Freelance

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'The roof is on fire': The academic writer and social critique

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Paris is burning. They riot in the streets. My daughter tells me she has begun work on a documentary critiquing the government's new sedition laws - we both know the danger. Would they dare arrest the film makers? The phones are playing up - too many noises, clunks, echoes, static: are they being bugged, again? This is Australia. This is 2005.

Many of you know that I have moved to a small country village in Victoria and there I am engaged with my community. The community is so active that I had to put down some boundaries or I would have absolutely no time for anything else. Having made it clear I didn't do scones, I have become the words person. It's nothing. Recently I was asked to assist a group in their application for a community award. They sent me a draft which was less than average and I wrote the application with a clear eye on the audience and purpose, bringing it in at 499 words for a 500 limit. None of this is unusual and we all do things like this all the time. It is simply a use of our craft - of what we *know*. And I wouldn't have thought any more of it had I not recently undergone a very gradual politicisation. I can't pin-point exactly when it was that I came to see the world in terms of 'conservative' and - I search for a word - is it 'radical'? No, that is not the balance to conservatism in this dichotomy, a better term is 'critiquing'. Somewhere recently things started lining up like this for me, and I began dividing the world into conservatism and critique. Philip Adams on *Late Night Live* on one side and Michael Duffy from *Counterpoint* on the other. I was definitely standing in the Philip Adams critique section of my dichotomy.

In my new politicised self I could see that the application of what I knew - my writing craft - empowered my community by giving them a way of talking about their organisation, themselves. I began to understand just what is meant by the phrase *Writing is powerful*. And with this understanding I addressed questions that had been troubling me.

- Why were academics so overworked and so underpaid?
- Why were there so many battles about research in the arts?
- Why was the government with all its power and might attacking the student unions in the university - a place where most of the

politicians trained?
- Where is the real opposition to the conservative government - is it now with community and religious leaders, is it with the courts?

And I asked myself what had stopped me, as co-editor of *TEXT* for nine years, from going out and soliciting papers critiquing much of what I was appalled by in conservative Australia? Why had I not thought that it was the business of *TEXT*, the content of our curriculum, the stuff of our research when we in writing were being so radical elsewhere (the development of the research higher degree in creative writing for example)? I had no answer. In a paradigm case of hegemony, I had stopped myself. I felt myself waking from an awkward dream.

Another anecdote. When I was a child my parents in a flush of charity decided to take a couple of orphans from the local Catholic orphanage out for a day's activity. We were all grilled on the requirements - be nice to these kids or else. We understood that the shared day with the orphans was part of our parents' social obligations and if we mucked it up all hell would break loose. The day arrived. We picked up the three kids from the orphanage and had some kind of day out. I don't recall. I only recall talking to one of the girls and asking what it was like to be without a mum and dad. She told me she had a mum, and I felt cheated. I felt totally let down by society who had given my family pretend, second rate, not-the-real-thing orphans. I didn't tell mum or dad, I didn't want to spoil it for them. Years later I understood this story. The kids were Aboriginal, part of the stolen generation. They were very much the real thing, the victims of yet another government policy that went terribly wrong. At the time, and for some time later, we didn't have the concept of a *stolen generation*, or the language for it, and naively saw these kids as orphans who needed treats and days out.

I can almost excuse this lack of knowledge in the 1950s when I was a girl, but the practice of taking indigenous children from their parent continued into the late 1960s. By then I was at university, a politicised hippy fighting the Vietnam war in the streets of Adelaide. And yet, even politicised, I still did not know what was happening to Aboriginal people. Later as a Feminist and Trotskyite, a member of the Socialist Workers Party in the UK, I still did not know.

It wouldn't have been hard to know but I just didn't ask that set of questions. I didn't look in the right places. I never questioned the orphanage story. Few of us did. We cared passionately but our passions were distracted, channelled into other issues. Richard Neville in a recent article in *The Age* (Neville 2005) titled 'Grandchildren of the Revolution', used a review of an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, *British Art & the 60's*, to compare the counter-cultural times of that period to now. He reflects in hindsight: 'Overall, I should have listened less to Bob Dylan and done more for Amnesty International.' His point, and mine, is that we passionately wanted to change the world but that our focus was caught by certain cultural and political events and ideas to the exclusion of others.

Of course, no one can take on every cause and remain sane. And the last thing I want to do here is get lost in a nostalgic baby-boomer 1960s dream. What I want to point out is the nature of distraction. I was distracted and did not see the stolen generation although it was actually in my life and formed part of one of my family stories. A powerful thing, this distraction. It is no defence to say *I did not know*, and yet I didn't. And it wasn't

because I didn't *want* to know - I did. It was because I was distracted by other issues and causes.

I am not mounting a defence, I am looking at distraction. If I was distracted then from knowing this great injustice - from having language to name it, ways to speak of it other than *not-a-real-orphan* - what things are happening today that I am similarly distracted from looking at, from naming, from addressing?

Let me suggest to you that distraction is no longer accidental or arbitrary. Distraction has become the tool of the conservatives to keep us in a silent dreaming state, to devalue anything we as writers and academics say and to ensure that the conservative position remains uncritiqued. And what a tool it is: it is so silent, so clever - we become our own jailers.

Let me unpack how it operates.

Those who critique are identified as groups - trade unionists, academics, students, journalists at the ABC, the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, the *Age* newspaper editors. You could add one or two more but it's a small list.

I do not need to walk you through the steps of how each of these groups has been worked over. Power has been gradually and systematically taken away from them. Their conditions have gradually eroded. They find themselves with longer and longer working hours, harder roads to promotion, a greater threat of redundancy. There are less and less funds or resources to do more and more. The number of clients are increased, the number of limitations and restrictions and watchdogs are increased. When standards fall, as they inevitably do, much is made of it - the lack of members in trade unions for example is made much of. In a recent exchange (November 2005) at the Senate Enquiry on Industrial Relations Laws, Senator Kevin Andrews attacked union leader, Bill Shorten, over his irrelevance because of the lack of union membership (Australian Workers' Union 2005).

In addition there are provided juicy, enticing, hard-to-get-at carrots. Australian Research Council grants, PhDs, publications, the promise of a job *somewhere else* are examples. Hannie Rayson used the carrot of a job with the UN in her tragedy *Two Brothers* (loosely based on the Costello brothers - one a federal politician, the other a church leader). It is a play about power and evil and manipulation of people. Tom is a low-paid lawyer and CEO of the Lawson (*read* Brotherhood of St Lawrence) Foundation - one tiny act of bad faith would land him a prestigious UN job helping thousands of refugees. His politician brother, Eggs, tempts him, taunts him. I will quote a scene at length to illustrate the tone of the play.

> *Eggs*: No, wait! This is an opportunity for us both. Look, Tom, I can get you a plum job. United Nations, UNESCO, Human Rights Commission. London, New York, Geneva. You name it. You can do good, throughout the whole friggin' world, if you want. Just leave me Australia.
> *Tom*: You're asking me to leave the country.
> *Eggs*: I'm asking you to let me be PM.
> *Tom*: You're trying to buy my silence.
> *Eggs*: Tommy, you and I simply cannot go on playing out our disagreements on the national stage.
> *Tom*: Why not? The Costellos manage it.
> *Eggs*: Neither of us will survive.

> *Tom*: Who else are you going to muzzle, Eggs? Is that what you want to stand for: political intimidation?
> *Eggs*: Get off your high horse.
> *Tom*: 'My government will not brook any dissent.'
> *Eggs*: Look, you can sound off all you like to your leftie acolytes at bloody conferences. But I'm offering you real power. Without that, you're just pissing up against the wall.
> *Tom*: There was a time when you found debate healthy.
> *Eggs*: Tom, I intend to run the country. And I will not be shot in the foot at every turn, by my own brother.
>
> (Rayson 2005: Act 1 Sc 2)

Tom wrestling with his conscious generates one of the great tensions in the play and we are asked can the ends justify the means?

Often these government carrots take people in directions they never wanted to travel, working in groups where they are uncomfortable, on projects not of their own choice. It is very busy, hard and difficult work. It requires committees and emails and procedures. And just enough carrots are given out to keep the rest trying. All this is classical behaviourist training technique.

And distraction has other sides to it. To further dilute any escaping critique from places such as the academy, a swag of belittling terms are floated about in the public domain. We are members of the literati, somehow beyond the real world. We are like sparrows, the chattering Chardonnay classes, or have too much time on our hands drinking coffee and gossiping, the *latte* set. Margaret Seares in a paper delivered at the 2003 Manning Clark House Day of Ideas said:

> I find for example, in the arts, you often find either ridicule or belittlement, because artists are seen as intellectuals, and we have all these labels that apply: the Chattering Classes, the Chardonnay Socialists, the Café Latte Group, pointy heads, boffins and egg heads. We get all that because we work in the arts or in universities, and these are not exactly endearing terms. And then you have some expressions of quite strong alienation from the arts at certain times, as in the ridiculing of some of the more arcane grants given to arts or to academics. I have to say, having been both with the Australia Council and with the Australian Research Council, I get to see all the press clippings that come in about some of the grants that have been given that not all members of the community are happy about. And also the outrage expressed in the media or through individuals about artists' events or happenings. (Seares 2003)

She goes on to speak of a culture of fear, and of the labelling of critique of the government as 'un-Australian' - a dangerous stance given Howard's new sedition laws?

Julianne Schultz in her introduction to the *Griffith Review* issue *People Like Us* (2005) refers to this labelling as the rhetoric of reaction, devices which 'preclude conversation, encourage people to retreat into like-minded communities, and lose touch with their shared humanity.' She points out that 'the biggest targets of this abusive rhetoric are education and the

media, the two institutions which (James) Hunter (in his *Cultural Wars* 1991) predicted meant it was likely that progressive values would prevail.' (Schultz 2005)

On 16 November 2005 Federal Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews said of the group of 150 Industrial Relations academics whose representatives were set to address his committee: 'A group of academics is no substitute for common sense proposals' (*Age* 16/11/05). And there we have it - 150 specialist academics dismissed in 11 words! We think we have power?

The voice of critique has been silenced - it has been overworked to silence, ridiculed to silence, made fearful to silence. For example, the weekend after the new sedition laws were passed in the lower house, the only daily newspaper which has an editorial critical of the Howard government ran a week-long expose... about the new laws? No. Their enquiry was into public transport in Melbourne. If that is not fear-driven delay and distraction while the lawyers work out what can and cannot be printed, what is?

We now have a society where the criticism comes not from thoughtful or informed sources but from radio talk-back hosts. The shock jocks masquerade as unbiased but provide a right-wing commentary to their millions of listeners. Marian Sawer in the *Financial Review* (2004) writes:

> At the same time, on commercial radio, millionaire talkback hosts with close ties to corporate Australia were depicting themselves as victims of the political correctness imposed by new class elites. This has been the genius of the "tsars of talk", their presentation of themselves as not only on the side of the battlers but as part of them. They too are persecuted by the all-powerful thought police who object to racial vilification and waste tax-payers' money on ramps for the disabled. (Sawer 2004: 2)

If all this seems a bit too conspiratorial, let me remind you of the sort of academic work which gains newspaper coverage and support from the talk-back hosts and associated media. Professor Mirko Bagaric and his colleague Julie Clarke, both of the law department of Deakin University, published a paper in an American law journal exploring the moral virtues of the official use of torture in certain circumstances. Professor Bagaric was flown to the University of San Francisco to be a keynote speaker alongside General Janis Karpinski (now demoted to colonel), the officer formally in charge of the notorious Abu Ghraib prison. No doubt many see Professor Bagaric - because of his mssage - as a successful international academic.

Of course what we are seeing here is an application of the ends justifying the means. Take one life to save many lives, or a more important life - whatever that means. It's the kind of argument the conservatives have been using a lot lately. Let me give you some examples:

John Howard in a *7.30 Report* interview with Kerry O'Brien... The end here is a strong economy.

> Can I start by saying that in the end, the thing that will determine job security and wage rates and conditions of employment in this country is the strength of the economy, not the rules and regulations that govern it, and the worth of

> any industrial relations system is the contribution that it makes to a stronger economy. Now, under the present law, there are certain arrangements. We're going to make them different under these laws, and in determining the overall worth of these changes, you've got to look at the individual positions of people, and the strength of the economy. *And you can't judge the fairness or otherwise of the system entirely by the actual rules and regulations. You've got to look at the strength of the economy.* No system can guarantee full employment, unless the economy is strong. And I think the greatest value of these changes is that they will produce a stronger, more flexible economy and that more than anything will deliver job security, higher wages and better conditions. (Australian Broadcasting Coporation 2005b. My italics)

It's the kind of talk-back speak that has many saying: 'Of course, I see that John.'

This ends-justifies-the-means rhetoric is so entrenched in the conservative government that it is blatantly used in what is quite a comic manner. On 22 November 2005 Attorney General Phillip Ruddock, while the media were distracted by the new IR laws, released his call for submission to amendments to the Native Title Act. He said:

> I'm not happy about Indigenous people who have been left in a situation where the prospect of gaining access or title to their land is denied because the system is incapable of delivering it as effectively as it should. (Ruddock 2005)

In his statement he offers as justification for the weakening of Mabo, the Native Title Act, the idea that Indigenous mums and dad at the moment can't buy their own land. Can you picture it? Up at Yundamu for example, wanting to take out a mortgage, buy the house, put in a barbie, add a carport? By deliberately confusing culturally diverse notions of land ownership, the Attorney General evokes some kind of suburban dream as a justification for a serious attack on Indigenous people's rights. He neglects to mention the interests of pastoralist and mining companies which are clearly driving his agenda. Does Ruddock dream of restoring *terra nullius*? We have to wonder.

But we are getting used to the rhetoric and it is beginning to sound normal, commonplace. Let me give you a creative example of how the ends-justifies-the-means sounds reasonable when dressed in contemporary language. David Hare's documentary play *Stuff Happens* (2004) is a play dealing with the political and diplomatic lead-up to the most recent Iraqi invasion. In it a journalist asks:

> How spoiled, how indulged we are to discuss the manner - oh yes, we discuss the manner, late into the night, candles guttering, our faces sweating, reddening with wine and hatred - but the act itself - the thing done - the splendid thing done - freedom given to people who were not free - this thing is ignored, preferring as we do to fight among ourselves - our own disputes, our own resentment of each other elevated way above the needs of the victims. "I trust Blair/I don't." "I like Bush/I don't." "Bush is stupid/Bush is clever." This obsession with ourselves! How Western we

> are. From what height of luxury and excess we look down to condemn the exact style in which even a little was given to those who had nothing. (Hare 2004: Act 1 Scene 5)

How convincing this argument seems. We 'look down to condemn the exact *style* in which'… *Style* seems such a harmless, fashion sort of word. And if we take the moral position of saying that the ends do not justify the means then we are perched on some moral high ground where we look down condemning these poor suffering people. Clever, isn't it. Hare as a major playwright knows the importance of, to paraphrase Hannie Rayson, *giving his best lines to the enemy*.

Yet the play does more than this - it portrays Colin Powell as a tragic figure whose endless efforts to prevent war is foiled by trickery and deception. For Powell war is the failure of diplomacy, something he is deeply committed to. Powell pleads to President Bush:

> All I can see is a group of people getting a hard-on about the idea of war, and no one giving a damn for the reality. Ten times more excitement about going in than there is about how the hell we get out!... Rumsfeld wants the State Department to toy with some dicked-up plan for post-war reconstruction. Has anyone put a figure on it? And most of all, has anyone stopped for a moment - have they stopped for one moment to consider the implications? If you go into Iraq, you're going to be the proud owner of twenty-five million people. Their lives. All their hopes and aspirations. All their problems. Has anyone begun to think about that? (Hare 2004: Act 1 Scene 11)

It is a masterful piece of theatre.

So this is our situation. We who are both writers and academics, who have at our fingertips the enormously powerful device of being able to critique and through our writing skills be heard and understood - a double strength - have also through a combination of distraction, erosion of our working conditions and ridicule of our social group been silenced. In our place the shock jocks offer a critique which is deeply pro-conservatism, fear-generating and supportive of the current conservative philosophy that the ends justify the means.

What is missing in our country is widespread informed public debate. Instead of it we are given a series of non-truths, many of which are believed - the children overboard, weapons of mass destruction, the new sedition laws based on UK laws, the navy did not witness or fail to give assistance to the SIEV X sinking - all of which have been supported by the conservative media. It is interesting to note from Greenwald's documentary *Outfoxed* (2004) that of those who watched US Fox TV 33% believed that weapons of mass destruction *had* been found in Iraqi and 67% thought that the US military *had* found links between Saddam Hussein and Al-Quaida.

In addition, for many young people the main source of news comes from comedy programs. In the US the Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press (2004) found that 21 percent of people aged 18 to 29 cited the comedy news shows, *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live* as a place where they regularly learned presidential campaign news. This trend of getting critique through non traditional sources has not gone unnoticed

either by our local satirists or by the conservatives. In Paul Gray's recent article in the *Australian* (16/11/05) he attacks the local comedy news program *The Glass House*:

> Egregious examples of the anti-Christian bias of the ABC derive not only from the broadcaster's news and current affairs department but with greater impact from lifestyle programs such as comedy show *The Glass House*. *The Glass House* has given repeated offence to Christians with humour directed at the Pope and Mother Teresa. (Gray 2005)

And Gray concludes with a call for tighter restrictions on the ABC:

> There is no case for increased taxpayer spending on drama at the ABC. Rather, there is an urgent need for tighter, tougher scrutiny of more than $700 million in taxation revenue the national broadcaster already receives. (Gray 2005)

Which is interesting since, according to a report tabled with the Senate Committee (the *Age* 31/10/05) the Howard government recently spent $55 million on their pro Industrial Reform campaign. This is over 12% of the annual ABC budget. It seems that it is legitimate to spend funds to promote but not to critique.

But even under such watchdogs, and such financial restrictions, critique does come through, often, and by necessity in unusual places. I want to site three examples. You may know of others.

The first is George Gittoes' documentary *Soundtrack to War* (Gittoes 2004a). On the face of it the film is about soldiers at war and the kinds of music they listen to. It is full of cheerios to home and is filmed in a relaxed manner. It could have been more distraction. But a visit to the film's website will illustrate the strength in this anti-war documentary which places the responsibility of war firmly in the hands of the politicians. (Gittoes 2004b)

What is interesting about Gittoes' technique is that he doesn't give us a running commentary, he lets the juxtaposition - of the soundtracks the boys are listening to against the roads in which they drive - shock us into new ideas. At once we are sympathetic to the lads - they are pawns in a much bigger game, they are innocents hiding in a heavy metal soundscape. But at the same time we are appalled at the realities of the war in Iraq.

The second example is the *Time to Go, John* phenomenon. A group of Australian documentary makers, led from a Melbourne collective, decided to contribute to the anti-Howard election campaign. There was no funding and little time. *Green Left* comments:

> *Time to Go, John* is a compilation of 15 short films documenting pivotal moments in Australia's recent history - including the Iraq war, refugee detention centres, the GST, anti-terrorism laws and reconciliation. Made by some of Australia's best filmmakers and presented by comedian Rod Quantock, the film packs many punches to encourage voters to think carefully about their voting choices at the polling booth. (*Green Left Weekly* 2004)

They collected clips from footage they had in stock, worked it, musicians wrote sound tracks, Rod Quantock donated his time as anchor man, lawyers donated their time, cinemas took off other films and rushed it into screenings all around the country. People bought the DVD (2004) or they could freely download it. The collective made so much money they set up a political film fund. They didn't achieve their objective, since Howard was re-elected, but they surprised their own industry by being able to pull the project together in such a short time and with a budget of zero.

But the film has not been lost in alternative screenings or lefty shops. Since the election the group have signed with Madman who are distributing the DVD in newsagents and prominent DVD stores. These radical filmmakers stood outside of the traditional grants, broadcasters, bottom and top line budgets and the rest, and just did it. It's rough and it's awkward and it's patchy, but it's exhilarating and thought-provoking and amazing, all at once.

The third example is Hannie Rayson's play *Two Brothers* which I have mentioned above. When first performed the play created a media frenzy as conservative critics panned it while others sang its praises. Gerard Henderson said in his review:

> The portrait of the conservative politician in *Two Brothers* is so over-stated as to turn what purports to be a drama into a parody. Not only is "Eggs" Benedict (played by Garry McDonald) involved in the deaths at sea of hundreds of women and children, he is also into hand-to-hand murder, stabbing a refugee to death at the commencement of the play.
>
> The message of *Two Brothers* is that conservatives are, virtually by breeding, evil and dishonest. The play is currently showing, after a group of Liberal MPs (including Judi Moylan, Petro Georgiou, Bruce Baird and Russell Broadbent) successfully led the campaign to release long-term detainees from mandatory detention. This cause was supported by numerous conservatives including, towards the end, high profile commentators Andrew Bolt, Miranda Devine and Alan Jones. Such complexities of political life seem beyond Rayson's (leftist) understanding.
>
> She is not alone. Similar messages are hawked around the media by such luvvies as cartoonist Michael Leunig and broadcaster/columnist Phillip Adams. (Henderson 2005)

Henderson has given us the line up. He and Andrew Bolt were prolific in their attack, I suspect because this play was not playing at a small out-of-the-way experimental theatre but in the main Melbourne theatre and part of the repertoire of the main company, the Melbourne Theatre Company. Of course, thousands flocked to see what all the fuss was about and the actors, sensing the importance of their work, imparted an electricity to the stage. When I saw the play I wept at the final moments experiencing the full Aristotelian purge of pity and fear.

So great was the frenzy that Rayson wrote a reply in which she said:

> We are living in times when debate is not encouraged. Andrew Bolt, the relentless fulminator, is screaming at me in page after page of vitriol: "Shut up. Just shut up. You are

> a witch who has no right to speak." In this climate, what is called for is bold provocation. Now is not the time for timidity in our drama.
>
> Hyland accuses me of producing a play that preaches to the converted. Nine hundred people see this play every night. They are not required to fill in a questionnaire before they are permitted entry. How does Hyland know who these people are, how they vote, what their views are? I don't. I just know that they keep coming. And I have never heard audiences be so vocal: gasping, chiding, laughing and clapping spontaneously mid-scene.

And she goes on to point out the totality of the conservative position and lack of opposition:

> Others say this is anti-Liberal Party propaganda - as if the theatre is no place for interrogating the government of the day about its fundamental values. But the greatest political indictment in the play is surely directed against the Labor Party. You set out to write a political play about one of the defining issues of our times and the Labor Party is not present. What does that say? In my play, the defender of human rights is a refugee advocate. Not a Labor politician. This recalls the joke: Who is the leader of the Opposition? Julian Burnside [a human rights lawyer]. (Rayson 2005b)

Rayson alludes to another twist in the current situation. I want to suggest to you that the old Labor and Liberal, left and right, rhetoric is no longer as helpful as we might have hoped. The manipulation of language has been so thoroughly and skilfully carried out that much of our well-worked language of critique falls on suspicious and deaf ears. People, ordinary decent people who are beginning to notice through the clouds of distraction the atrocities that are occurring in the name of our government, are asking moral not political questions and are aligning on moral not political sides. Of course, you and I realize that the two are mixed, but I want to suggest to you that we who are silenced are the minority who realizes this. For the general mums and dads wanting to make a stand it is morality that drives them, not politics. Remember the demonstrations against invading Iraq in 2003? The streets were filled but in a new way. Where once anti-war marches were collective affairs, these marches were characterized by people demonstrating under individual banners. Wit, humour and pathos were common in these banners, as were professions - *Architects Against War* or *Dog Groomers Say No War*. Here a group of artists got together for an anti-war protest in Sacramento, US in 2003. Such images are common on the web.

(*Sourced from:* http://dillingertoons.dillwood.org/inthestreets/ *Quoted for educational and research purposes only*)

The cultural phenomenon spread quickly and was so prolific that my daughter and I made our own banners and marched with hundreds of thousands - almost as many banners as people.

What is interesting to note in the photograph of the march in Melbourne 14 February 2003 (below) is the number of home-made signs. Just as my daughter had given up her Greens Triangle for her own home made-message, so too had others.

(*Sourced from:* Age *15 February 2003, Picture AAP. Quoted for educational and research purposes only*)

Protesting became personal and probably more to do with joining a group from your gym than with aligning with any political party. Globally it had become a kind of conscience vote-by-your-feet event.

[It can be added that in the more recent December 2005 mass rallies against the new IR laws people stood up not under individual banners but in their professions or trades. If you marched it was probably in an academic gown with a group of other academics. People wore their clothes of trade and marched under the banner of their profession or industry. The issues were about work and people grouped in work-related numbers. This photo shows groupings of colour as marches wore their traditional work clothes. Notice the absence of individual placards.

(*Sourced from:* https: www.cpsusurveys.org.au/photogallery/ *Quoted for educational and research purposes only)*

But it is too simplistic to claim the mass rallies as a victory for unionism. One surmises that the people who stood on the streets protesting about the IR laws will not, in the main, join their union - that is too strong a step, too

politically motivated. Instead they were sending a work-orientated message to *their* government that change was moving too fast.]

In addition, traditional conservative voices have begun to offer critique of the government. Arch conservative Archbishop George Pell, who wants to wind back the clock and re-introduce blame into the divorce laws, criticized Howard's Industrial Reform Bill. As did Pru Goward, a personal friend of Howard and his appointment as the Sex Discrimination Commissioner of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Goward did not mince words; she emphatically claimed that the current IR legislation would mean the end to employer-funded, paid maternity leave. Similarly, Malcom Fraser and other Liberals have long been critical of Howard's immigration policy and his treatment of refugees.

We have a situation where much of the opposition and critique is coming from voices in the conservative camp while the traditional opposition remains curiously conservative and too often silent.

Is there a way forward? I think there is. But I'm not sure it will come from the methods employed by the 150 IR specialist academics. It comes I think, from us, from the joint skills of being able to critique and being able to entertain. We know the art of story telling, and knowing that is a powerful device which we have at our disposal.

I have quoted a number of creative sources in this paper, places where people are working and critiquing, are recognizing the distractions and offering new ways of speaking. They have all come from performance - in this I include theatre, comedy TV and documentaries. In the 1960s, in what was called the counter-cultural revolution, much of the ways of seeing came from music, lyrics and poetry. I want to suggest, as Paris burns again, that this time it is coming from performance. Obvious examples include Hannie Rayson's *Two Brothers*, David Hare's *Stuff Happens*, George Gittoes' *Soundtrack to War*, the political documentaries *Outfoxed*, *The Corporation* and *Time to Go, John*, and the comedy program *The Glass House*. These performance works are in the public arena - available in scripts, and as DVDs in newsagents and bookshops.

The critique is also coming from seemingly non-political performances which tear up structure and replace it with something more alarming, more revealing. I'm thinking here of groups like the Forced Entertainment company, a group of clowns led by director/writer Tim Etchells based in Sheffield, whose recent Australian tour of *Bloody Mess* confused critics and left audiences laughing but curiously disturbed, as if we had been asked to see again the world around us. Etchells writes:

> Looking at *Instructions for Forgetting* and *Bloody Mess* I've been thinking about the way these smaller shapes get layed over each other, next to each other in a way that utilises their content and their tone, their rhythm and their formal qualities - creating a meta-rhythm and an "argument" that is bigger than all of them. In this work it's the live moment that really matters - the moments in which the watcher viewer has to join the dots and fill the gaps. (Etchells 2005)

But by no means all theatre occupies this space. David Williamson's recent play *Influence* (2005) has a central character, a shock jock, who is

entertaining rather than provocative, slick rather than confrontational. The play is set in the private prejudices of the central character rather than in the tragic consequences of the ends justifying the means as a philosophy of government policy-making.

Bryce Hallett in a *Sydney Morning Herald* review comments:

> *Influence* almost ends where it begins - the lone manipulator reveling in the adoration of strangers while his own life is in tatters. The merchant of "the truth" is almost unchanged except he's more smugly inflated as he reassures listeners that he'll always be back "because this country wants to hear what I've got to say". (Hallett 2005)

Williamson's play disengages with the tragic and in its flaws we can see the strength in the other works. Are these works important for our times because they explore and re-invigorate tragedy? Is that the way to snare the products of an ends-justify-the-means philosophy?

It caught my eye in a recent edition of the *7.30 Report* when Christopher Patten made use of David Hare's interpretation of Powell. I don't know for certain that Patten had seen the Hare play, but it is reasonable to assume he knows of it. He commented on Colin Powell: "I think Colin Powell is a slightly tragic figure because of the way he becomes - because of the way he was used by the Administration which he served" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2005a).

Here is an example of how a play has helped to shape a commentary. The play gave a way of seeing Powell, of making sense of a man who saw war as failure, who desperately wanted to avoid his country being involved in what is now often claimed to be an ill-thought-through invasion. This is the power of writing. It is not didacticism, it is engaging with now, with recent history and events, to construct tragedy, comedy, reflection. It works, in part, because it is connected to the current environment.

I can't give you a blueprint, I can only point this out and hope that some of you will avoid the conservative device of distraction and move your research agendas into finding language to constructively critique our world.

In the final section of the documentary *Soundtrack to War* a soldier sings a Bloodhound Gang song:

> The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire
> The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire
> The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire
> The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire
> We don't need no water let the motherfucker burn
> Burn motherfucker, burn
> The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire (Bloodhound Gang 2005)

I think the roof is on fire and it'd be a good thing to wake up and raise the alarm.

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