

Quadrant Magazine *Editorial* October 2006 - Volume L Number 10

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Fifty Years of Quadrant

THIS MONTH we celebrate the fiftieth year of publication of *Quadrant*, whose first editor was the distinguished poet and intellectual James McAuley. Its joint founder was Richard Krygier, whose experience of Central Europe under communism had convinced him of the nature of that system, and with a small number of influential supporters he first founded the Association of Cultural Freedom, an offshoot of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which saw as its mission the conduct of intellectual resistance to communism. He had before him the example of the English journal *Encounter*, at its peak one of the most interesting of the intellectual journals of that country, and a number of continental counterparts.

Since McAuley's day there has been a number of editors of *Quadrant*, most notably Peter Coleman, and the fortunes of the magazine have fluctuated—never was it ever able to exist without continual financial exigency, and only thanks to a dedicated group of hardworking volunteers and a few generous donors. While all the other journals of this stable have gone, *Quadrant* remains the sole survivor. Against all the odds and despite many vicissitudes and the occasional crisis it continues to be a significant presence in the Australian cultural debate.

The first editorial was written about the time of the Soviet repression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956. At that stage it was impossible to imagine that the Soviet empire would be defunct fifty years later, but since 1989 that is of course the case. The collapse of the Soviet Union was effectively the end of communism and it might seem—and did to many people—that not only was the Cold War with its dissemination of propaganda through the organs of the Left over, so also was the age of ideological conflict.

While there was an element of truth in this, and it is certainly the case that ideological divisions in mainstream politics are no longer of great relevance, it is far from true that the habits of thought of authoritarianism are dead, especially not amongst

intellectuals of the Left, both here and elsewhere. Nowadays it is disguised as an amorphous “progressivism” which seems more about some kind of party line emerging, no one knows how, which comes to be accepted by all those who like to think of themselves as progressive. Many aspects of this are unobjectionable. It would be wrong to fail to recognise that there has been real progress in some social attitudes, with a general acceptance of equal rights for women, a recognition that racial differences are not a reason for discrimination against some, a general tolerance for homosexuality, and so on. But these are not unambiguous; equal rights for women does not imply that women should be given preference over better qualified men, although there are often good grounds for eliminating past practices which effectively excluded women from access to some professions.

However, while the major political parties have grown further together, agreeing on many of the central issues of the day, the Left intellectuals are if anything becoming more and more remote from the mainstream of politics, and in particular alienated from the society in which they live. What the democratisation of education in the last fifty years seems to have achieved is a class of people who are socialised to a generally half-baked version of their orthodoxy, convinced of their superior virtue and right to govern, quite contemptuous of suburban dwellers, and almost openly declaring that the electorate is not really fit to decide anything about how it is governed.

They have adopted all the style of a privileged elite without having any real status as genuine elites: they presume to the style without the content. They do not trust the electorate to handle democracy responsibly; their instrument has now become the law, which can be used to achieve what they think is desirable without enlisting consent. The increasingly elaborate structure of “human rights” and international law is one of the chief means seen to achieving dominance over the democracy—dissatisfied that the electorate does not particularly like the idea of elevating homosexual unions to the status of marriage between man and woman? The answer is easy—go to the courts and argue that it is a human right or that it is a breach of anti-discrimination law to deny it. Doubtless some judge brought up in the same milieu can be found who will agree.

WHAT IS OBJECTIONABLE about the orthodoxies now fashionable amongst the educated middle class (those who can usefully be referred to as the “chattering classes”) is that they have become increasingly oppressive. Moreover with the takeover of the universities by the post-1968 generation these orthodoxies are perpetuated through education, in the indoctrination of both future school teachers and of future generations of all professionals, including the next generation of academics. The rise of “political correctness” has made dissent from the progressivist consensus more difficult, both for students and for rising professionals, and even for those in established positions. The consensus pervades the media to the extent that what outsiders often perceive as bias is seen by insiders as the natural views of good thinking people from which no one can properly dissent. There is even a kind of neo-McCarthyism which encourages the pursuit and the abuse, or ridicule, of any who question the consensus.

Consider a controversy in which *Quadrant* has played an important role over the last few years. Keith Windschuttle published a critique of the writings of a number of historians who had claimed that the European settlement of Australia had involved extensive massacres of Aborigines. If true, this would be horrifying enough. But he was able to establish that a good deal of this

material was based on faulty premises. Instead of his contribution being coolly considered by historians, there has been a heated reaction, with committees of offended academics producing numerous publications designed to discredit him, and this has been accompanied by much abuse and denigration of both Windschuttle and *Quadrant*.

It is clear that what is involved is not the defence of historical accuracy and integrity but of a worldview which holds that the history of Australia is somehow that of an appalling mistake or crime. It is now politically incorrect to challenge any of the conclusions of the historians who were originally criticised, even though there have been some grudging concessions that perhaps they might have made some minor errors.

Moreover, academics who write for *Quadrant* are likely to be subjected to pressures from their peers; many as a result do not dare to. A similar kind of consensus is found in many areas of public debate, especially in matters related to politics and international relations, as well as the more recondite areas of the humanities such as “cultural studies”. There has been some debate recently about how this kind of thing has biased the study of terrorism in the universities. Equally, it has until recently been virtually impossible to question many aspects of policy with regard to Aborigines, despite the growing evidence that the post-1968 consensus has done immense harm to them, both in terms of their health and expectations and in terms of the everyday life of especially remote settlements with all kinds of abuses flourishing. It now seems pretty clear that on many indicators Aborigines are worse off than they were nearly forty years ago.

The universities seem to be functioning worse, too. *Quadrant* has always paid particular attention to the universities, as might be expected from an intellectual journal. This is because many of our contributors and readers are either university-educated or intellectually inclined. But it is clear that the universities are not functioning well. This is not a result of inadequate funding, though there is always a case for more money to be spent on teaching and research—if it can be usefully applied. But the management of universities is coming increasingly into question, political correctness has entered into their administration and policies, and intolerance by administrations of the independence of comment by the members of universities has become greater. It is now a threat to tenure in academic positions to criticise university administrations. Sometimes this is blamed simply on government because inadequate funding has forced them to pay greater attention to fund-raising from outside sources and any criticism is considered to impact unfavourably on the reputation, and hence fund-raising possibilities, of the universities.

This is however hardly sufficient to account for the growth of top-heavy bureaucracies which, instead of taking on the burden of administration, devolve it more and more onto the people who are employed for teaching and research. A large part of the problem is the highly centralised system of administration and funding, which was wished onto the universities by the extension of central control, as distinct from funding. Whereas there is a clear need for greater diversity of teaching and research institutions, more and more uniformity has been imposed.

But of course the problems of intellectual life and academic institutions are not a matter for Australia alone. The American universities, though in some cases richer and certainly a part of a more complex and diverse system, and not chiefly dependent on central government funding, are experiencing similar difficulties owing to the rise of political correctness and the progressive

consensus. Thus the President of Harvard, Lawrence Summers, was driven out not so long ago because of his earnest attempts to address the issue of politically correct racism (in the guise, of course, of anti-racism) and, finally, his temerity in making sensible comments on the relative absence of women in the higher levels of research and scientific endeavour. He merely suggested that one hypothesis which should be considered was that men and women are different. He was howled down for daring to say such a thing. That the intolerance of non-conformity to the tenets of political correctness could be effective in one of the institutions of greatest intellectual prestige in the world is alarming.

The defenders of political correctness are fond of saying that really it is no more than a matter of polite and civilised discourse. If that were all, there would be no great problem. But of course it is much more—it is a form of censorship not by state or church authority but by bullying. Few amongst us would have any problems in refraining from racist or sexist abuse—but discussion of real problems and issues is not such a thing. Any more than discussion of the issues raised by militant Islam for modern society; and of course terrorism is one aspect of this. Here is yet another inversion of earlier modes of discourse. These days it seems acceptable in the media and amongst the progressivists to denigrate Christianity, in general or in specific forms. Thus we see constant reference to the “Christian Right”. But such specific reference to any aspect of Muslim life would be reproved as evidence of “stereotyping”—another of the sins against political correctness. We all hope that Muslims of all kinds in Australia will integrate, as past influxes of religious minorities have done. It remains foolish to forbid discussion of any specific issues.

IN SAYING ALL THIS we are really reaffirming *Quadrant*'s commitment to liberal democracy and genuine tolerance of debate and dissent. It is strange that fifty years after the foundation of *Quadrant* and seventeen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union that this should need saying. But such is the extraordinary state of political and cultural debate in Australia, and in much elsewhere of the nominally democratic world, that these values need reaffirming and defending. When the leaders of our major political parties express the need to affirm “Australian values” —which are no more and no less than the values of liberal democracy—they are criticised and attacked by the progressivists, as if they too did not live and die by these values which they are not prepared to defend.

This is our mission: to defend the great tradition of free and open debate, to make possible dissent, while at the same time insisting on both civilised discourse and rational argument. This mission is not the same as at *Quadrant*'s founding, but it is not dissimilar. For while the communist dictatorship is no more, the love of anti-democratic dictators still survives among many intellectuals, as does their determination to impose their own strange beliefs on the population as a whole.

In his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* the great French writer Albert Camus concluded that the fate of humanity in its struggle for what is most worthwhile in life was similar to that of Sisyphus, who was condemned forever to roll a large boulder up a mountain, only to see it crash back downwards towards the depths before he could get to the top. Nevertheless he concluded that this determination for betterment and improvement was the most noble of humanity's motives in everyday life, and it was this activity itself which made life worth living. With or without religion, it is the eternal struggle of people to make the world a better place, for themselves and others, but without coercion.

“I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain,” he wrote. “One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well ... The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill men’s hearts. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

It has to be remembered that at the time *Quadrant* began Camus was generally vilified amongst the French Left, especially for his insistence on drawing attention to the existence of the Stalinist gulags. The Left there and here preferred to draw a curtain over such matters, and believed that all was justified in the pursuit of a Utopia, no matter how many people died or were made miserable en route.

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