style.



Caroline Overington discusses why many young people are turning towards the Howard Government. Their "boomer" parents might be focused on refugee rights or the environment, she writes, but their children happily identify with labour market reform and the emphasis on job growth.

Other contributors are Christopher Pearson, Glenn Milne, Nicholas Rothwell, Stuart Rintoul, Samantha Maiden, Roy Eccleston, Steve Lewis and Patrick Walters.

*The Howard Factor* provides a comprehensive assessment of the Coalition government since 1996. It remains to be seen whether the suggestion in the book's title of enduring fundamental change is justified.

Three interesting compilations in the final (125) pages of the publication are a handy summary of the main events during John Howard's ten years in office



(Rebecca Weisser), 25 photos spanning the ten years of the Coalition government (Paul Burston) and a selection of statistics that contrast the beginning and end of the decade (George Megalogenis).

**'NOT A MATTER FOR NEGOTIATION':  
AUSTRALIA'S COMMITMENT TO MALAYSIA  
1961-1966**

By Moreen Dee

**Australia in the World: The Foreign Affairs and  
Trade Files No.2**

**Commonwealth of Australia**

**pb 2005 rrp \$19.95**

**ISBN 1 920959 57 2**

The federation of Malaysia was established in September 1963. The consequences that followed contain powerful implications for Australian foreign and defence policy. These considerations relate to Australia's military capacity, differing perceptions between Australia and its allies, the importance of accurately anticipating policy consequences and the significance of regional stability to Australia.

There was British pressure on Australia to send combat forces to Borneo, notwithstanding our inadequate military capacity at the time. Do not rely on ANZUS was the clear message from a US intent on maintaining and developing its relationship with Indonesia.

Malaysia was formed at a time when a number of European colonies were gaining independence. The British feared regional instability. They saw a Malaysian federation as desirable in the circumstances. It comprised Malaya, Sarawak, British North Borneo and Brunei, as well as Singapore (later to withdraw).

At the outset, the Malaysian federation met with opposition from Indonesia and the Philippines. Dr Sukarno, the Indonesian President, interpreted the federation as a British plot. The British, he believed, were creating the Malaysian federation in order to maintain their influence in the region and to encircle Indonesia. Consequently, Indonesia adopted a campaign of confronting Malaysia.

Armed Indonesians began to infiltrate Malaysian territory. Confrontation posed delicate and potentially dangerous implications for Australia. Australia stood by its military commitment to Malaysia. Sensibly, it sought to avoid military action between Australian military forces and Indonesian infiltrators.

*Not a matter for negotiation* tracks Australian diplomatic efforts through the difficult and demanding days of Confrontation.

Written by Moreen Dee, the monograph is the second in a series produced by the Historical Publications and Information Section of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It is a companion publication to *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy, Australia and the Formation of Malaysia, 1961-1966*.

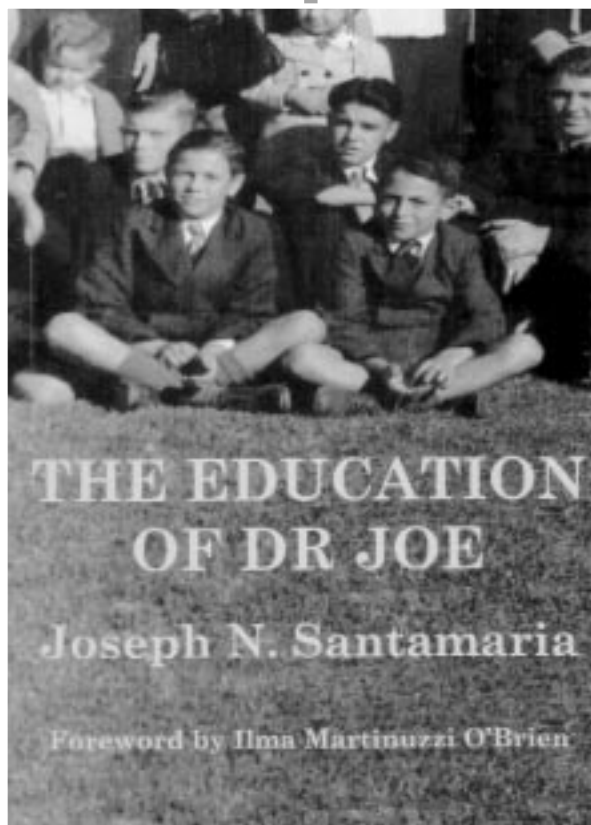
Moreen Dee writes that Confrontation reached its most critical military stage in August-September 1964. Dr. Sukarno was flirting with

an uneasy alliance between the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and Indonesian nationalism. He declared "The Year of Living Dangerously" on the 17 August 1964. A second military front then opened on the Malaysian Peninsula. Large Indonesian seaborne landings occurred in late October 1964. On the 29 October, Indonesian forces engaged with Australian troops. Then, in January 1965, Dr. Sukarno withdrew Indonesia from the United Nations.

Meanwhile, Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Dr Subandrio, was threatening to seek Chinese and Russian support. An abortive coup in late 1965 in Indonesia led to clashes between the

Indonesian army and the PKI. The army gained the ascendancy.

A change of government in Jakarta followed. General Suharto emerged as President. Indonesia then abandoned confrontation. Moreen Dee provides a clear and succinct account (41 pages) of Australia's diplomatic initiatives during Confrontation.



**THE EDUCATION OF DR. JOE**

By Joseph N Santamaria

Connor Court Publishing, pb 2006

Rrp \$24.95 - from [www.connorcourt.com.au](http://www.connorcourt.com.au)

ISBN 0 975815 3 8

Retirement provided Dr Joseph Santamaria with the opportunity to become familiar with computers. This in turn led to a desire to transmit family information to his children and grandchildren.

Dr. Santamaria's reminiscences about his upbringing have been released by Connor Court Publishing in *The Education of Dr. Joe*. The 80 pages are written simply and sincerely. It is a personal and engaging story. Equally, it is the story of an Italian immigrant family living successfully in two different cultures between the two world wars.

The Santamaria family migrated to Australia from the Aeolian island of Salina, north of Sicily. 2006 marks the centenary of the family's decision to settle permanently in Australia. Joseph was born in Australia in 1923.

After graduating in Medicine from the University of Melbourne in 1948, he specialised in haematology and oncology. (One of his brothers – B A Santamaria – became a prominent Catholic layman, political commentator and activist.) Dr Santamaria became director of Community Medicine at Melbourne's St. Vincent's Hospital. His childhood was spent during the 1920s and 1930s in the Melbourne suburbs of Brunswick and West Brunswick.

The Santamaria children mixed easily within the Australian culture and the culture of Melbourne's Aeolian community. Deep-seated Italian sympathies coexisted with a genuine integration into the Australian culture.

Dr. Santamaria writes that his parents were his prime educators in the areas of social integration and social identity. Family life provided a set of enduring values as well as a sense of security and support. His essays range across a number of themes – shopping, food, opera, wine, the local tennis club and Australian Rules football. Indeed, the family's allegiance to the Carlton football club became their second 'religion'. It assisted in consolidating the family's integration into Australian society. *The Education of Dr Joe* concludes with some reflections on wisdom and its relationship to serenity.

*John McConnell is the author of several senior textbooks.*



## THE HISTORY WARS - THE NEXT CHAPTER

John Hirst was a Labor supporter when young and is now a self-proclaimed conservative. His new book, *Sense and Nonsense*, challenges many of the left liberal interpretations of Australian history – the pioneer legend, Australian egalitarianism, and colonial culture – and has offered a brave new essay on Aboriginal dispossession and the history wars. John Hirst reveals an independent mind, challenging familiar outlooks and deepening a sense of Australia's development from convict society to distinctive democracy.

**SPEAKER:** DR JOHN HIRST (Academic and author, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* [Black Inc 2006])

**TOPIC:** *In the Middle of the History Wars*

**DATE:** Monday 19 June 2006

**\*\*BOOKINGS FROM 5 JUNE ONLY\*\***

**TIME:** 5.30 for 6 pm

**VENUE:** 41 Phillip Street, Sydney  
LIGHT REFRESHMENTS

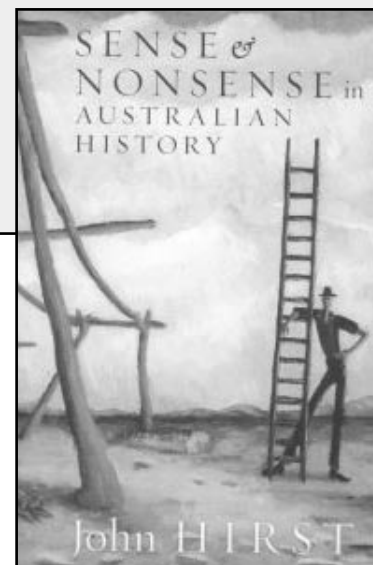
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# REVIEW OF THE REVIEWERS

Stephen Matchett

These are hard times for moral middle class ideologues, the keepers of the old ideals of Whitlamism who believe in a big social engineering public sector, well funded by ordinary Australians.

Because, no matter how long and loud the MMC tell us how the Howard Government is exploiting the workers, large numbers of them keep voting for it. It is a puzzle that daunts the average intellectual of the moral middle class, so they stick with what they know, calling John Howard racist, sexist, an environmental vandal, and so on. And they argue that a generation of micro-economic reform has been very bad for us all. Not only are we working harder than we used to, we are all suffering so much stress that life is a misery for many. Despite all the evidence of an improved standard of living, the MMC constantly tell us things are not what they used to be.

It is an argument so often advanced it is easily accepted as fact, making it one of the few intellectual victories the MMC has enjoyed for a decade. The problem is that it just isn't true. Don Aitkin's recent book, *What Was It All For? The Reshaping of Australia* (Allen and Unwin, 2005) provides all sorts of anecdotal evidence that life is much better for most Australians than it was 50 years ago when the nanny state was strongest.

There is far more involved in this argument than an assessment over our standard of living. Among old-fashioned ideologues it is an article of faith that the changes that have reduced their political power and economic authority have made us all worse off. This argument is essential to their case that John Howard has been a disaster. It is also the foundation for the only argument that can get the MMC back in the political game; that as reform has been bad in the past we must return to the old Whitlamite ways to create the sort of society they want Australia to be. This is a serious intellectual issue; if the advocates of the old orthodoxy have their way we will leave the reform task incomplete. This alone makes the case advanced by advocates of another wave of structural economic change, such as Bob Catley in his *The (strange, recent but understandable) triumph of liberalism in Australia*

(Macleay Press, 2005). But while the ordinary intellectuals of the MMC concentrate on complaining, the smarter ones realise that there is no turning back and that if the next generation of Whitlamites is to be taken seriously they need new ideas. David McKnight in his *Beyond Left and Right: New Politics and the Culture Wars* (Allen and Unwin, 2005) offers a raft of them.

These three very different books are at the heart of the ideological struggle over where Australia has come from and where it goes. While none of them have anything overt to say about the tenth anniversary of the Howard Government's election they all address the core political issues of the past decade - how we got to where we are and where we should go next.

## A BETTER OFFER

The March 2006, celebrations certainly must have confirmed the worse fears of the moral middle class. John Howard has now been prime minister for a decade, second only to his spiritual mentor, Robert Gordon Menzies in his occupancy of the office. In 1996 there was a sense among the public sector policy elite and in the universities that Howard's election win was an aberration, occurring because the electorate was tired of Paul Keating and resented the recession they may have needed but never wanted. It was seen as a rejection of Labor politicians, not Labor policies, especially those of the last term, when Keating had abandoned the politics of reform for a Whitlamite profligacy.

It was a judgement proved wrong in definitive detail in a bare decade. For good or ill, it is John Howard not Paul Keating who has defined Australia's contemporary political culture. His ascendancy has signalled much more than a defeat for one political party. It has re-established the primacy of the issues that have always shaped politics - the ability of the economy to provide an ever-improving standard of living for ordinary Australians.

And this is anathema to the moral middle class, which adored the agenda of the later Keating years. With the significant exception of National Competition Policy, the last Labor years were a surrender to the MMC vision of the way Australia should be run. There was an emphasis on the arts, a belief that big public sector plans, supported by spending were the way to solve unemployment. Above all there was an emphasis on the two symbolic Rs of the Labor left, reconciliation and the republic.

So, at the end of March 1996 while Labor had lost office, the moral middle class, assuming they were safe in their public sector and university jobs,

expected to sit out the three years of a one-term Howard Government, waiting for the electorate to return to its senses and reinstate their power under a new Labor government.

They waited until 1998 and then they waited until 2001 and again until 2004 and in 2006 they are still waiting.

At first they found reasons to explain the delay in the electorate coming to its senses. First they blamed Pauline Hanson, the Hansonite horror, although the red head from Ipswich did as much damage to conservative parties as she ever did Labor. Then they blamed the Prime Minister for turning working class Labor voters from the obedience they owed their moral middle class betters in the left of Labor, arguing that he had corrupted them by subliminally selling a racist agenda. And to finally fill their armoury of appalling errors they suggested that micro-economic reform had reduced the electorate to obedient serfs, so terrified of their worsening economic circumstances they did not dare defy their oppressors.

It was all nonsense. The voters were not bullied and bluffed into abandoning Labor's two, then three Rs - the republic, reconciliation and refugees. They left because they got a better offer from the Liberals. In recent months the reason why upwardly mobile working class families have stuck with the conservatives has become clear. They are being bribed to an extent that Labor in the 1980s could not have imagined.

## YES, WE HAVE NO NET TAX

The way the Howard Government has protected middle Australia through the tax and welfare system is so complex a way it is hard to believe it is being done deliberately. For a start the percentage increase in national wealth over the past decade has been much the same across all income groups. The idea advanced by what remains of the left, that the Howard Government has impoverished middle income Australians with dependent children, is simply not so.

And while the increase in housing values has increased overall wealth, the great engine of conservative political success has been the tax and welfare system. Certainly there have been some losers - low skilled single individuals without children are left to rot. And people bringing up their children on welfare payments can find themselves penalised if they get a job after tax paid and benefits lost. And, for all the Treasurer's trumpeting about tax cuts, all Peter Costello does at each budget is reimburse bracket creep to PAYE income earners who pay the top marginal rate of 47 per cent on income above \$125,000, which they cannot shelter in trusts and family companies.

But the benefits that have flown to middle income earners with dependent children and the elderly are spectacular. Recent research shows that a family earning \$56,000 a year with two kids under 13, and who receives rent assistance, pays no net tax. In fact they are a net creditor, taking more money out of the system than they put in. And while no one lives in luxury on the old age pension, the government goes out of its way to protect its elderly supporters by footing almost all of their ever-more expensive health costs.

The left grumbles about the political power of red neck reactionaries, working class Tories who are the heirs of

Hanson. However, the government does not play to the right as much as bribe its way into office. And it will keep doing so until the inevitable economic down turn ends the era of the great Howard giveaways. And what a grand giveaway it has been! The government spent around \$60 billion to buy off everybody it could in the year leading up to the 2004 election. While the commentariat focused on tax cuts, the real bribes were in health and welfare spending, areas where too much money is never enough.

It seems a fair bet there is more to come. The very fact that Treasurer Peter Costello keeps warning us that a surplus of anything up to \$15 billion this year cannot guarantee tax cuts and more social security spending, this makes a bucket of bonanzas in the lead up to the 2007 election a racing certainty.



## ON THE BEACH

A Deakin University study of all federal seats, published in February 2006, illuminates the outcome to date of the government's strategy of taxing and spending on its friends. It found no especial correlation of contentment with income across the country. In fact regional electorates, especially seats with nice stretches of coast but where nobody makes much money, are happier than upwardly mobile inner city seats where the inhabitants are all highly educated, well paid and ever-so ambitious, both to make more money and buy a bigger house. To an extent this only reflects the obvious, that money does not make anybody especially happy - that easy access to the beach and cheap housing do the job as well, if not better, especially for older Australians or ordinary families whose ambitions focus on family life.

It is this capacity for contentment that the Howard Government has tapped into. Blessed by good economic times the Prime Minister has basically bought community support by spending the biggest imaginable buckets of money on working and middle class welfare. This sort of short sighted bribery on a national scale cannot succeed forever, and will do nothing for the historic reputation of the Howard Government. Unless the government changes its MO and stops using our money to pay for election ploys, by introducing real reform with reduced rates, it will be judged in the future as a regime that renounced reform to set Australia up for another generation of prosperity in favour of electoral opportunism.

Of course, for politicians focused on re-election in the present this is no reason to change course and we are likely to see more of the profligate same, until the money runs out. Nor is there any denying the extraordinary economic growth that has made possible the profligacy of the Howard Government, especially over its last two terms. This is all very bad news for those who hold to the argument that 25 years of economic reform, especially the last decade, has made ordinary Australians poorer and much more miserable. Because, on almost every

imaginable measure, the vast majority of us are better off than we were a generation ago.

## SWEDEN DOWN UNDER

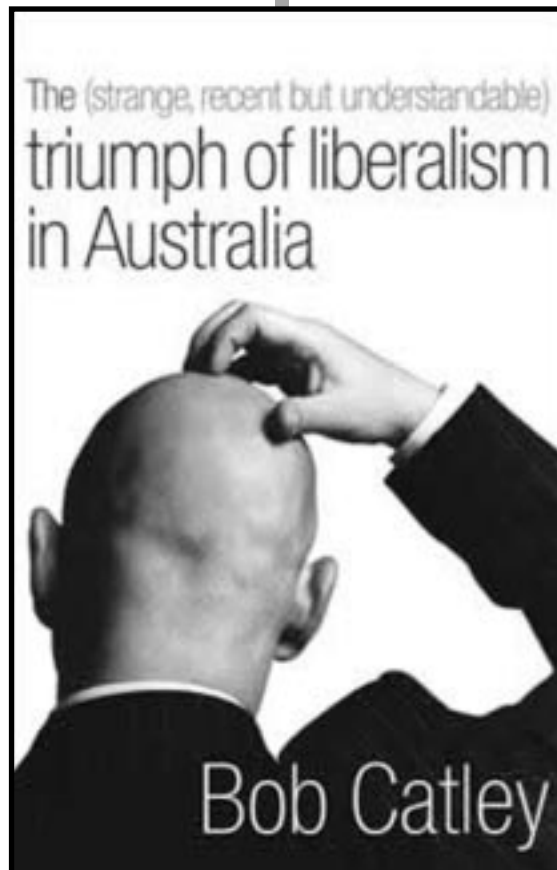
In fact it is as if Mr Howard has turned Australia into Sweden, with one exception, the money goes direct to the recipients, with the public sector dealt out of the action. But the academically orthodox in politics and cultural studies departments have never had much interest in economics. Having lost the argument on almost every imaginable real world issue, the Howard haters are now reduced to arguing that the last decade has been bad for us all because we are too stressed. And those who are especially and unjustly stressed are the old public service managers, who account for much of the MMC army and who feel reform has reduced their rightful role as leaders of society.

There is a lot of this sort of stuff about, perhaps best demonstrated in Michael Pusey's *The Experience of Middle Australia* (2003) which concludes that in all the restructuring undertaken by the "New Right political class" its objective was "the political disempowerment of the broad middle class". (167) The problem is that even if he is right that the old mandarin of middle level

bureaucrats and university employees are worse off, the vast majority of ordinary Australians aren't.

## DON AITKIN REMEMBERS

In fact, as Don Aitkin demonstrates, most of us are having the time of our lives and Australia is, on most measures, a much better place for ordinary people than it was in the age of public sector power before deregulation. Aitkin went to school in the northern NSW town of New England, finishing as a member of the class of 1953 and he uses his classmates' lives and opinions to track the temper of the times as Australia changed. It is a terrific idea that could have made a fascinating book. The experiences and opinions of Aitkin's class captures a cross section of middle class Australia whose world changed completely over half a century. The problem is that there is too much of Aitkin and too little of his school friends in the book.



At times Aitkin abandons his classmates for social science summaries of the state of the nation. There is nothing wrong with this, but compared to the lives of his subjects it is all abstractions, and dull ones to boot.

But even though slabs of the text are hard going, this tale of a generation makes for a fascinating book. The long extracts from conversations and letters and the snippets of life stories present the people who are the basis of this book as entirely ordinary Australians, but also as self aware, astute and overwhelmingly generous in their judgements of their country. They come across as people with generous hearts and good natures.

It is also one which makes a core point that is too easily ignored among the endlessly ideological complaints about the state of society - this is a much better country for ordinary people to live in that it was 50 years past. "Too few people appreciate the extraordinary developments in the texture and maturity of Australian society that took place in the second half of the twentieth century," Aitkin writes.

The Armidale Aitkin's class lived in was poor and provincial. Nobody went hungry and everybody had the chance of a basic education, but expectations of what life would offer were very limited. Aitkin's class have lived far more interesting lives than their parents could have ever imagined. They have changed careers, they have travelled and they have enjoyed more options than their parents, who were children of the Depression, could have ever imagined. And most of them are cross about aspects of Australian life. In fact, Pusey would probably argue they are all stressed by too much reform, but in truth they are acute and critical, as is appropriate for citizens of a democracy. As Don Aitkin argues:

**Once collectivist and conformist, a society in which departures from familiar ways were frowned on, Australia has become diverse and individualist. It is perhaps a more selfish society, too – more materialist, less compassionate and caring about those less fortunate. The rich are much richer and the poor only a little richer, the gaps between the haves and have-nots has widened. Yet the much wider participation in education has had many effects, one of them being a level of debate about issues and about the future for our country that could have had no counterpart 50 years earlier. (7)**

And as for the golden age that is gone, Aitkin sets out exactly what the moral middle class would have us mourn, "Australia could seem to foreigners the most

socialist country outside the Soviet Union because of that public sector – at least to those with a right wing perspective." (11)

It is a point too easily forgotten, that Australia was a country that did not make the most its most important natural asset, its people, and that was shackled for generations by public sector regulation. And Aitkin makes it plain that while the transformation was painful, Australia had no choice but to undertake the transformation that began with the floating of the dollar. This is not to assert that Aitkin argues all is well now. He and his school friends see a great deal wrong in the state of Australia. But overall the sense of the state of the nation in Aitkin's book is much more positive than the socially stressed and spiritually bereft nation Pusey and his pals assert Australia has become.

## **BOB CATLEY'S MESSAGE**

Bob Catley's thesis is essentially the same as Aitkin's - on steroids. According to Catley, Australia is in every way a superior country to what it was a generation ago and he argues his case with such a passion that he appears to believe our future depends upon it. Which to an extent it does. There seems no doubting the parlous state we would have been in by now if the Gough Whitlam–Malcolm Fraser years had continued for another decade or so. Certainly the world would have changed Australia if we had not changed ourselves, but the outcome would have been a lot harder than the structural adjustments that started in the middle 1980s.

Any attempt to shelter behind protectionist barriers and to leave a vast public sector in charge of the commanding heights of the economy would have left us poorer and even more dependent on resource experts than we are now. It is only two decades ago that Treasurer Paul Keating rightly warned that we could no longer assume we lived in a first world economy that could automatically afford the health care and infrastructure we wanted.

Catley obviously absorbed the message and is desperate to ensure we never slide back into our old ways, the very thing the moral middle class wishes we would. So, he explains why things are better than they were, why they are as they are and how we have work to do to ensure that the good times keep coming.

It is hard to argue with Catley's intent but it is very easy to be annoyed with the way he makes his case. Catley has produced an all-purpose tome, part undergraduate guide to the big ideas in economics, part explanation of the damage done by socialism and part polemic on recent Australian politics. It is an

eccentric amalgam that does not work at all well. Catley includes an opinionated commentary on a wide variety of subjects, including leftist journalists (it is hard to believe there are other kinds) and academics in thrall to modern ideas (many of whom have nothing to say about anything that matters). There is also a section called "Technological Change in Distribution and Retailing" which would look like the author was showing off, but for the fact that it is deathly dull. Is there anything the wise Professor Catley does not know? Perhaps not, in which case we should be grateful the book was not longer. Catley mistakes erudition for elucidation and makes his case by stacking on the detail. Like Mark Latham's now forgotten *Civilising Global Capital*, this book is bigger on detail than it is on overarching ideas.

But there is a great deal of substance in the most important sections of the text, beginning with Catley's description of the way the Australian settlement unravelled in the stagflation crisis of the early 1970s. With the nostalgia the passage of time provides it is easy to ignore how much trouble Australia was in back then. And while the Whitlam and Fraser Governments did not create the disaster that shaped Australia they were slow off the mark in accepting that the world had changed and we either changed with it or set off down the Argentine road.

Catley's argument is unremarkable orthodoxy for all but the moral middle class that resents the end of a richly resourced policy making public sector. As is his suggestion that the 1970s saw the left seize control of the opinion making high ground in the ABC and universities. And he is especially strong on the Bob Hawke-Paul Keating breakthrough reforms that began with the floating of the dollar, making the point that Labor just began a process which it had no choice but to participate in:

**In the longer perspective it may now seem that the arduous process of reform begun during the Labor government was merely the local manifestation of a larger process of change towards more liberal practices in the developed countries. ... It was a local response to the onset of globalisation and the defeat of socialism. .... The Labor governments of 1983-1996 had gone some way down this path, but much remained to be done. (175)**

And he is pleased that the Howard Government was also game to have a go.

**The economic record of the Howard coalition may be readily summarised as the modest pursuit of more liberalisation**

**accompanied by greater fiscal rectitude than its immediate predecessor. But this was sufficient to yield outstanding results. (182)**

Catley includes a great deal of economic data to make his point and pays the Howard Government what must be close to his most generous compliment, "Adam Smith's economy began to replace that of Alfred Deakin and Lord Keynes". (188)

To his obvious irritation, he argues the moral middle class will still not admit its error and continues to make mischief. For a university teacher, Catley's contempt for academic culture, especially in the humanities, is refreshingly frank, even obsessive. However, this is one section of his book that reads more like a polemic than dispassionate analysis. Certainly he is right to assert that the humanities academics, who never appear before a mass audience, generally appear to adhere to a higher form of Howard hating. But whether they are so dangerous to merit all the attention they receive in this book is a different question. The sad truth is that, as with their moral middle class mates in the media, nobody pays much attention to anything they argue.

Catley concludes with a manifesto for further reform in skills training, public sector efficiencies, productivity improvements, and taxation, all sensible stuff. And he encapsulates the reason why the way the old economic left, in its new MMC academic guise, loathes how Australia has changed - nobody is listening to them:

**... the radical doctrines of thirty and forty years past no longer resonate in a society which has addressed them and moved on. If the now culturally powerful, former radicals do not address the gulf between their own views and concerns, and those of society at large and particularly the young, the decline in their disciplines will continue. (207)**

## DAVID MCKNIGHT'S THESIS

And David McKnight knows it. His book is close to the best imaginable rebuttal of Catley from the left. It is tighter in its writing, an equal in erudition and while it is also dull in part it is much less pompous. But it is equally passionate and as firm in its intent.

McKnight is rare among the polemicists and political philosophers of the moral middle class. He is not so self absorbed that he cannot see what has happened to his cause. He realises that the old left has lost the economic debate and as a corollary of this defeat, the moral middle class no longer has political power to impose its own interests on ordinary Australians.



McKnight's objective is to get his mates back into the debate by calling for a new left ideology that can save us from the supposed miseries imposed on us all by market economics.

But ultimately he fails to deliver anything other than an unconvincing ideological illusion. For all its faults, this is a brave book for a former communist to have written. McKnight acknowledges the old left ideologies based on command economies, ostensibly intended to enforce equality, have failed completely. He argues that to beat the capitalists, who are still awful, new ideas are needed.

This is a great deal more than many of McKnight's intellectual allies are able to accept. For ten years the staple of conservative pamphleteers of the left has been denunciations of John Howard and outrage at the way the electors resolutely refuse to embrace what are now the three Rs of refugees, reconciliation and the republic. With each election the criticism of Australians for not obeying intellectual taste makers in the public sector unions and universities has become ever more shrill and increasingly irrelevant to electoral politics.

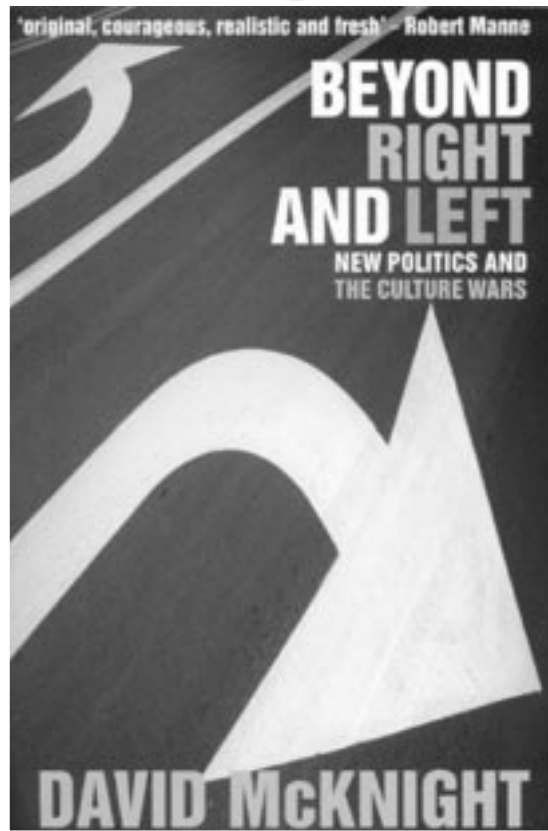
In contrast to many of his fellow-travellers, McKnight has thought deeply about the way the defeat of socialism and the end of economic class conflict has changed practical politics. He builds a credible case that the ideological battle of our age is between a grand coalition of old left and right, supposed supporters of family values and workers rights, on the one hand, and advocates of globalism and economic deregulation on the other:

**Culture war and wedge politics have become permanent features of modern politics, because the Left side of the spectrum is now a coalition of social forces. It lacks the unifying set of ideas once provided by class-based ideology. This is most apparent in the Labor Party, but it reflects the situation in broader progressive thought. While the Right has reconfigured its ideas, the fact this has not yet occurred on the Left is a vital part of contemporary politics. (12)**

The foundation of McKnight's thesis is that in the marketplace of ideas nobody is buying what true believers in the various hothouse hybrids of socialism are selling. As such his book is far in front of the usual Howard hating rhetoric that holds that anything that reduces public sector power is an affront to freedom.

For all its strengths, however, the book, fails on two fronts. For a start McKnight never makes a case for why we need an economic alternative to market liberalism. There is very little about other ways of producing and distributing wealth in this book. Secondly he exhorts the left to fight on second order issues:

**Increasingly, what appears as poverty (economic inequality) is generated by the crisis at the level of the family – by substance abuse, mental illness, poor education or often by a combination of these things. (126)**



Fair enough, but many of these problems have nothing to do with the way market economies allocate resources, or with debates over the best way the state can encourage those capable of generating wealth, and protecting those incapable of looking after themselves. Rather than argue about the main economic game he provides a great deal of middle class moralising about feminism, multiculturalism, childcare and the importance of living more materially modest lives, because of all the damage consumerism does to the environment. There is also whingeing about the way work

harms family life. McKnight accepts the idea of a class struggle for control of the means of production is archaic. But he goes on at length about the damage done by working too much, as if we are all chained to the oars in the capitalist galleys. And it is ironic that some of the most important issues he mentions, like education, are ones where the state, not the market, has failed ordinary Australians, demonstrated by the flight of families to private schools.

That McKnight writes about middle class welfare, rather than job creation and the idiocy of a tax system that bedevils poor parents trying to move from social

security to work, demonstrates how removed this book is from the issues that confront low income Australians, the people the revolutionary left always argued it existed to help, but rarely did. At the heart of this book is the moral middle class assumption that people with material aspirations are crass and greedy and the real battle now is between the friends of the earth and all the others:

**... focusing on human needs exclusively can reinforce the attitude that humans should and can conquer the national world with impunity. A narrow, short-term, human-centred worldview can lead to the disregard of the ecological interdependence of all life forms. This approach to humanism has little to say on cruelty to animals, for example. We need a planet fit for humans, and this means that human needs must be moderated to fit in with the requirements of the planet. Among other things, creating a sustainable society on human values will necessitate stopping the growth of human population and accepting limits on human material desires.**

And of course there will always be MMC ideologues ready to instruct ordinary people in what they will be allowed in an environmentally sustainable state. This is not only patronising, it is a less than veiled threat to the rest of us who dare not share McKnight's ideological objectives. But then again, there can't be much to worry about when the biggest idea the left's best and brightest can come up with is to threaten us with cuts to our standard of living. As a way of getting the left back in the political game it may be intellectually sophisticated but it is common sense free.

## **MORE ATTENTION NEEDED**

Even so, McKnight's book, as well as the other two deserved more attention than they received from the mainstream reviewers. In particular, Aitkin's book was outrageously ignored. Just about the only assessment was by Andrew Stevenson who summed up Aitkin's story with his lead:

**Marx saw class struggle as the engine of social change. Others looking for explanations have found God, or science or, increasingly, the market. When Don Aitkin looks at Australia he sees the dream. (Sydney Morning Herald, 1 October 2005)**

It was a fair, if uncritical, summary and certainly nowhere near as tough as the coverage of Catley. Dennis Altman, in a joint review of Catley and McKnight got stuck into both books, especially

Catley's, (*The Age*, 10 September 2005) but for reasons that explained as much about the reviewer as the reviewed:

**His is a poorly written (and edited) book that rehashes old lecture notes on political theory and repeats the constant attacks on the Fairfax media and the humanities faculties, who between them seem to loom as a modern equivalent of the Comintern to the terrified forces of the New Right.**

It was a sneering review that focused as much on Catley as his book.

That McKnight's book attracted more, and favourable attention, may not surprise Professor Catley who is convinced that the old left is powerful in the universities and much of the media. Altman did not accept McKnight has anything interesting to offer the left, "his final call for a new moral vision is so vague as to offer little more than a set of generalities most of us could agree with precisely because they are so unspecific". And he went on to argue that an economic slow-down could prove McKnight wrong by leading to a new Green-Labor party of the left. (*The Age*, 10 September 2005).

Labor's Lindsay Tanner agreed with McKnight that the old ideological fault lines dividing the materially rich and poor were going, if not gone, and that while the "Right" had adjusted to the new context of politics the "Left" was now "largely the defender of the status quo" (*The Australian*, 20 September 2005). Martin Crotty also accepted much of McKnight's argument, before concluding that what he was suggesting should happen already had:

**... none of this is as startlingly new and fresh as McKnight seems to think. Left and Right might be labels that are used widely and inaccurately in opinion columns, but the reality is that most academics, policy-makers and politicians have moved well-beyond doctrinaire and slavish adherence to fundamentalist ideologies. ... McKnight wants us to move beyond Left and Right. Notwithstanding some of our dogmatic opinion piece writers, I suspect we are already there". (Courier Mail, 8 October 2005)**

Perhaps someone could tell the MMC, so they stop hoping for a return to the forgotten days when people actually paid attention to them.

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# LABOR'S PRE- SELECTION BATTLES - REPORTING A DISASTER

As far as the leader-writers were concerned Labor was in trouble entirely of its own making during the March pre-selection strife in the Party's Victorian branch. Certainly, some were more supportive of Simon Crean's struggle to survive than others. But they all agreed that from Kim Beazley down, the fighting was a disaster for all of Labor.

Not all the leader writers accepted Simon Crean's self-assessment of the significance of his survival. For example, the *Courier Mail* (8 March) recognised that Crean offered no answer to Labor's internal dissension, only seeing his fate as symptomatic of the party's problems:

**Mr Crean, whose mediocre contribution to the federal Labor Party has been mythologised through his ex-leader status, deserves to be congratulated for his dogged determination to stare down a backroom deal aimed at dumping him as a candidate ... But it is likely to be a hollow victory – unless there is a real move to put democracy into a party that has an active and genuine membership reckoned by some insiders to number in the hundreds, as opposed to the thousands of drone-like sign-ups whose dues are often paid with slush funds.**

Which was why the leader saw Kim Beazley as the biggest loser, looking "weak and used" and with his leadership "now in crisis".

*The Advertiser* (6 March) also saw Simon Crean as a symbol of Kim Beazley's problems. Even before Crean's branches voted, the paper called the Labor Leader "a weakened political force":

**At a time when his party desperately requires leadership, Mr Beazley appears**

**increasingly to be controlled by others who have only their own interests, and not the Labor Party, at heart.**

The Herald Sun (8 March) thought much the same.

**For Mr Beazley, it may be too late but now is the time to show some real leadership. And time to try to unite the Labor movement and provide real direction.**

So did *The Age* (8 March):

**The big loser from Labor's internal writhings is not just Victoria's right-wing Labor Unity faction. ... The Crean contest further undermines federal leader Kim Beazley, who appeared to wash his hands of his embattled frontbencher. He said party members were allowed to challenge and that people were allowed to vote and he encouraged them to do so. This was hardly inspiring leadership, and as a student of history Mr Beazley should know the inglorious fate history can have in store for those who practise such justice. Whether the Crean mess has further weakened his leadership will only be seen further down the track, but it can hardly have strengthened it.**

But while all agreed that Kim Beazley had blundered badly, some of the leader writers also fell for Simon Crean's line that Labor owed him. Like *The Advertiser's*, (16 March):

**... there is a line between renewal and disloyalty. With Mr Crean, Mr Beazley overstepped that line.**

In Hobart *The Mercury* (8 March) was also strong for Crean, calling his survival, "a small sign that there is still hope for the faction-riddled ALP". Forgetting how Crean secured his seat by factional fiat, the paper saw Simon's as a symbolic struggle for the soul of Labor:

**The ALP membership, bullied and threatened by factional heavies, could not have sent a worse message to the wider community about Labor values and the party's commitment to democracy than by buckling under the intimidation and dumping Mr Crean.**

Especially because of the qualities "the popular and policy-oriented Simon Crean" provided the Party. Popular, apart from some of the worst opinion polls for any Labor leader. And policy-oriented, except for his inability to settle on a

message that Labor could have used against the government in the lead-up to the second war in Iraq.

*The Age* (11 February) also argued Crean was required in Canberra:

**A good leader is essential for a political party to succeed, but so is having experienced people in the ranks. Given Mr Crean's singular advantage on this front, it is short sighted as well as churlish for the party to hang him out to dry while factional paybacks rule the day.**

But the paper was less convincing on exactly what Crean had that anybody needed. Thus *The Age* (8 March) missed the irony of an old unionist criticising a young unionist for trying to knock him:

**Mr Crean's seat of Hotham was supposed to have become the property of the Labor Unity-controlled National Union of Workers and its state secretary, Martin Pakula. It didn't matter that Mr Crean is one of the few significant members of Parliament to have a grasp of industrial policy and its effects on working people, something that under normal circumstances should be important to unions. It also appears that the forces lined up against him greatly underestimated the campaigning ability of such a seasoned warhorse.**

Well, earth to *The Age*. His parliamentary colleagues sacked Simon Crean from the leadership after a performance of unmatched ineptitude, at least before Kim Beazley's second sortie in the job. His policy record is less blemished than blackened, as any one old enough to remember the expensive farce of "Working Nation" will remember. And his grasp of industrial relations policy dates from the days of the old arbitration system, which looks gone for good.

The editorial even challenged its own argument by stating,

**... at a time of shrinking union membership it would seem the last thing Labor needed to engage the electorate was another crop of union officials, no matter how telegenic.**

And what, other than work for the union movement, did *The Age* think Mr Crean used to do, perform brain surgery?

*The Sydney Morning Herald* (3 March) was more sensible, making the point that Labor had to do better than to preselect more of the same:

**... if Mr Beazley is serious about getting rid of the government he should have a front bench with a broad range of backgrounds and experiences like the Hawke ministry of just a couple of decades ago. Labor renewal must mean more than merely replacing one generation of party loyalists and union apparatchiks with another. Factionalism and nepotism are the problem, not the solution.**

Nor was *The Australian* (8 March) all that enthused that Mr Crean had held on:

**... before anyone spills any bubbly (or invective), Crean's win needs to be examined within the broader context of a Labor Party that is sorely lacking in leadership, is raven with factional infighting, and is so busy squabbling with itself over the spoils of defeat that it cannot mount a credible opposition – much less come up with a coherent policy platform that might get traction with voters.**

Perhaps the *Daily Telegraph* put it best when it spelt out the electoral irrelevance of Mr Crean's survival.

**There is a trip factor built into the ALP which makes Labor the subject of unwanted headlines, just when it wants to put the government on the front page. This trip factor has worked with great precision over the past four years, throwing Labor's unhappy internal affairs to the fore just when the government seemed vulnerable. Here we go again. The Victorian preselections have exposed Labor when it should have been concentrating on its opponents in parliament.**

A statement of the bleeding obvious perhaps but one that Labor seems incapable of acting on.

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# GERARD HENDERSON'S MEDIA WATCH

The inaugural issue of *Gerard Henderson's Media Watch* was published in April 1988 – over a year before the first edition of the ABC TV *Media Watch* program went to air. Since November 1997 “Gerard Henderson's Media Watch” has been published as part of *The Sydney Institute Quarterly*.

## MR RAMSEY'S SENIORITY

Remember this? On the ABC Radio *Sunday Profile* program late last year (4 December 2005), Monica Attard raised the “r” word with *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Alan Ramsey. This was an unusual phenomenon. Journalists like to ask politicians, business figures, entertainers and the like about retirement – but usually do not raise the matter with their own kind. And, yet, there is a real story here.

Take the ABC TV *7.30 Report* presenter, Kerry O'Brien, for example. Mr O'Brien likes to question John Howard as to when he might retire after a decade as prime minister. Yet no one seems to ask Kerry O'Brien as to when he might step down as *7.30 Report* presenter after ten years in the job. Ten years, that is, if you ignore Mr O'Brien's many absences from the program due to his generous holiday allocations (journalists tend to call a holiday a “well earned break” when referring to the vacations of their peers).

But I digress. Where were we? Oh, yes – the topic was retirement, Ms Attard, Mr Ramsey and all that. Let's go to the audio tape:

**Attard:** Is retirement in the offing for you?

**Ramsey:** It's getting close; it's getting close. I mean, you can't go on forever and I do some dopey things. I find that I make mistakes, silly mistakes. What some people from time to time call “a senior moment”.

In any event, the good news is that Alan Ramsey has decided to stay on. He seems to have dropped his shorter week-day column but his longer Saturday column is alive and well. Or as well as it might be. Give or take “a senior moment” or two. Or three. Or more. The only problem is determining when Mr Ramsey is having a senior's moment – like many of us – and when it is just Mr Ramsey being Mr Ramsey. Take your pick from some recent Alan Ramsey columns.

• **12 November 2005.** John Howard is referred to as a “mean little toad of a leader” and linked to fascism. Later (on 4 December 2005) Mr Ramsey upped the ante by calling the Prime Minister a “duplicitous toad”. Here the columnist seems to have forgotten that anyone who called a real fascist leader a “toad”, or some-such, would have invariably faced a firing squad the next morning. In the Howard Fascist Dictatorship, however, all Alan Ramsey faces each morning is breakfast.

• **26 November 2005.** The columnist writes: “David Barnett's 1997 hagiography, *John Howard: Prime Minister*, makes no mention of Lyall Howard's membership of the short-lived fascist New Guard movement”. Here your columnist forgot to ask the central questions. Was Lyall Howard (John Howard's father) ever a member of the New Guard? And was the New Guard fascist? The answer to the first question is that there is no evidence whatsoever to support the allegation that Lyall Howard was a New Guard member. The answer to the second question is that the New Guard, which was active in parts of Australia in the early 1930s, was in no sense fascist. Not when compared with real fascists of the time – i.e. Benito Mussolini and the Blackshirts in Italy.

Apparently Alan Ramsey simply forgot to consider that the key reason why there was “no mention” of Lyall Howard's membership of the New Guard movement in David Barnett's book turned on the fact that there is no evidence to support the allegation. How about that?

• **23 December 2005.** Your man Ramsey is well known as a practitioner of the VERY LONG QUOTATION. This time around he gives his style of journalism a new twist by actually quoting, wait for it, HIMSELF. At length, of course. The columnist wrapped-up his columns for the year by writing: “In reviewing the spirit of the year almost dead, I can think of nothing better, really, than to revisit something I wrote in the *Herald* two days after John Howard's winning fourth election on October 9 last year. You might remember it.”

Sure do. This was the column (*Sydney Morning Herald* 11 October 2004) where your man bagged Australians for their “gullibility”, “ignorance” and “greedy self-interest” and attributed the Coalition's success to “the thick and the avaricious”. Anyrate, the columnist told his readers that his 11 October 2004 column had well stood “the test of what has happened since”. But, er. Another senior moment, it seems. For your man just forgot to quote the final sentence of his post-election column. Remember? The one that predicted that

Mark Latham's "time will come; believe it". Mr Latham stepped down as Labor leader just over a year after this particular (false) prophecy.

- **4 January 2006.** Your columnist reflects on the heady days of the National Party: "At their peak the Nationals had 23 MHRs in the 1975 Fraser landslide government with 18 per cent of Australia's popular vote...". Alas, yet another senior moment. The National Party won 18 per cent of House of Representatives seats in 1975 – not 18 per cent of the vote. In fact, the National Party (and its Country Party predecessor) has never polled more than 11.5 per cent of the vote. Which is a long way short of 18 per cent – even in senior moment land. In 1975 the Nationals polled 11.3 per cent of the vote.

- **18 April 2006.** In an article which consists almost entirely of quotations from other people, Alan Ramsey returns to his twin themes that John Howard is "wretched" and that Australia is on the way to "fascism". Oh well. At least your man has remembered his line – no senior moment on this occasion, at least. But no firing squad, either.

## DOWN THE AARONS' MEMORY HOLE

Alan Ramsey (born 1937) is somewhat more senior than Mark Aarons (born 1951). Yet the latter had a significant almost-senior's moment when he starred on the ABC TV *Dynasties* program on 2 January 2006.

Now for some family history. Mark Aarons is the son of Laurie Aarons (1917-2005), the nephew of Eric Aarons (1919- ) and the grandson of Sam Aarons (1895-1971). *Dynasties* opened its report with the claim that "the Aarons were once called 'the Royal Family of Australian communism'". Quite so. Sam Aarons was one of the first members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and became secretary of the CPA's Western Australian branch in 1947. Sam Aarons – along with his sons Laurie and Eric – was elected to the CPA's central committee in 1955. At this time all communists were devoted followers of the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin and all Stalinists were communists. In fact the CPA was officially a part of the international communist movement and, as such, part of the Stalinist killing machine. In 1965 Laurie Aarons became the CPA's national secretary. The CPA split with Moscow in 1968 – following the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia.

In other words, the Aarons family supported the various crimes of Soviet communism up to 1968. Including (i) Lenin's and Stalin's purges, (ii) the forced famine in Ukraine and the ethnic-cleansing deportation of Soviet nationalities, (iii) the Nazi Soviet Pact of 1939-1941 (which made it possible for Nazi Germany to commence the Second World War), (iv) the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and more besides.

The *Dynasties* program made scant reference to the worst excesses of the communist totalitarian leaders

in Moscow. However, at one stage the narrator commented:

**But if the Aarons family were in the ascendancy, communism itself was in trouble. The brutality of the Soviet regime had destroyed most people's faith in revolution. Russia's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was the final betrayal. Australian communists deserted the Party in droves. Even Laurie Aarons spoke out.**

Well, yes – even Laurie Aarons. But that was in 1968. By then the corpses of European communism's victims had piled high. It's understandable why Mark Aarons feels supportive of his late father. But surely there was role for some editorial direction by the *Dynasties* production team here? For the Aarons clan was presented as a nice, if somewhat unusual, family. No attempt was made to assess just what would have happened if "the Royal Family of Australian communism" had gained power in Australia during the 1940s and 1950s. The fact is that, on all the available evidence, Laurie Aarons would have behaved just like his communist heroes in Eastern Europe at the time. In other words, there would have been show trials of opponents followed by executions or confinement in prison camps.

How do we know this? Well there is precedent. In the 1940s and 1950s, Stalinists (like Laurie Aarons) did what Stalinists did. Namely, imprison and kill those who they regarded as their objective enemies – objective in the sense that they did not know them personally, but hated them all the same. And then there is what Eric Aarons actually fessed-up to about deliberations on the CPA's central committee in 1956.

In February 1956 the then Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev condemned Stalin's crimes. The report of his address soon leaked to the West and was published in *The New York Times* on 5 July 1956. Soon after, the CPA's central committee discussed the matter. Laurie Aarons, Eric Aarons and a majority of their comrades went into denial and declined to acknowledge the importance of Khrushchev's speech. In other words, they decided to remain loyal Stalinists – in the face of Khrushchev's evidence of Stalin's crimes. One of the reasons for the CPA's continuing loyalty to Stalinism resulted from Eric Aarons' reminding his fellow comrades that, had the Australian communists come to power, they might have behaved a bit like Stalin. As Eric Aarons put it in *What's Left*:

**I made the point at the Central Committee meeting which decided the matter that our outlook was such that, had we been in power, we too could have executed people we considered to be objectively, even if not subjectively (that is, by intention), helping our enemies.**

None of this was mentioned on *Dynasties*. Denise Eriksen (head of ABC TV's Factual Entertainment Unit) defended the program's treatment of the Aarons family in a letter which was printed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 13 January 2006:

**As the title suggests, the [Dynasties] series explores the personal history of Australian families who have been pre-eminent in this country over three or more generations. Families who have contributed in politics, media, arts, business, sport and to regional Australia have been featured. In the case of the Aarons family, they were pre-eminent because of their politics and beliefs. We set out to tell their family story – not the story of communism. In the same way, in previous series, we told the stories of both Downer and the Anthony families without recounting the story of the Liberals or National parties.**

How about that? The head of ABC TV's Factual Entertainment Unit is really not interested in facts, after all. Or, rather, she is interested in some facts but not in other facts. The point being that Australians know what the Downer and Anthony families would have been like in government because the Liberal and National parties have gained office in Australia. The same can be said of the Beazley Labor family. But the communists did not achieve their aim of obtaining power in Australia by revolution. So it is reasonable to expect that a program like *Dynasties* should examine what would have happened if a communist dictatorship had come to power in Australia. Also, there is an inconsistency here. *Dynasties* should not have presented Laurie Aarons et al as "the Royal Family of Australian communism" if it only intended to "tell their family story" – and not the story of communism.

Needless to say, *Dynasties* gave the last word to Mark Aarons:

**I personally stopped believing in the possibility of revolution quite early in the my life and I look at it more from the point of view of what we achieved and what we got wrong.... Certainly it won't be over for me personally until I take my last breath because I'll go on doing the things that I believe in. Whether or not it's over into the future – well that's up to the next generation of Aarons. I just don't think they believe that our side can lose so it's up to people like us to keep working and working and working.**

It seems that Mark Aarons has taken his "working and working and working" on to the pages of Morry Schwartz's left-wing journal of (left-wing) opinion *The Monthly* – as well as to Phillip Adams (why not?) and his ABC Radio National *Late Night Live* program. *The Monthly* is published by Mr Schwartz's Black Inc. company.

In the April 2006 issue of *The Monthly*, Mark Aarons bagged a group which he claimed constituted a "Jakarta lobby". There were many targets – Gough Whitlam's Labor Party, Malcolm Fraser's Liberal Party and the late B.A. Santamaria's National Civic Council and its Democratic Labor Party (DLP) ally – among others.

Mark Aarons was particularly critical of the attitudes taken by Australians to East Timor and West Papua. Well, it's true that the Australian left (including the Communist Party of Australia) opposed Indonesia's take over of East Timor in 1975 during the time of the right-wing dictator Soeharto. But what about West Papua (formerly West New Guinea and Irian Jaya) during the time of the left-wing dictator Sukarno? Peter Edwards, Australia's official war historian, spelt out the reality in *Crises and Commitments* (Allen & Unwin, 1992). He recounted how the Liberal-Country Party Government, headed by Robert Menzies, held out as long as it could to prevent Indonesia from taking over the Dutch province of West Papua in the early 1960s. Dr Edwards continued:

**Total opposition to the Indonesian claim was one point on which there was almost complete agreement across the political spectrum, from the left-wing of the ALP to the DLP and the RSL. Only the communists took the opposite view.**

What's that again? Yes. The Communist Party of Australia was the only political organisation in Australia to support West New Guinea being absorbed into Indonesia in 1962. And who was the Royal Family of Australian communism circa 1962? Why, the Aarons family – of course. Including Mark's old man Laurie, who was the CPA's central committee at this time. Why did Mark Aarons not mention this in his article in *The Monthly* or during his interview with Phillip Adams on ABC Radio National? He must have forgotten. That's what.

It's a convenient thing to do – when writing for *The Monthly*, at least. You see, *The Monthly* is about the only journal of opinion in the Western world which does not carry a Letters or Correspondence page. Take Mark Aarons, for example. He can write what he likes in Mr Schwartz's left-wing journal – while knowing full well that Mr Schwartz does not publish letters-to-the-editor in response to published articles. Worth remembering, surely if you want to bag your political opponents and protect the old man's legacy at the same time.

The Aarons Royal Family of Australian communism. Just another (half remembered) Australian story – per courtesy of the ABC.

## **WITH FREUDS LIKE THESE WHO NEEDS FACTS?**

While on the topic of Molly Schwartz's Black Inc. publications, consider the case of Judith Brett's *Relaxed and Comfortable: The Liberal Party's*



*Australia* (Quarterly Essay, Issue 19, 2005). It provides a useful study of what authors choose to remember – and what authors choose to forget.

Note, for example, Dr Brett's introduction to her *Quarterly Essay* where she argues:

**Today Howard seems invincible, presiding over Australian politics like the veritable colossus and making it hard to think beyond and around him, especially for his opponents both inside and outside the Liberal Party.**

Well, we have to take note of such an insight to this. After all, Judith Brett is regarded as an expert on the Liberal Party. Consequently, her views about the Howard Government's longevity are worthy of considerable respect. Provided, of course, you remember that – once upon a time – the very same Dr Brett was much admired for her expertise which prophesied considerable longevity for Paul Keating's Labor government.

Cast your mind back to 17 July 1993 – when *The Age* published an article entitled "The party on the road to nowhere". It was written by Dr Judith Brett, no less, who confidently declared: "The Liberal Party in the 1990s seems doomed." Less than three years later the Liberal Party was in office in Canberra.

And so it came to pass that Dr Brett, who was much admired for her analysis of the Liberal Party's (alleged) terminal state, is now much admired for her analysis of the Liberal Party's longevity. In other words, she earns applause for analysing the consequences of her past flawed prediction. Dr Brett is a humanities academic who was once a co-editor of the leftist magazine *Arena*.

And then there is Dr Brett's revamped view of the Liberal Party founder Robert Menzies. In her *Quarterly Essay*, Judith Brett wrote:

**History was kind to Menzies and the Liberals. The post-war boom brought undreamed-of affluence to Australia, and after winning the 1949 election the Liberal Party began to reap the electoral rewards... History was also kind to the Liberals in another way: after the death of Ben Chifley, Labor was riven by conflict over communism. The party split of 1955, the subsequent formation of the DLP and the erratic and increasingly paranoid leadership of Bert Evatt all weakened Labor as an effective opposition and a plausible alternative government.**

Good points, eh? Worth, say, ten and a half out of ten? At least. And yet. And yet – didn't Judith Brett once declare that it was Robert Menzies who was paranoid about communism – rather than maintain that former Labor leader Dr Evatt was paranoid about anti-communism? Sure did.

Turn to Page 71 of Judith Brett's *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People* (Macmillan, 1992) which was published just a year before she prophesied that the Liberal Party "seems doomed". Here the author thrust the switch to Sigmund Freud. Consider her attitude to Robert Menzies' position on socialism:

**The dependence on the state which socialism would foster is linked to dependence on the mother and to sexual impotence.... To increase the state's power is to reduce its citizens to children.... The state Menzies projects is not labour's state – the creative expression of the interdependence of members of society, a co-operative solution to their common problems – but a threatening, suffocating state, like a mother who won't let her children grow up. The threats posed are different for sons than for daughters: sons will lose their sexual potency while daughters will have their role usurped....**

Here Dr Brett (circa 1992) seems to be stating that Robert Menzies was really opposed to socialism because he believed that socialism led to sexual impotency. And your man Menzies really wanted to get it off. Or something (Freudian) like that. The implication suggests that Mr Menzies believed that a chap couldn't really root for socialism. Or something like that. But what about the possibility that Robert Menzies opposed socialism because he knew it was an economic dud? Dr Brett apparently forgot to consider this.

Then turn to Page 87 of Dr Brett's opus magnum. Or is it magnum opus? Here Dr Brett thrust the switch to douglasism (as in the work of the social anthropologist Mary Douglas) when considering Mr Menzies' attitude to communism:

**The human body is a particularly rich source of imagery for the understanding and organisation of social life. The body's margins and internal divisions, along with images of bodily pollution and integrity, provide ways of thinking about threats to the social order – the body politic – and means of combating them. Much anti-communist rhetoric has drawn on bodily imagery: the imagery of sickness and disease (a social cancer) and the anal erotic imagery of the attack from behind (rooting rats out of holes). There are occasional uses of such imagery by mainstream Australian non-labour politicians like Menzies...**

No sources were quoted in support of this assertion. Here Dr Brett (circa 1992) seems to be stating that Robert Menzies used "anal erotic" based imagery – as in the, um, "attack from behind" scenario to mount his case against communism. Possibly so. But what about the possibility that Mr Menzies opposed communism

because he knew that the ideology was a dud? Dr Brett apparently forgot to factor in this possibility.

And now, dearly beloved Freuds, open your Brett Epistle at Pages 64-65. Here Dr Brett thrust the switch to a screwing/not screwing analysis of political life in Menzies' time:

**The Victorian's [sic] terms for sexual abstinence and ejaculation – saving and spending – easily fit this emotional structure of pleasure denied. While saving (renunciation) is presented as “the whole business of life”, Menzies recognises that pressure is needed to keep people up to the mark, that eating, drinking and being merry do have their attractions. The pressure behind most people's saving was fear of impoverishment from sickness, unemployment, death of a spouse, or old age, and it was just these pressures that the ALP's welfare programmes were designed to alleviate. The danger, as Menzies saw it then and as critics of the welfare state continue to see it, is that without such fears people will collapse into indolence and dependency.**

Here Dr Brett (circa 1992) seems to be saying that when Mr Menzies favoured saving, he was in monastic mode – so to speak. But when it was time for spending, Mr Menzies really got it off. Wow. Excuse me. Etcetera. Dr Brett apparently forgot to consider that Robert Menzies may have genuinely believed in the need for balanced budgets.

These days Dr Brett seems to have eased off the Freudian based psychoanalysis. Not before time. In the introduction to her edited collection *Political Lives* (Allen & Unwin, 1992), Dr Brett bagged empirical biographers like David Marr and Allan Martin – declaring that they “rely on extended chronological narrative rather than on thematic or analytical interpretation”. In other words, David Marr and the late Allan Martin were criticised for relying on facts – rather than theorising about bonks achieved and/or bonks denied.

However, Judith Brett has not completely turned her back on her career as a seer. In her final chapter in Mr Schwartz's *Quarterly Essay*, Judith Brett compared John Howard's intention to further reform Australia's industrial relations system with former Labor prime minister Ben Chifley's “disastrous decision to nationalise the banks” in the late 1940s. Her conclusion was as follows:

**...today's unions are weak and have already accepted much of the workplace reform agenda. Australians do not like ideologues and extremists, though they are prepared to tolerate pain and radical reform when they can be convinced that these are unavoidable. Howard has made much of the**

**need for balance, of finding and holding the moderate, consensual middle. Will this legislation mark his loss of political acumen as his small-business heart imagines the unions of today are unions of the 1950s? Or will he, as he has before, bow and bend before sustained political pressure, keeping his government to the moderate middle of national experience?**

And now for some facts. *Relaxed and Comfortable: The Liberal Party's Australia* was released in September 2005 – along with Dr Brett's implied suggestion that the moderate Mr Howard might just “bow and bend before sustained political pressure” and junk his industrial relations reform agenda. The aim being to keep his government in the “moderate middle of national experience” (whatever that might mean). Interesting theory – and, certainly, worth discussing in a Humanities department or some such institution. It's just that no such scenario eventuated – and the Howard Government's industrial relations reform package, WorkChoices, came into operation on 1 July 2006.

By the way. Anyone who purchased a copy of Dr Brett's *Quarterly Essay* was entitled to receive what Mr Schwartz's team at Black Inc. described as “an inspired gift”. Namely “a FREE copy of *The Howard Years*, edited by Robert Manne”. How more inspiring could a gift be? Especially since Dr Brett and Mr Manne are fellow academics in the La Trobe University Politics Department. Judith Brett is a relative newcomer to La Trobe – she only joined this particular Humanities department two decades ago. That's all. Unlike her (academic) colleagues Professor Robert Manne and Professor Dennis Altman and Professor Joe Camilleri and Dr John Chiddick and Dr Leon Gleler and Dr Ross Martin and Mr John Miller – all of whom have been at La Trobe University since the mid 1970s. Believe it or not. They all lecture-at-large (per courtesy of the taxpayer). Apparently their topics include the need for, er, change.

## **SPOT THE (JASPAN) DIFFERENCE**

While on the subject of credibility, which newspaper do you believe published the ridgy-didge version of John Birmingham's fine article on why the left's sense of humour has been crippled by contemporary intellectual fashion? Well, first, can you spot the difference?

Here's what John Birmingham wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 21 January 2006 about conservative blogger Tim Blair:

**He revels in the bile directed at him for his relentless assaults on Greenpeace, the ALP, John Kerry, the ABC, arts grants recipients, grieving war mum Cindy Sheehan, human shields in Baghdad, Phillip Adams, global warming doom-mongers, *The Age* editor-in-chief Andrew Jaspán and clueless pop stars. “A freakin' smorgasbord!” as he puts it.**

And here's what John Birmingham wrote in *The Age* on 28 January 2006 about conservative blogger Tim Blair:

**He revels in the bile directed at him for his relentless assaults on Greenpeace, the ALP, John Kerry, the ABC, arts grants recipients, grieving war mum Cindy Sheehan, human shields in Baghdad, Phillip Adams, global warming doom-mongers and clueless pop stars. "A freakin' smorgasbord!" as he puts it.**

How strange. *The Sydney Morning Herald* ran John Birmingham's reference to *Age* editor-in-chief Andrew Jaspan as one of Tim Blair's leftist targets. But this citation did not make it into *The Age*. Fancy that.

Now, how can this be? After all Andrew Jaspan is known to be a cheer-leader for free speech and a dedicated opponent of censorship. For example, on 25 October 2005, *The Age* ran on its own Opinion Page, wait for it, the opinion of its own editor-in-chief. It was a paean for "press freedoms" and "free speech". The Jaspan words, as published in *The Age*, had been first pronounced at an address to the Law Institute of Victoria. Readers could all but hear the editor-in-chief pound the lectern as he declared:

**We won't tolerate attempts to muzzle our effectiveness and fulfil the important societal and public policy dimension expected of us: holding people and institutions accountable without fear or favour. It is time for those who cherish freedom of speech – including many in the legal community – to defend responsible media organisations from unwarranted attacks and intrusions on the freedom to communicate.**

So how come *The Age* did not live up to its high standards and prevented its readers from knowing that, according to blogger Tim Blair, its British-born editor-in-chief is a fashionable leftist? Well, it couldn't be censorship, because Mr Jaspan is on record as supporting free speech "without fear or favour". But not, of course, without clichés. Clearly a sub-editor simply forgot to include these crucial remarks about Mr Jaspan. Or perhaps a cleaner inadvertently knocked a key-board. Or perhaps...

## **SUCH LITTLE TIME - SO MANY SENIOR MOMENTS**

But, alas, it is not only *The Age* which is having a problem with memory. It seems that this affliction is fast growing and has affected various media outlets and the commentators who opine in them. Some recent incidents come to mind.

• **On 15 December 2005** – just after the social disturbances in the southern beach suburb of Cronulla – *The Australian* ran a piece on its Opinion Page by conservative commentator Peter Ryan. He started off by testing the memory of his readers:

**Aghast at their television screens as they watched, Sydney's race riots, how many Australians cast their minds back 20 years to remember Geoffrey Blainey's thoughtful warning that such horrors might happen? Happen, that is, unless we reconsidered our program of almost indiscriminate immigration and the accompanying madness of multiculturalism.**

It is not clear precisely how many of Mr Ryan's readers actually cast their minds back two decades. However, had they done so, they might have recalled a somewhat different reality. The Cronulla riots commenced as a violent random protest by some Anglo-Celtic Australians against a small number of Australians of Muslim/Arab background – who, it was maintained, had acted improperly with respect to local women and men. Then there were random reprisal riots by young Australians of Muslim/Arab background directed essentially at Australians of Anglo-Celtic background.

In his famous/infamous speech at Warranambool on St Patrick's Day 1984, Geoffrey Blainey argued that "the pace of Asian immigration is now far ahead of public opinion". That's right. Professor Blainey said nothing whatsoever about immigration to Australia by Muslim/Arabs from Lebanon – which had commenced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He was not publicly concerned at the time about Muslim/Arab immigration. So what did the events at Cronulla in 2005 have to do with what Geoffrey Blainey had said two decades ago? Answer – nothing at all. Mr Ryan seems to have forgotten what precisely Professor Blainey was on about all those years ago. An Alan Ramsey senior moment, perhaps.

• **Then, on 23 January 2006**, *The Australian's* "Cut & Paste" segment published the thought of David ("Call me Professor") Flint – which had first appeared on the Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy website. It seems that the (retired) Professor had become agitated about the inaugural "A Mate for Head of State" day – which took place on the Sunday before Australia Day.

The concept was launched at a Sydney Institute forum on Wednesday 18 January 2006 and there were a number of small functions on Sunday 22 January 2006 – including one near the Professor's home in elitist, no less, Bondi Beach. Except that the supporters of an Australian head of state had endured the Sydney public transport system or the Bondi Beach parking restrictions to get there. Whereas the Professor had an expensive abode over looking Australia's most famous beach.

On the ACM website on the morning after the "A Mate for Head of State" night before, the Professor went over the top. He declared that the public forum was an "exclusive" function. He said that "only one" person was wearing the designated gold ribbon at Bondi Beach. And he declared that "a total of 46 turned up" at the Sydney Sunday function. All comments were incorrect.

Interesting reportage – especially from a critic of contemporary Australian journalism. The Professor is known to be critical of journalists reporting events which they have not attended and to be dismissive of the use of anonymous sources. The Professor did not attend either “A Mate for Head of State” function on which he commented. And his only source was the oh-so-familiar “reliable observer”. It seems the Professor forgot his own teachings on this occasion. That’s what the sight of a few “a mate for head of state” types does to a Bondi Beach monarchist during the heat of Sydney summer’s day.

- **Previously, on 11 January 2006**, “Cut & Paste” had reproduced a comment from Crikey newsletter contributor Charles Richardson about the lack of biographies of leading Liberal Party figures:

**The lack of biographical attention to Liberal Party figures is a national disgrace. John Howard is the most notable example, with his only biography to date being an embarrassing book by David Barnett with Pru Goward (Viking, 1997). But think how many others would be material for a good story: Andrew Peacock, Malcolm Fraser, William McMahon, Rupert Hamer, Steele Hall, Fred Chaney, Billy Snedden and many more.**

Good point. Pity about the examples. For there are biographies on Malcolm Fraser (by Philip Ayers), Andrew Peacock (by Jim Carey/Tony McCrae and Russell Schneider) and Billy Snedden (by M. Bernie Schedvin). The latter tomes are somewhat slight – but they are on the shelves. There are also biographies on Richard Casey (by W. J. Hudson), Garfield Barwick (by David Marr), Paul Hasluck (by Robert Porter), Robert Menzies (by Allan Martin), John Gorton (by Ian Hancock), Charles Court (by Geoffrey Blainey), Jeff Kennett (by Tony Parkinson) and Henry Bolte by Tom Prior).

Also Julian Leaser is said to be writing a biography on William McMahon. In the 1990s, Paul Hasluck was asked how it was that a “treacherous liar” like William McMahon got so far in the Liberal Party. To which Sir Paul replied: “By treachery and lying”. Clearly, he remembered.

- **The senior moment phenomenon** appears to have affected the whistle-blower confraternity. Andrew Wilke – who resigned (on Channel 9, no less) from the Office of National Assessment in the lead up to the Coalition of the Willing’s invasion of Iraq – recently wrote to *The Age* from his domicile in Sandy Bay, Tasmania. In doing so, he sounded off at all-and-sundry:

**Australia’s institutions are ill-equipped to deal with this Government’s misbehaviour. Political opposition is weak and patchy, the ALP remaining a national laughing stock under the bumbling management of Kim Beazley. The public service is**

**politicised, much of the media is compliant or incompetent – and royal commissions and other inquiries are ineffective as long as their terms of reference are framed by the people most in need of scrutiny. In a healthier democracy the head of state might have intervened by now. But, again, no chance of that here: Governor General Michael Jeffrey is beholden to the PM who selected him.**

Apparently, from delightful Sandy Bay, Mr Wilkie recalls that – in healthy democracies – heads of state intervene in the democratic political process. Another senior moment here. Certainly a head of state can dismiss a government which cannot guarantee supply – as occurred in Australia in 1975. But that’s it. It would be completely unconstitutional for any governor general (who represents the Queen, Australia’s head of state, in Australia) to intervene in the on-going political debate. Maybe it’s the Derwent River air impacting on Mr Wilkie’s sea-change experience.

- **And then there was the sad case of Melanie La’Brooy.** Sad because you would anticipate a sharper memory in one so young. On 4 March 2006 the novelist graced *The Age’s* Opinion Page with yet another “Dear John” letter – as in “Dear John Howard,” of course.

In a confusing ramble, Ms La’Brooy started off with the claim that she and “Dear John” had been together for “ten years”. Give or take some flirting with “Paul” (Keating), “Mark” (Latham) and “Simon” (Crean). Ms La’Brooy felt close enough to “Dear John” to call him “Winnie-the-Pooh”. How nice. But, lo and behold, she then berated her “Winnie” in an obscure reference to a “sock factory”. Fair dinkum. So the “Dear John” letter concluded:

**It’s been 10 years but at times it’s felt like an eternity. So I’m sorry, John, but this is officially your Dear John letter. I promise that I’ll still always think of you when I hear our special song, *Beds are Burning* by *Midnight Oil*. But please don’t call me, don’t beg and don’t cry. If you want to apologise, I’m willing to listen, as long as you understand one thing. You and me – we’re over.**

Gee wiz. This kind of public emote is well worth a run on *The Age’s* Opinion Page. For sure. But what about the Melanie La’Brooy’s reference to the “war in Iraq” having commenced in “2002”. Can this be an *Age* exclusive? Or did Ms La’Brooy forget that Iraq was invaded in 2003? There is a lot to be said for memories – if only they can be recalled accurately.

