

Dinner Address

Dividing the Great Australian Consensus

Peter Coleman

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This very week, a splendid international conference is being held at another hotel up the street from here. I won't say it is a grander hotel than ours, but the conference certainly has a grander name. It is called 'The 1995 Global Cultural Diversity Conference'. It is, we are advised, part of Australia's national contribution to the world-wide celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, and a small part of our contribution to the International Year of Tolerance.

A Minister of the Crown (as he may still be jokingly called) – I mean Senator Bolkus – launched the Conference last Thursday at a breakfast – The Cultural Diversity breakfast. He was its keynote speaker. I didn't go to hear him because...well, he has given the speech quite a few times recently and I have caught his drift.

The drift is not what you might imagine. You might believe or hope that the New Diversity – the Diversity being sponsored by government – means at last some acknowledgement that enlightened Australians are not all of exactly the same opinion on the evils of racism, sexism, homophobia, wood chipping and privatisation, or the goodness of old-growth greenies, new-growth republicans, medium-growth arts bureaucrats and the ABC. But no. Caution is called for. New Diversity, it soon becomes clear, encourages all kinds of Diversity except Diversity of opinion.

This is what seems to have happened. Distortion of the ideals of multiculturalism has brought the very word into some disrepute. It always was, for the ordinary person, a bit of a turn-off. Some politicians can't spell it. It never commanded popular assent.

A man might rally to the colours for, say, God, King and Country, or for 'The Land, Boys, We Live In'. But few are going to give much blood, sweat or tears for Multiculturalism, even for a Multicultural Republic, indeed even for the Multicultural, Ecological, Posthumanist, Poststructuralist, Ungendered, Rock-and-Roll and Queer Republic.

There is also an increasing awareness of an authoritarian, illiberal underside to some multicultural debates. Australians have for generations absorbed refugees and immigrants from foreign lands. This sort of openness was part of our liberal-democratic tradition, or even what was still called, a generation or two ago, our British inheritance. In a sense Australians were multiculturalist *avant la lettre*.

But the doctors of official multiculturalism despise Australian and certainly British traditions and have often called for their subversion. Anyone who challenges the multicultural catechism – nervously as Commissioner Fitzgerald did, or forthrightly as Professor Blainey – is in for a hard time. A new, simpler word was called for, something jargon-free. The one selected is Diversity. It sounds good. But it is important to see how thoroughly Orwellian it may be.

You will recall that in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the department that invents all the political lies is the Ministry of Truth. Government-sponsored Diversity does not mean diversity in ordinary language, that is, tolerance, pluralism, a pleasure in variety. The New Diversity means Conformity, enforced by the opinion formers or network managers of the media, academia, the political parties, the thought police.

Consider. In the Age of Diversity, a Gay Mardi Gras is free to ridicule Christianity. But Christians are not permitted to ridicule the Gay Mardi Gras. That would offend the principle of Diversity. A conference on Population may demand the liberalising of laws on abortion, but calls for laws restricting abortions are not permitted: that would offend the principle of Diversity. (One headline read: 'Bolkus Rebukes Pope'.) You may criticise discrimination, but not if it is

called affirmative action. You may call for more attention to 'community languages', but not to English. You may discuss ethnic traditions, but not ethnic gangs.

There were several slogans inscribed on the walls of George Orwell's Ministry of Truth : War is Peace; Freedom is Slavery; Ignorance is Strength. The Australian contribution is : Diversity is Conformity.

This brings me directly to tonight's theme – the Great Australian Consensus. Australia, it often seems, labours under a more comprehensive orthodoxy than any other English-speaking country. Sydney or Melbourne, when compared with New York or London, seem to be closed societies. To describe them I would like to borrow a term from the poet Les Murray – a term he used to describe his experience as editor of a poetry magazine.

Murray, it should be recalled, has 'come out', as it were, as a Christian and he found himself publishing the occasional poem of Christian inspiration. When, despite rumblings and warnings, he persisted and indeed did it twice in the one issue, the patience of the literary community was exhausted. The non-god of secular humanism, he wrote, is a jealous absence.

This is a literary journal, his critics exploded, not a Church propaganda sheet. Poets began withdrawing their contributions, readers cancelled subscriptions, the arts bureaucrats hinted at the suspension of subsidies. Humanist and secularist ideas were OK but not religious ones. Before resigning, Murray concluded that Australia was much further down the road of 'quasi-totalitarian consensus' than he had thought.

Quasi-totalitarianism? I would prefer to modify it slightly and call it soft totalitarianism. It's the same thing.

If you offend, you do not get a bullet in the neck or end up in a slave camp in the Gulag. But you will be marginalised, boycotted, perhaps vilified, and in a bad case brought before the thought police and fined. Your career will be damaged, perhaps ruined. There are many names on the honour roll of those wounded in battles against this new Conformity now called Diversity – Gabriel Moens, Dr Tralaggan, Geoffrey Blainey. A recent addition to the roll is the late David Stove of Sydney University, a traditional philosopher who reflected in print, as such fellows do, on the feeble arguments justifying affirmative action in his university and the harmful results it was having on academic standards.

For his pains he was advised in writing by the university authorities that disciplinary proceedings against him were under consideration. He should desist forthwith from further thinking and, even if he did, it might be too late. Clearly the spirit of the New Diversity now prevailed in Sydney University.

The dissidents I have so far mentioned are all people of education and reputation, able to speak for themselves and, to some extent at least, look after themselves. But what of the inarticulate millions for whom words like multiculturalist society or equal opportunity tribunal or anti-discrimination board or homophobia or sexism are incomprehensible jargon? What chance do they have when confronted by the apparatchiks of the New Diversity?

However, I really do not want to strike a pessimistic note. Australia has for generations been one of the most liberal, lawful, democratic and prosperous countries in the world, a bastion of representative government, a haven for refugees. It would be absurd to assume some vogue could transform it so quickly into soft totalitarian conformity.

There is no ground for despair. I do not suggest we adopt without qualification the attitude attributed to Prince Metternich when he was advised about the desperate condition of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: the position, he said, is always desperate...but never serious. He was wrong, of course. A day did at last come when the Empire fell. But it lasted many centuries in its desperate state, and Prince Metternich has much to teach us.

The late Jim McAuley used to say that in the end the only really revolutionary act left to us, as we confront all the follies of the age, is to await the return of commonsense. There are a few straws in the wind that suggest this moment may be approaching.

Take the new play by David Williamson, *Dead White Males*, which is packing them in night after night at the Opera House. There have always been two David Williamsons. One was regularly on hand at writers- and-artists rallies, especially at election time, always good for a speech that was ... a bit heavy-going. Then there was the other David Williamson, the brilliant and witty playwright who cast a cold eye on both the Left and the Right. In his new play he casts this eye on feminist multiculturalism, or on the sort of academic literary intellectual who regards Western civilisation as a racket created by a repressive, sexist patriarchy – the dead white males of the title. Williamson comes down firmly on the side of liberal humanism – to the rage of the arts pages critics and the delight of the public. Such a play could not have been produced a few years ago.

Or take the popular film now showing throughout Australia, *Once Were Warriors*, based on the novel by the New Zealand Maori writer Alan Duff. Its subject is the fate or future of indigenous people, Maoris or Aborigines. Its message is the harm done by both government welfare services and by head-in-the-sand ethnic traditionalism. Its appeal is to self-help, independence, and spirited involvement in the modern world.

Alan Duff is not, he insists, politically correct, but the popularity of his work is significant and encouraging.

There are other straws in the wind. One is Helen Garner's courageous *The First Stone*, published this week, which takes up the theme of sexual harassment. Helen Garner is a feminist and one of the best writers in Australia. She writes sensitively of outsiders and misfits. In her new book, which may become a classic of its genre, she canvasses the question whether her generation of feminists has nurtured a new breed of power intoxicated young feminists who set out to destroy the careers of men in authority. The controversy attending her book shows no sign of abating. My point for the moment is that it could not have been published a few years ago. The ideas it raises would have been too far outside the Consensus.

Finally let me refer briefly to some recent, encouraging expressions of free thought in the field of gay liberation, homophobia and 'sexist discrimination'. Robert Dessaix is another fine writer who is also the host of the ABC's Books and Writing program. He has written an acclaimed autobiography, *A Mother's Disgrace*, and edited an anthology of Australian homosexual verse.

This is what he is recently quoted as saying about the ABC in the Melbourne magazine of the arts, *Storm*:

'The political correctness of the ABC is extraordinary. There's no leeway in anything to do with race or gender or politics. There is only one attitude you can have to Aborigines, to multiculturalism and to feminism.'

The ABC, he went on, is a highly authoritarian organisation and that since he is anti-authoritarian, it means 'I have to tailor what I say to the reigning ideology of the ABC'. As for career prospects in this bastion of gay men and feminists, 'heterosexual males may as well go and commit suicide'.

Christopher Pearson is another writer and editor who, speaking as a founding member of one of the first 'gay lobbies', has often written of his impatience with the clichés of soft totalitarianism, defending the Tasmanian Government against the fatuities of Attorney-General Lavarch's privacy legislation, or criticising the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act, which actually permits discrimination by homosexuals against heterosexuals, and generally ridiculing the absurdities of the doctrines of 'gay marriage'.

One could go on. There are other straws in the wind which suggest that the Great Australian Consensus is losing ground, that its heyday is passing.

The question remains: what can we do to hasten the process? As I have already suggested, following Jim McAuley, we must rely on the enduring commonsense of the public. Without that, the position would be hopeless. But commonsense needs buttressing, as Sir Samuel Griffith knew well.

Anything that supports the idea and spirit of independence and self-reliance becomes crucial. Independent courts. Independent schools. Independent press and media. Underlying them all is freedom of association, even more fundamental, it seems to me, than freedom of speech, precious as that must always be.

One of the most important of all, I believe, is independent States, or federalism and States' Rights. Since States' Rights are often the butt of merry jokes by our journalists and pundits, may I take a few moments to explain myself?

Many years ago when I first entered public or parliamentary life, the Premier of the State was the late Bob Askin and the Prime Minister was John Gorton. The inevitable tensions over the division of tax revenues was only intensified by John Gorton's centralist indifference to Askin's State problems and Askin's parochial indifference to Gorton's national problems.

Askin mounted a major campaign based on federalist principles and designed to embarrass the Gorton Government. State MPs were instructed to show no mercy in attacking their federal colleagues in public or in party assemblies.

You know the sort of demagoguery : the Commonwealth is spending a million dollars on a swimming pool in Canberra, or on a theatre restaurant or a public mortuary, but only has \$100,000 to spare for child care centres or teachers' colleges or emergency services in the States. The State ambulances are poor but you can ring them up very efficiently on Commonwealth telephones. And so on. It was effective enough.

Some of us tried to pitch the debate at a higher, more philosophic level. I was one of those foolish fellows. I remember a political science conference at Sydney University in which I had to debate the issue with Gough Whitlam, whose centralist hostility to the States, or to any restrictions on Prime Ministerial power, left even John Gorton trailing.

I argued that the States were centres of social reform, experiment, innovation and insisted that the future of federalism depended on the States resuming income taxing power on the Canadian model. Lord knows what Bob Askin thought of all that. In any case he dropped the whole campaign as soon as he had extracted as much as he could expect from the Commonwealth and moved on to other issues – such as law and order.

I continued my own little campaign in journalism and speeches and at one stage even introduced a private member's bill for the resumption—and reduction—of income tax in New South Wales. I really only gave up the struggle when I finally realised that no one was listening.

But I still believe we should defend our federal system with its States' rights against the centralists. But today I would not base that defence on any belief in the splendours and glories of our State Governments.

Their value resides in the fact that, along with the other constituents of the balance of power — the Courts, the Senate, the Governor-General — they limit the power and the grasp of the central and centralising government.

When, in a federation such as ours, a central government adopts a policy on, say, land use or sexual morality or constitutional practices or Aboriginal policy or whatever, we rely on the fact that there are other authorities with entrenched powers which may arouse public opinion or sometimes obstruct the central government.

If this seems a negative defence of federalism, it is not really. It acknowledges the central power, and asks only that it be limited, that the liberty and consent of the subject come first. It is the same liberal and sceptical spirit that has so often led Australians to vote No in referenda. They were not always mistaken to do so. May they, at least sometimes, continue so to do.