

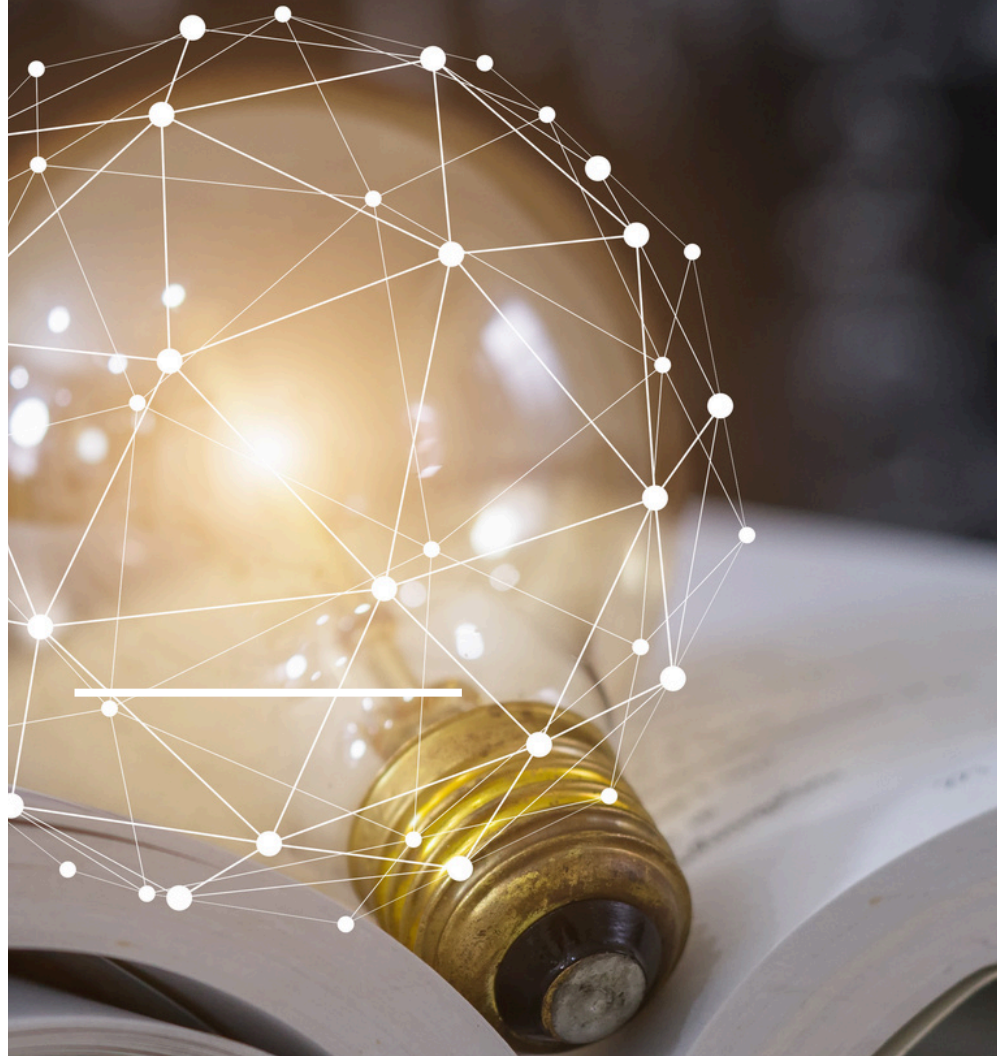


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Ideas, Inventions and
Influencers -
Shaping the Public
Discourse in Australia

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AM BA(Hons) MA FRNS JP



FOREWORD

Welcome to the inaugural edition of the WEA Sydney Quarterly Journal.

This publication marks an important moment for our community. Since 1913, WEA Sydney has been a place where ideas are explored, challenged, and shared in the spirit of lifelong learning. With this journal, we renew that tradition, offering a space for thoughtful reflection and the exchange of perspectives that shape our society.

We are proud to open this edition with the Inaugural Keith Suter Memorial Lecture, delivered by Christopher Puplick. This lecture honours the legacy of Dr Keith Suter, whose life's work was grounded in the belief that ideas matter and that informed public discourse is essential to a healthy democracy.

The themes explored in this lecture are expansive, provocative, and, at times, deliberately challenging. Readers may not agree with every argument or conclusion presented. Indeed, we expect that some perspectives will prompt critical reflection or even disagreement. This is not only welcomed, but essential.

WEA Sydney exists to foster exactly this kind of engagement. The strength of a learning community lies not in uniformity of thought, but in the willingness to engage with complexity, to test ideas, and to remain open to perspectives different from our own. It is through this respectful exchange that understanding deepens and new possibilities emerge.

In publishing this lecture, we invite you to read with curiosity, to question with purpose, and to participate in the ongoing conversation about the ideas that shape our collective future.

We thank you for being part of the WEA Sydney community and for contributing to a tradition that continues to value learning, dialogue, and the power of big ideas.

Tiffany Roos
Executive Director
WEA Sydney

Ideas, Inventions and Influencers: Shaping the Public Discourse in Australia by Christopher Puplick

It is a singular honour and privilege to be invited to give this inaugural lecture in memory of Dr Keith Suter, a remarkable Australian and a man of profound convictions and ideas.

It is even more of an honour to be doing so in the presence of his life partner Jane Phelan and so many of his personal friends.

I had the pleasure of meeting Keith once or twice, but I have read his books and listened to many of his interviews and podcasts and feel great affinity with his life's work and deep convictions. Like Keith, I was born in the same place London, in the same year, 1948 and like him into a family of modest means who migrated to Australia to make a better life and where we both made our careers and contributions and shared our hopes and horizons.

The thesis I want to advance tonight may be stated briefly. I believe that the dramatic decline in the quality of public debate in Australia poses, if I may use an increasingly fashionable adjective, an existential threat to our democracy, society, security, and way of life.

This is a threat that would have alarmed Keith who understood the power of ideas in public discourse and who shared his insights with everyone from Barack Obama to the regular viewers of

breakfast television.

In the *Sydney Morning Herald*¹ obituary his friend Michael Kirby and partner Jane Phelan wrote:

“He made Australians who were not particularly religious more informed and resilient to the constant changes of modern life. He “rolled up his sleeves when he saw a problem, devoting great energy to finding solutions, and offering ideas to solve problems.”

I want to try and explain the reasons for this dangerous narrowing of public debate, in what I shall call, with reference to the so-called birthplace of democracy, Athens, the agora, the marketplace of ideas. I shall try to explain what I fear are the potential consequences and then be vainglorious enough to try to suggest some possible solutions.

There is an aphorism attributed to Victor Hugo to the effect that nothing can withstand the force of an idea whose time has come. What Hugo actually wrote was:

“A stand can be made against invasion by an army; no stand can be made against invasion by an idea.”²

In similar vein, Lord Jonathan Sacks (onetime Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom) declared:

“The choice with which humankind is faced is between the idea of power and the power of idea.”³

To my way of thinking there are two principal categories of ideas which I shall call original and osmotic.

Original ideas are those which arise at the margin and migrate to the mainstream under the aegis of personality and power.

Osmotic ideas are those which arise not from a single original thought but rather from a combination of ideas swirling around, like a soup to which a final master-chef adds an ingredient which gives it its lasting distinctive flavour.

Original ideas are by definition contrarian – they challenge the paradigms of both past and present, advocating a future which bears little or no resemblance to either.

Original ideas arise from the margins: a bleak execution site outside Jerusalem; a dark cave near Mecca; a banyan tree on a riverbank; a church door in Wittenberg; a Lincolnshire orchard where apples fall; the cramped cabin of HMS Beagle; the silent reading room of the British Museum; the dreary Patent Office in Bern or even a smelly beerhall in Munich.

Australia, like all late-developing

European colonies has found little or no space for original ideas in a philosophical sense. In Australia, the principal purpose of an idea has generally - not been to reshape society, but rather to help us manage the immediate and often physical challenges which confront us in terms of living in a harsh and unforgiving environment.

This is not to say that we are people or a nation without ideas – I will return to this, but rather, to quote Oakeshott:

“to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.”⁴

Take for example some of our great earliest political ideas - all osmotic: Henry Parkes *Tenterfield Oration* (1889) which grew out of our increasing sense of Australian national identity; Alfred Deakin's *Australian Settlement*⁵ which grew out of our emerging economic independence; or the way in which we spiced up the soup of democracy with the addition of female suffrage, secret balloting and compulsory voting.

Instead, what has happened is that our initial ideas have been turned into *inventions*. We are a remarkably inventive nation.

Type “Australian inventions” into your favourite search engine and you will find hundreds of pages and examples. From the stump-jump plough and the box kite to the cochlear implant the range might take you through the CSIRO’s invention of wi-fi technology, gene shears, the mass production of penicillin, the cervical cancer vaccine and ultrasound and IVF technology, via the detours of the feature film, polymer banknotes, the precursor of Google maps, the winged keel, bushmaster assault vehicles, refrigeration technology and even the totaliser and the ubiquitous Ute.

Each of these starts with an idea designed to enhance the way we live but the emphasis is upon the physical not the metaphysical upon the practical not the philosophical. In August 2023, the *Weekend Australian* magazine ran a feature entitled “50 Australian inventions changing the world”. It was a great list but not a philosophical idea was featured.⁶

Perhaps nothing so pellucidly exemplifies the Australian attitude towards how we live and what we value, as the words of that great thinker Barnaby Joyce that when faced with challenges, what Australians want is “*the fire brigade not philosophers.*”⁷

It is a matter of amazement that while here at home we lionise the practical achievers, the Australian intellectuals who have had most real influence throughout western society do so from overseas - where they are lionised.

As I shall note later, it is not that Australia is without great intellectuals, it is just that those great intellectuals are without Australia.

I should pause to define what I mean, at least for tonight’s purposes as an “intellectual”. To me there are three elements. First, the person must engage in critical thinking with a level of research and reflection that goes beyond the immediate situation or problem deep into the bowels of our society; secondly they must address issues of the real world and finally they must be prepared to argue their case for particular solutions to our normative problems.

I do not agree with David Carter who asserts that “*there is something fantastic, even grotesque, about the role public intellectuals accord themselves as the nation’s saviours*” and that it is only “*their elevated style and tone of discourse*” that separates them from, say, ‘media personalities’.⁸

Rather, I’m with Gramsci:

“The mode of being the new intellectual can no longer consist of eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, as ‘permanent persuader’, not just simple orator.”⁹

IN HOC SIGNO VINCES

Before I get to the heavy, and I hope not too boring stuff, let me indulge in a flippant aside.

If you were to ask people to give you some sort of familiar phrase which helped describe Australian history or society, what might be the response?

I suggest you might get:

- the ANZAC spirit - mateship
- the cultural cringe
- the lucky country
- the tyranny of distance, or
- the great silence.

They are all good. They are all true. They are all so dated.

The ANZAC spirit (1915); the cultural cringe (A A Phillips, 1950); the lucky country (Donald Horne, 1964); the tyranny of distance (Geoffrey Blainey, 1966); the great silence (W E Stanner, 1968).

Really? Nothing in the last almost sixty years, no single pithy thought that might characterise our Australia.

A LAND OF BIG IDEAS¹⁰

I might be drawing a long bow when I assert that, albeit indirectly, modern Australia (that is post-1788) arose from an idea, or rather a set of ideas. Almost exactly 250 years ago in the Pennsylvania State House (now Independence Hall) delegates to the Second Continental Congress adopted a *Declaration of Independence*. That document, setting out a series of propositions, ideas, stated boldly:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it..."

There was nothing strikingly original in this Declaration (other perhaps than the unique reference to happiness) – all its principles derived from the intellectual ferment of the works of, Lilburne, Winstanley, Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Thomas Paine, and others and were shaped by the rhetoric of that exceptional intellectual Thomas Jefferson.

America was above all, an idea and the success of that idea necessitated the British government's decision to settle a group of people - carefully or carelessly selected by the best British judges - on the other side of the world in Botany Bay. Hence, without the success of the American idea, no colony of New South Wales, no Commonwealth of Australia.

Once again we can blame it all on the Americans.

David Kemp in his monumental five-volume study of Australian history has demonstrated how various ideas derived from intellectual sources including Locke, Mill, Montesquieu, Mary Wollstonecraft, de Tocqueville, Bentham, Burke, Wilberforce and others found their way via an emergent Australian intellectual class, to shape Australia.¹¹

These local intellectuals, Wentworth, Wardell, Parkes, Higginbotham, Syme, Pearson, Smith Hall, Haddon, Bruce Smith, and others were able to persuade the political elite – the colonial Governors and their Councils, to advance what Kemp calls the foundational “liberal agenda” of colonial Australia.

Terry Irving in his study of the democratic movement in NSW prior to 1856, *The Southern Tree of Liberty*¹² has also shown how local democratic impulses in the colony derived from a keen local appreciation of the intellectual underpinnings of the Enlightenment.

If you read the *Convention Debates* you will be struck by the constant references to basic intellectual propositions about the nature of government, sovereignty, responsibility, and democracy which were shaping the development of our Federation. You will equally be in awe of the sheer intellectual power of the debates, and the political giants who were participating.

It was the combination of inventions necessary to secure basic survival,

together with ideas to shape our polity that made the Commonwealth possible.

The advent of the Twentieth Century then presented Australia with a series of existential challenges which resulted in the relative retreat of intellectual debate. The First World War, the Great Depression and the Second World War preoccupied the nation for the first half of that century, but after 1945 big ideas began to emerge again.

These big ideas were in practice transformative. Each of them changed the nation profoundly and after each of them there was rarely a chance to go back.

Chifley and Caldwell had a big idea – it was to populate the continent through the mass post-war migration scheme. Menzies had big ideas – to establish our university sector, some of our cultural institutions and concept of houses – spiritual and physical as underpinning society. Harold Holt had big ideas – to embrace Asia, end the White Australia Policy and pass the 1967 referendum. John Gorton had a big idea, to remake federalism to fit the modern era.

We may pass over William McMahon – most people did.

Gough Whitlam had some big ideas such as free university tuition and opening up to China, although only one sensible economic idea, to buy Blue Poles, a painting that some claimed changed a nation¹³. Malcolm Fraser had big ideas – multiculturalism, FOI laws and the passage of the Land Rights Act. The Hawke/Keating big ideas floated the dollar, opened the

economy, and abolished most restrictive financial controls, Medicare.

And then the big ideas ran out. They just stopped.

Somehow we let the light on the hill fade into relaxed and comfortable.

It should not be up to the politicians to be the sole source of big ideas, but the last Big Idea I could find from non-political sources was Nugget Coombs' determination in 1954 to start remaking Australia's cultural environment with the establishment of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust.

This is not to say that there were not important policy initiatives, for example the introduction of the GST, the NDIS or making limited progress on legal and economic equality for women, but I would assert that nothing in the last 30 years has really fundamentally changed Australia. If anything, our nation has become in many ways less equal, less united, less forward looking, less tolerant and less self-confident.

Others may claim that the goal of Indigenous reconciliation is a big idea that should be recognised as such and I will return to that exact consideration.

Lest you think that I believe that big ideas are automatically good or synonymous with progress, let me eschew that. There are some big ideas that are successful but just plain awful – Brexit, Make America Great Again and John Dawkins' destruction of our wonderful TAFE sector under the rubric

of “amalgamation”. I won't mention AUKUS.

There are still some big ideas around, and State Leaders like Berejiklian and Malinauskas who articulate and deliver, find themselves rewarded.

I think that so much of what ails us as a nation today results from our having run out of big ideas, and while we may blame the political class for that, the intellectual class must shoulder its equal burden of responsibility.

THE WITHDRAWAL FROM THE AGORA

One of the most striking features of recent Australian intellectual life has been the emptying out of the agora. It is not that participants have been expelled or (as the Athenians would have done), ostracised from that marketplace of ideas but rather that so many have actually withdrawn themselves, often with their tail between their legs.

The Church has gone. In his day the Reverend Sir Alan Walker, originally a Methodist evangelist but later, like Keith, a key figure of the Uniting Church, was prominent in many areas of public policy and debate. Where now are the leaders of our Churches in the agora?¹⁴ Their voices are now largely silent, a process which I trace back to 1968 with the Vatican's publication of *Humanae Vitae*¹⁵ which alienated so many believers, and has continued ever since as the Church was seen to manifestly fail its own standards, beset by scandals, sexual abuse claims, internal schisms, collapse of public respect and trust and even with the unjust imprisonment of a Cardinal and the resignation of an Archbishop Governor-General.

The Universities are gone. Public respect and political support for them has been squandered in the morass of their abandoning intellectual standards in the pursuit of paid overseas enrolments, the awarding of degrees to students who cannot speak English, their failures to deal with harassment on campus, the subversion of measurable standards by artificial intelligence (AI) and the bloated salaries of Vice-Chancellors.¹⁶

No longer is their primary pursuit excellence, it is rather manipulating “*a bunch of metrics to be gamed*”¹⁷ - with the consequent loss of their social licence. Where now are the voices of John Anderson, Frank Knopfmacher, Manning Clark, Keith Hancock or Raimond Gaita? The public intellectuals who do participate in the debate now do so largely outside the ivy cloisters or red bricks of the university.

Our icons are gone. Once upon a time a generation looked to the Royal Family – still, I regret to say, our Royal Family – to set standards. Standards of service, of integrity, of family virtues, of stoic leadership. All gone, abandoned in a maelstrom of marital infidelity, grasping for money and the stygian depths of paedophile association.

In 1997 John Howard waxed lyrical about Sir Donald Bradman: “*the greatest living Australian who has straddled the generations and the hearts and minds of generations of Australians like no other person in the history of this nation has been able to do*”.¹⁸

Putting aside the truth about Bradman’s shady business practices¹⁹ and his nasty anti-Catholic sectarianism²⁰, we can truly say that any respect for our sporting leaders got sandpapered into oblivion on the green pitch of Newlands in 2018.

Our artists are gone. The leaders of our cultural organisations, our festivals and our opportunities for enjoyment and entertainment have been reduced increasingly to be pensioners of the state less concerned with excellence than ticking the necessary politically-determined boxes to secure their next meagre grant; less concerned with curating exhibitions which help us explain, and more focussed on pursuing their ideological obsessions and virtue signalling; less preoccupied with creation and more with cancellation. They no longer give us the tools to help us understand, rather they seek to expiate their own sense of self-loathing, inadequacy, and guilt by transferring it to their audiences.²¹

The media are gone. Of course there are plenty of media around, we shall examine some of them later, but in terms of influencing the public debate, they matter less and less. Gone are the days when David Syme at *The Age* could effectively shape the politics of Victoria²², or J F Archibald used *The Bulletin* to champion the “white Australia policy”, or Rupert Murdoch intimidate at will.²³ A recent study by the Australia Institute describes the traditional legacy media as

“yesterday’s kingmakers, today’s spectators”²⁴ whose “opinions and endorsements now have little influence over how Australians actually vote”.

I continue to be bemused by the sheer hutzpah of *The Australian* in daring to place on its masthead the slogan “Welcome to the contest of ideas” while running an exclusive and excluding ceaseless campaign denouncing the science of climate change, the value of renewables and running a line in Christian exceptionalism which would not be out of place on the front page of *L’osservatore Romano*. Try contesting those in its pages!

The agora is not entirely vacant. Since the establishment of the Institute of Public Affairs in 1943 we have had a significant growth of “think tanks”. Organisations such as the Lowy Institute (2003), the Australia Institute (1994), the Centre for Independent Studies (1976) and the Grattan Institute (2008) have contributed to the public debate to a greater or lesser extent, but the problem is that their general political and philosophical stance is predictable and often pedestrian. The Menzies Research Centre, the Chifley Research Centre or the McKell Institute tell you upfront in their names what to expect. None has however succeeded in capturing the commanding heights of public policy in the way in which the Heritage Foundation (founded 1973) in the United States, has via *Project 2025* – originally an intellectual project, now actualised, for which we are all paying.

I might mention that there have always been other outlets for exposing ideas for public discussion, such as through our literary magazines and journals. They have not done well in recent years. *Southerly*, *Splinter*, *Sovereign Texts*, *Overland*, the *Griffith Review* and even the revived *Meanjin* struggle for audiences. *Quadrant* and *The Spectator* continue their never-ending crusade against modernity. None of them however has any influence on public policy.

There has not been a *Boyer Lecture* since Sir Zelman Cowen’s *The Private Man* in 1969 that has precipitated a change in anything.

Credit where credit is due, to that most maligned of actors, the politician. Over many years now our politicians have made great efforts to shape the public debate through the presentation of thoughtful speeches and engagement in public discourse. Alfred Deakin was, I think, the first to embark on such a venture both in his speeches and his books²⁵, followed closely by Sir Robert Menzies in his foundational and vastly influential *Forgotten People*²⁶ talks. Some of these speeches have achieved iconic status: Paul Keating’s Redfern Address (December 1992); John Howard’s Gallipoli Address (April 2000) and Julia Gillard’s “Misogyny” speech (October 2012). In more recent times I would cite Gladys Berejiklian’s *Menzies Research Centre* address in 2019, Senator James Patterson’s *Hughes Oration 2025*, Julian Hill’s recent *McKell Lecture* (February 2026) and Andrew Leigh’s *Ted Evans*

Address last week dealing with AI. They are all thoughtful and important contributions to the public debate but just as they are seeking to promote an idea they all too often seek to denigrate and devalue the contributions of their political opponents, and as such they lose the full impact which a thoughtful non-partisan contribution might have commanded.

Not without mustard²⁷

Australian intellectuals as a class do display some singular characteristics. I do not necessarily go so far as Greg Melleuish who gives his book *Australian Intellectuals* the subtitle, "Their strange history and pathological tendencies."²⁸ For Melleuish our intellectual class is possessed of the highest degree of both self-loathing and self-righteousness. I take issue with this, although I do concede that pride in post-settlement Australia, its history and its national character is largely absent in their works. In my lifetime there have been at least four outstanding Australian intellectuals who have left their mark on the entire western world.

I start with the late Robert Hughes (1938-2012) whose television series *The Shock of the New* (1980) brought to the fore a new way of reading and understanding the art and culture of a new century. His famous tome, *The Fatal Shore* (1986), a book whose fundamental premise I reject, nevertheless paved the way for an ongoing discussion about our nation's history, both pre- and post-1788; a discussion most recently joined by Tony Abbott's *Australia: A History* which has already sold over 65,000 copies.

Secondly, Geoffrey Robertson (b 1946)

and outstanding defender of free speech and Julian Assange, scourge of the Vatican for its cover-up of sex abuse,²⁹ founder of the world's most prestigious human rights chambers (Dougherty Street), who in his address to the National Press Club in 2008 identified British intellectuals as the progenitors of Indigenous dispossession in Australia stating:

"Much as white Australians may castigate themselves today for their deluded assimilation efforts, it is necessary, as with every genocide, to sheet home responsibility to the intellectual authors of the policy. These were the Fabian socialist heroes who believed eugenics principles could be applied to produce a "superior" society."³⁰

Thirdly, Germaine Greer (b 1939), a key figure in the development of "second wave" feminism whose pioneering work, *The Female Eunuch* (1970), along with the subsequent *Sex and Destiny* (1984) has profoundly shaped the intellectual horizons of sex and gender studies. Greer is of course also a significant Shakespearean scholar³¹ as well as a notorious contrarian. *The Female Eunuch* ends with a challenge:

"Privileged women will pluck at your sleeve and seek to enlist you in the 'fight' for reforms, but reforms are retrogressive. The old process must be broken, not made new. Bitter women will call you to rebellion, but you have too much to do. What will you do?"

Apparently Greer does not expect much from Australian women having, in 2004, dismissed the land of her birth as “a sports-obsessed suburban wasteland devoid of cerebral stimulation” where, “If your ambition is to live on Ramsay Street, where nobody has even been heard to discuss a book or a movie, let alone an international event, then Australia may be the place for you.”

Finally, I come to the one Australian intellectual whose work has been impactful around the world and seriously moved the dial on many vital issues. I refer to Peter Singer (b 1946) the outstanding philosopher and bioethicist. His first major book, *Animal Liberation* (1975) rewrote the script in terms of how humane societies approach issues of animal rights and welfare. Laws and practices were changed by this book. Later work, especially *Practical Ethics* (1979) took some of his original concepts into the world of human relationships even positing that the traditional notion of the sanctity of life ought to be discarded as outdated, unscientific, and irrelevant to understanding problems in contemporary bioethics.³² The contrarian’s contrarian.

Each of these intellectuals chose to spend their careers primarily overseas, limiting their contacts with the land of their birth – a familiar pattern and not one that serves us well.

FILLING THE VACUUM

Nature, as we know, abhors a vacuum and so the space left in our agora must be filled. Enter the influencer.

These are people who, either by their behaviour, or by their force of argument provoke a listener or follower to alter either their own behaviour or opinion to

conform with that of the influencer. I have seen it argued that former American First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962) was the “original media influencer.”³³ While she achieved celebrity in her role as First Lady, she built a global personal brand as a wise, informative, trustworthy woman, informed and empathetic, with an acute understanding of how power worked. Her messages resonated.

I think that the first real influencer was Oscar Wilde. Wilde did not set out to be an influencer, but he was, as an aesthete to be emulated in his lifetime and as a martyr and role-model afterwards. Wilde just wanted to be Wilde, but then so did a lot of other people.³⁴

I am reminded that the importance of influencers has long been recognised, even extending to people of a non-philosophical bent. In his magnum opus, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Keynes wrote:

“The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the whole world is ruled by little else.

Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.”

In Australia, today's influencers are to be found not in the physical world of the university, under the klieg lights of the traditional television studio or the pages of the legacy media. Unlike the United States where the influencers peddle their wares largely on cable network television, ours are primarily in the netherworld of the online.

Sure, you can be bored to death by, yet another "revised" ABC television discussion format or amused to death by watching something after dark, where the lights of intelligence are turned off.

But if you want to find our influencers, you must head to the keyboard. The origins of online influencing can be traced back to the emergence of digital blogs and platforms in the early 2000s. Nevertheless, recent studies demonstrate that Instagram, an application with more than one billion users, harbors the majority of the influencer demographic.

These influencers represent an emergent independent third-party endorser or promoter who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media. They come in many guises:

- Celebrities: Artists, athletes, pop culture stars and "personalities"
- Industry experts and thought leaders
- Micro-influencers: Individuals with impact on social media and usually nowhere else
- Bloggers and content creators.

They can be benign or monstrously malign.

Vile misogynists like Andrew Tate and Tommy Robinson (with 8 million followers) poison the minds of young men in their "manosphere" encouraging and legitimising violence against women³⁵ and gay people.³⁶

Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) uses social media in a way that, in 2017 Facebook estimated that as many as 126 million of its users had seen content from Russian disinformation campaigns on its platform. Twitter stated that it had found 36,000 Russian bots spreading tweets related to the 2016 United States elections.

Unmediated sites which peddle images of "ideal" bodies share responsibility for the tragedies of young women, and increasing numbers of young men, becoming so distressed about their body images that they develop eating disorders, suffer mental health problems and even resort to suicide.

The surviving Bondi shooter, who I decline to recognise with a name, is alleged to have been "radicalised" to his murderous behaviour by watching online videos, sermons and podcasts encouraging his wickedness. The malign forces of Islamic terrorism are alert to the seductive power of this means of communication and exploit it to the fullest.

I do not want to dwell further in this malign cesspit but rather turn to try and identify who are the "influencers" having some level of legitimate influence.

The key to understanding social media is to appreciate that it is all about the use and allocation of time. Time is precious and the more things – clicks – you can fit into any period of time – the better. The platform is not called Instagram for nothing, and “tweets” are by definition short.

In terms of social media followers, no politician or political commentator in the world comes within the proverbial bull’s roar of the top of the list.

In Australia, our Prime Minister is on Instagram, X (Twitter) and Facebook with 3 to 4 million followers. Angus Taylor’s haul is about 250,000.

By contrast Kylie Minogue has over 5 million; Daniel Ricciardo 8 million, Hugh Jackman 35 million, Cate Blanchett 40 million and at the top of our local list is Chris Hemsworth with just under 60 million.

Millions follow Donald Trump – some out of fear, some out of necessity and some out of a warped sense of humour. There are about 120 million of them. Taylor Swift has 550 million but even she cannot compete with the super-star of all, with well over 900 million and on the way to a billion is Cristiano Ronaldo – and for those of you who do not know - (because you live on another planet) - he plays football.

Let me explore the political world of our Australian social media.

In terms of followers our top influencers are Abbie Chatfield (podcaster, Greens supporter), Konrad Benjamin who is better known as 'Punter’s Politics' (podcaster, unaligned, and whose

catchphrase is 'policy over party'), Hannah Ferguson (Cheek Media co-founder, Greens member / Teals supporter), Freya Leach (policy maker at the Liberal-affiliated Menzies Research Centre), Joel Jammal (Turning Point Australia founder, conservative libertarian) and Trisha Jha (researcher at the Centre of Independent Studies, centre-right commentator, not a content creator). They command about a million followers on Instagram and about 800,000 on TikTok.

Jordan Shanks-Markovina (known online as friendlyjordies), is a journalist, political commentator and stand-up comedian. His content often discusses contemporary Australian cultural and political issues, involving self-described "lowbrow humour". His YouTube channel, created in February 2013, has over one million subscribers. Albanese appears in his podcasts.

Who they reach is important. Research from the University of Canberra has shown young audiences receive most of their news from social media, and video content is increasingly popular for this demographic. YouTube has also become a powerhouse for political content, and upstart digital outlets such as The Daily Aus on Instagram have cemented themselves as legitimate news sources. The Canberra research indicates that, of young voters:

- One in four say social media is their main source of news, overtaking online news websites.
- Instagram (40%) and TikTok (36%) are the top two platforms
- Only 24% of Australians have received news literacy education.
- 29% are interested in personalised AI news summaries.

Contrast this with listeners to the toxic-swamp of talkback radio. Two to three million people listen to talkback radio on a daily basis. Some 45% to 55% of them are aged over 55 while those under 25 constitute less than 5%. Most have fixed political opinions and listen not for enlightenment but for validation.

It may be argued that what all this represents is some sort of “democratisation” of the public discourse in which every voice has a chance to be heard and every voice carries equal weight.

Perhaps this is a good thing.

All of us here would be familiar with Orwell’s *1984* where Winston Smith’s job was to alter media records on the basis that he who controls the present controls the past and he who controls the past controls the future.

In 1964 Marshall McLuhan wrote *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* in which he asserted that:

“...the medium is the message because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”³⁷

In 1969, Jim Morrison, legendary singer-songwriter for The Doors told an interviewer, “*whoever controls the media, controls the mind.*”

We know from our observation of current American politics that President Trump has established his foundations in the

MAGA movement through the mediums of Fox News, other right-wing cable networks and influential friendly podcasters like Joe Rogan and Theo Von. Once upon a time this included Tucker Carlson. They actually carry some weight in terms of influencing American voters, in particular encouraging them to turn out and vote.

There are a whole host of likeminded Australian wannabees lurking on Sky After Dark; fading talkbacks and, we are told that Karl Stefanovic is heading in the Joe Rogan direction, because he asserts that “*the media is becoming beige*” and needs a bit of right-wing colour.³⁸

Fortunately, the genius of Australia’s compulsory voting system serves as an antidote to most of this extremist nonsense, although we need to interrogate what the rise in the vote for One Nation might tell us about this.

Well, if control of the mind, and with it a consequential action, is to lie increasingly in the world of influencers, where are the intellectual participants in this particular corner of the agora?

I do not deny that there are significant political podcasts here, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere that actually provide platforms for robust political commentary and debate, but very few of them provide education. Few are there just to present the unvarnished facts – the news and just the news - to the extent that that is even possible – every reporter wants to be a commentator, every journalist a pundit and every presenter a player.

Absent from the debate are our so-called intellectual leaders. We have no Kenneth Clark helping us understand *Civilisation*, no Jacob Bronowski walking us through *The Ascent of Man* or no world-renowned David Attenborough sensitising us to the need to care for our *Fragile/Blue/Green (etc) Planet*. There is no replacement for Keith Suter.

At least here in the WEA family we have enlightened souls like Sandy Killick and Judith King who have successfully pushed for the establishment in Canberra of an All-Party “Parliamentary Friends of Democracy” group (backed by the Governor-General) with the aim of injecting some serious education about democracy and parliamentary government into the public debate. We are fortunate to have them, but this is the sort of initiative that our public intellectuals should have been involved in long before now.

A final observation. Our ban on under 16-year-olds accessing social media is bound to fail. Why we enact laws which invite young people to start their almost adult life by challenging them to practice how to get around the law and subvert it, just amazes me. “Youngsters have a right to share in new technologies. Adults must seek to make their time online as safe and rewarding as possible.”³⁹

A CALL TO ARMS

In his book *A New International Order* Keith Suter wrote: “*nobody can win alone, but we could all lose together.*”⁴⁰

That is absolutely true and what it

reminds us, is that each of us bears some responsibility for the future shape of our nation.

There are many problems to confront. I shall identify just three of them.

However, before addressing the problems, I must say something about the tools central to the solutions.

I start with the word “truth”. The Gospel of St John promises us “*You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*” (8:32). On the other hand, the same Gospel records that when Christ was before Pilate, the Procurator said, “*What is truth? And when he had said this he went out again....*” (18:38).

Humans have always argued over what are “facts”. They were doing so back in 1379 when Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his poem *The House of Fame*.⁴¹

America’s second President, John Adams said: “*Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.*”

Daniel Patrick Moynihan asserted: “*You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts.*”⁴²

Oprah Winfrey was and is still a major influencer who, in the 1990’s frequently invited her guests to “*speak your truth*” or “*live your truth*” as if that truth were somehow different from any other “truth” – not experience – but truth.

Then of course enter the world of Donald Trump. On January 22, 2017, when she defended the White House Press Secretary's false statement about the attendance numbers at Trump's first inauguration, his spokesperson Kellyanne Conway stated that he was giving "*alternative facts*".

The acceptance in any form of public discourse that there are "alternative facts" or just "my facts" is something that must be rejected. Karl Popper gave us a good method to test for factuality – the possibility of something being falsified. We should adhere to this and never allow ourselves to be distracted from reliance upon facts. How we address them may be a matter of debate but *res ipsa loquitur* – the thing speaks for itself.

Hannah Arendt addressed this issue in her essay "Truth and Politics" where she came to the pessimistic conclusion that, "*The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed.*"⁴³

It is up to us to prove her wrong.

THE BATTLEFIELDS

My first issue requiring our intellectual attention is the extent to which we will control or be controlled by Artificial Intelligence (AI). We know that AI is here to stay, a powerful tool capable of generating great benefits but equally imposing great costs. From loss of jobs (perhaps one in three of existing jobs⁴⁴) to loss of personal autonomy. Britain's AI Security Institute has already found that conversations with an AI chatbot were 50% more persuasive at shifting political opinions than reading a static AI-generated message.⁴⁵

Google is facing a lawsuit from the estate of a man who was allegedly talked into committing suicide by the Gemini chatbot⁴⁶. Artists are having their intellectual property and even their voice and images stolen daily.⁴⁷ Courts are awash with AI-generated nonsense claims.⁴⁸ Web-browsing bots account for more web traffic than do humans. Denial of service assaults are becoming commonplace. AI images distort and pervert our perceptions. AI models can trick each other into disobeying their creators.⁴⁹ People are forming intimate relationships with AI-generated avatars.⁵⁰ Moltbook is a platform where chatbots talk independently to each other and humans are not allowed to participate.⁵¹

The debate in Australia about this issue has been unedifying, underpinned by a deeply passive acceptance that the AI apocalypse is here and it is futile to resist. I see no serious intellectual response to the challenge issued by Anthropic's brilliant CEO Dario Amodei to address his concerns about the need for serious AI regulation.

Again, our intellectual passivity as federal and state parliaments, shamefully misusing the tragedy of recent antisemitic attacks, killings and rise of far-right extremism, put a sword to some of our most precious liberties such as the rights of free assembly and speech. Many of our intellectuals and commentators want to wax lyrical about the undermining of democracy in the United States and elsewhere, but what about at home? Where are their concerns? Apart from one paper from the Lowy Institute⁵² I can find nothing of real substance anywhere.

I must tread carefully here, although not so carefully were I to be in Queensland. On 11 March 2026, Queensland police arrested a man for explaining the phrase “from the river to the sea” to a rally in Brisbane, and also took a woman into custody for wearing a singlet displaying the slogan – just the six words, no more. Under recent Queensland legislation to utter those six words, if they merely “offend” (no more than that) a “member of the public” (that being anyone) is to commit an offence punishable by imprisonment.⁵³ In NSW a similar proposal was rejected by a Parliamentary Inquiry.⁵⁴

The use of these six words was considered by the Superior Court of Ontario which drew upon a significant report produced by the University of Toronto, entitled “*From the River to the Sea: Palestine will be free*”⁵⁵ which among other things reminded readers that the 1977 platform of Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud Party states “*between the Sea and the Jordan there will be only Israeli sovereignty*” to find that, in relation to an attempt by the University of Toronto to discipline student protesters:

[122] ... The expressions used within the encampment such as “from the river to the sea...” have multiple meanings. There is no evidence to suggest that the named respondents or the occupants of the encampment use them in a way that is antisemitic or that is intended to incite violence.⁵⁶

At the same time in Canberra police seized satirical posters depicting Trump and Netanyahu in Nazi uniforms from

a local music venue.⁵⁷ Eventually, they had to return them. There are reports of history teachers being concerned about what they can say in their classrooms without falling foul of new hate speech laws.⁵⁸

I cite this not to take sides in this dispute but rather to draw to attention the almost complete lack of calm reasoned debate about the way in which our legislatures are rushing to respond to a terrible and genuine threat to a particular community and society more generally with what I fear is terrible over-reach.

So, I come to my final and most difficult issue, the future way in which our Indigenous community and our settler community will find a path forward together.

Here my proposition is radical and perhaps would not have found favour with Dr Suter.

When Mark Carney addressed the Davos Forum in January he called for “*honesty about the world as it is.*” He claimed we are “*in the midst of a rupture, nor a transition*”. He said that “*nostalgia is not a strategy*”.

He called for us to be “*building what we claim to believe in, rather than waiting for the old order to be restored.*” He also cited the words of Alexander Stubb, the President of Finland making reference to his term “*value-based realism.*”⁵⁹

Stubb also addressed the Raisina Dialogue in India where he talked about this sense of realism stating that “*Now our holiday from history is over.*”⁶⁰

That phrase really struck me. It reminded me that Cesare Beccaria had declared “*happy is the nation without a history*”⁶¹ and that Hegel had written that no nation or government “*have ever learned anything from history.*”⁶²

Here is an area in which our intellectuals have actually worked themselves up to fever-pitch. The so-called “history wars” have been fought over the issue of Indigenous-Settler relationships with almost unbridled ferocity and spleen.

From Stanner’s “great silence”, to Henry Reynolds *Why Weren’t we Told*, to Geoffrey Blainey’s “*black armband*” accusations, to Bruce Pascoe’s *Dark Emu*, to Rod Meram’s *Massacre Myth*, to Keith Windshuttle’s *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* and Stuart Macintyre’s *The History Wars*, with contributions along the way from Robert Manne and Andrew Bolt and Tony Abbott and Greg Melleuish who dismissed his opponents as having “*all their primary arguments derived from the pro-Communist policies of the Cold War*”.

Where has the intellectual debate got us? Nowhere.

In my view it is time to take a holiday from this part of Australian history and focus on values-based realism. That will give you the facts: that Indigenous Australians suffer continuing discrimination and disadvantage, that they have worse employment opportunities, health, shorter life expectancy and lower educational attainments than other Australians; that their women in particular suffer more from domestic violence and their young people from incarceration.

We know the facts and we know what needs to be done.

However, the political climate is fraught, the confident consensus of 1967 has evaporated. The Voice Referendum was a spectacular and damaging failure for its proponents, there is already a walking-back regarding native title claims which could prove unbelievably costly to state Treasuries⁶³, there is rising opposition to talk of treaties and reparations, meaningless recitations of welcome to country and slogans about always was/always will be, or stolen lands are increasingly alienating and not unrelated to the rise of votes for One Nation and their ilk and the fraying of the fragile consensus in this area built up carefully over so many years by people of good will, black and white.

At least in this part of the agora, we have one of Australia’s true intellectuals, Noel Pearson, continuing to make real contributions.

Kierkegaard is right that “*life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forward*” and so I believe it is the time that we stopped assigning blame for the past – on all sides – and started assigning responsibility for the future – on all sides. In this public debate, history hinders rather than heals. Let’s give history a holiday.

THE GLUE THAT BINDS

“*Where there is no vision, the people perish*” says the Book of Proverbs (28:18) but we seem to have run out of vision, run out of big ideas, run out of intellectual vigour. As if Fukuyama was right and history had ended.⁶⁴ We are preoccupied with the narcissism of small differences, incapable of seeing the bigger pictures.

If we have to change, we have to change, that has always been the case.⁶⁵

We need a return to the world of big ideas – not fiddling at the margins – but getting back to what makes the heart of Australia beat. The new technologies, the collapse of the traditional liberal world order, the impact of Carney’s “rupture”, the increasing unreliability of our “allies”, our Indigenous and inter-generational issues, not to mention climate change and threats to social cohesion, all call for big responses – big ideas.

They must come from a variety of sources not just from self-interests in politics and the economy but above all from the thinkers, the intellectuals, the true patriots.

Underpinning all this, I believe that what is needed is a new national spirit which I call *civic individualism*.⁶⁶

As a liberal I believe profoundly in the spirit of the individual, in the capacity of society to be built upon individual effort, art and enterprise. I believe that allowing each person the maximum degree of freedom, consistent with that of others, is the best way to secure human progress. I believe that individual effort should result in recognition and reward. I believe that the individual dignity of each person should be respected and protected.

I also accept the wisdom of Burke’s assertion that “*Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom*”.

The individual must live in and contribute to society (sorry Margaret, but

there is such a thing) and society may, with his or her consent, impose limits upon any unrestrained passions. This reprises Pericles declaration that people who do not participate in society have no right to continue to be part of it.⁶⁷ We all have a duty to contribute and each of us has a duty to respect the contributions of others.

Those who have extra resources should contribute more and just as the richer should pay more taxes – too few do - so should those whose intellectual capacity is greater be prepared to exert themselves in making their contributions – too few do!

This is what I call civic individualism. It is the underlying template which I advocate to address all the practical problems which I have discussed tonight and which I believe must take its place in the agora.

Jean Jaures once proclaimed that from the “*altars of the past we should take the flame and not the ashes*” It is about time we as Australians stopped covering ourselves in ashes and started to grasp more flames. The flames of big ideas.

We have done it in the past and I believe we can do it in the future. I believe we must if we are to survive and grow into the nation and the people we can be – the people we should be. If we fail, the fault will be not in the stars but in ourselves.

In that respect, like all liberals, I live in hope.

I think Keith Suter would have been pleased to join me there.

Thank you.

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