

## Book reviews

### SILENCING DISSENT: HOW THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT IS CONTROLLING PUBLIC OPINION AND STIFLING DEBATE

Clive Hamilton and Sara Maddison

Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2007

Professor Robert Manne, in his 'Foreword', describes this book as 'timely, disturbing and unnerving' (2007: x). The thesis offered by Hamilton and Maddison is that Australian democracy has been severely jeopardised by the creation of a 'culture of political deception'; this culture has been using:

... much tighter control over the flow of information ... fewer forums in which dissenting voices can be heard, and ... increasingly rigid insistence that only those anointed by the government should be heard at all (2007: 22-23).

The first two introductory chapters, 'Dissent in Australia' and 'Redefining democracy' set the scene for a series of case studies outlining how critics are silenced.

'Universities' by Professor Stuart MacIntyre describes the recent assaults on academic freedom. He stresses that academic freedom does not occur naturally and requires careful protection. The 'Commonwealth's contribution to university expenditure has fallen' while 'its regulation ... has increased' (2007: 53).

MacIntyre uses the Australian Research Council as a case study, and describes the roles of Andrew Bolt (of Melbourne's *Herald Sun*) and P.P. McGuinness (editor of *Quadrant*).

In Chapter 4, Emeritus Professor Ian Lowe turns his attention to the research community more broadly, and particularly case studies of 'experts who have been silenced by the system' (2007: 61). Lowe pays particular attention to pressures on the CSIRO, and there are sections entitled 'Intimidating the experts', 'Muddling the models' and 'Stacking the deck.'

Although this is a book about the Federal Government, Chapter 5 by the principal authors is essential reading for the child welfare field. 'Non-government organisations' is the title of this chapter. No punches are pulled:

... community groups are being worn down and are increasingly reluctant to engage in the democratic process because they no longer believe they can make a difference. At the same time, certain influential business lobbies have been brought into the fold, along with a few tame or uncritical NGOs like Mission Australia, the Salvation Army and WWF (2007: 100).

Research centres are created as the result of political wheeling and dealing:

In 1999 the government relied on the support of Meg Lees, the leader of the Australian Democrats to secure the services of the goods and services tax legislation through the Senate. Part of the price was the establishment of a centre for Child Welfare at the University of South Australia, in the state she represented. Regardless of the merits of the centre its location was decided purely on political grounds (2007: 50).

There are further chapters on the media, statutory authorities, the military and intelligence services, and the Senate. Geoffrey Barker (of the *Australian Financial Review*) is described in the list of contributors as having 'an ongoing interest in the Australian Public Service' (2007: XIII). His is a fine chapter on the subject, well crafted and bringing to mind those wonderful BBC TV series *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*. The opening paragraph alone justifies the price of the book: Treasury Secretary Frederick Wheeler standing up to Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, and Defence Secretary Tony Ayers's exchange with Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser:

'I don't want to hear that,' Fraser reportedly said in response to some bad news from Ayers. Ayers's reply (expletives deleted) was, 'I'm not here to tell you what you want to hear. I'm here to tell you what you need to hear!' (2007: 124).

The roles of advisers are subjected to scrutiny by Barker and he is clearly concerned by what he sees; pages 144-145 in particular are very powerful analyses of the difference between a public servant and an adviser, and not flattering to the latter.

There is a great deal in this book for those with concerns about children and other vulnerable groups: the destruction of Employment National, the children overboard affair (and the use of the media to spread 'disinformation and distrust' (2007: 114-116)), and the repeated vilification of critics.

This is a pessimistic book and the chapter devoted to 'signs of resistance' is barely six pages long. Times might have changed, however. In January this year, Julia Gillard said that the not-for-profit sector had been living in a 'climate of fear' under the Howard Government. She promised to take 'the gag off and listen' (Franklin & Lunn 2008). I have only one minor criticism: the case studies are so forceful that occasionally a more measured writing style would have been adequate. As someone who has been shouted at by a Premier of Victoria (not the current one), I look forward to a similar analysis of the politics of fear, the ad hominem attacks, and

the politicisation of the public service in Australia's States and Territories. It will be interesting to see if Julia Gillard's promised climate change is as far-reaching as it needs to be.

REVIEWED BY

Professor Chris Goddard

Director

National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse  
Monash University

REFERENCE

Franklin, M. & Lunn, S. (2008) 'Critics in "climate of fear": Gillard', *The Australian*, 29 January, p.1.

BAD DREAMING

Louis Nowra

Pluto Press, Australia. 102pp.

*Bad Dreaming* is one of the publications in the *Now Australia* series from Pluto Press. The blurb inside the back cover describes this 'refreshing series' as 'unashamedly about how we live now', and states that it features 'new journalism on contemporary issues'. The authors are 'story tellers occupying the space where literature meets journalism meets politics,' and using 'writers of imagination, skill, experience and profile. *NOW* will always entertain ...'

Other issues include Murray Hogarth on climate change, and Joanna Mendelsohn on public versus private schools (there is an embarrassing typo in the advertisement for this one: 'Beyond public vs public' should surely read 'Beyond public vs private', but then accuracy has often been a casualty of immediacy). Australia needs more debate about such issues and Pluto Press is to be congratulated on the contribution these small books make.

Turning to Nowra's contribution, there can be few books that have been caught up in events as rapidly as *Bad Dreaming*. On the 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2007, Louis Nowra appeared on ABC TV *Lateline* to promote publication of the book the next day. Only weeks later, on 30<sup>th</sup> April, an advance copy of the report of the Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse was provided as 'a courtesy' to the Northern Territory Government. This was done so that they 'had time to consider the report and prepare advice on key actions before the report was made public' (Northern Territory Government media release 2007).

On 15<sup>th</sup> June, the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory released the report, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle, Little Children are Sacred* (Wild & Anderson 2007), calling it 'a landmark report' that exposes 'great pain and unhappiness' in the media release (Martin 2007). On the same day, the Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister at the time, Mal Brough, stated on ABC *News Radio* that 'This is a

national disgrace, it's a disaster and it's something that should never happen in this country' (ABC News 2007).

Less than one week later, on 21<sup>st</sup> June, Mal Brough launched the 'National emergency response to protect Aboriginal children in the NT' (Brough 2007). The measures included alcohol restrictions, welfare reforms, school attendance measures, 'compulsory health checks', acquiring townships, banning x-rated pornography, and increased policing (Brough 2007). The story has run in most papers on most days ever since, and towards the end of August, the NT government released its response (Northern Territory Government 2007).

Nowra's book sets out to ask why Australia has made so little effort to stop what the cover describes as a 'terrifying epidemic of male Aboriginal sexual and domestic violence against women and children', and why the efforts that have been made have been unsuccessful.

Nowra starts by paying tribute to a number of books – for example, Judy Atkinson's *Trauma Trails* (2002) – and several journalists, including Paul Toohy. He then shares some of his own experiences as a victim of what would now be called child abuse, as his mother and 'her third husband fought loudly and violently'. As he notes, at that time 'nothing much was done about domestic and sexual violence' (Nowra 2007:2).

Since the 1980s, Nowra has been collecting newspaper clippings on Aboriginal cultural conflict. The stories include pack rapes and arranged marriages. The accounts, however, are not merely newspaper stories: Nowra worked with a range of Aboriginal people and many described widespread sexual abuse. He visited outback communities and was disgusted by the violence he saw against Aboriginal women:

The violence was public and astonishingly brutal. Some of the women's faces ended up looking as though an incompetent butcher had conducted plastic surgery with a hammer and saw. The fear in the women's eyes reminded me of dogs whipped into cringing submission (2007:6).

The stories that prompted the book are described: the 50-year-old (already convicted of killing his wife) who was sentenced to 24 hours in prison for unlawful intercourse with a 15-year-old girl promised to him as his next wife; and the man who anally-raped a 14-year-old girl and who was sentenced to detention for the court sitting only.

Cultural traditions' are used 'to literally get away with rape and murder': Aboriginal boys are ten times more likely to be sexually assaulted than boys in the general population and the sexual abuse of girls is so widespread that one-third of thirteen-year-old girls in the Northern Territory are infected with chlamydia and gonorrhoea (2007:7).