

Australian Politics from a Distance

By Toby Miller

As a child growing up in London, I remember going to places like Australia House on the Strand to read the *Australian* and the *Canberra Times*. This was a means of keeping in touch with Australian politics and cricket. Now, I visit the *Sydney Morning Herald's* iPad application, which I greatly admire for its overall design and pretty pictures of the local bourgeoisie at play. Its politico-economic contents are another matter.

That sort of change in terms of experiencing Australian politics from a distance is obvious. And so is something that is perhaps insubstantial. It's a question of style and spectacle that political science often dismisses but I find quite significant as an interested, inexperienced observer from beyond.

If you think back to the debates that Robin Boyd's *Australian Ugliness* and Donald Horne's *Lucky Country* threw up about the mundane ease of the nation's suburban outlook, there was a striking contrast between the rather vapid architectural and intellectual worlds they described and the dominant political figures of the day and just afterwards.

Robert Menzies, Gough Whitlam, and Malcolm Fraser appeared and behaved like *colossi*. The latter two were physically imposing in terms of their size as well as their comportment, the former because of physical characteristics apart from height. While Menzies was in many ways a nativist-royalist, both Whitlam and Fraser had genuine internationalism coursing through them. They birthed multiculturalism, they pursued multilateral diplomacy, they quoted Horace (well, one of them did) and they adopted views that were quite distinct from many time-servers in their parties. All three men acted like statesmen much of the time, even as they did nasty backroom deals and engaged in sharp practice as part of their exercise of power.

In the 1970s, Australia's population diversified in terms of both social identities and lifestyles. Bob Hawke and Paul Keating continued and reflected the process in the next two decades: one a self-appointed organic intellectual of the working class who benefited from middle-class education, the other a self-appointed intellectual of the ruling class who benefited from Jack Lang education.

Again, each one was physically imposing: Hawke's tan and *coiffure* versus Keating's suits and sneer. And both men had international desires and markers, from their trade union and finance minister experiences respectively.

I left Perth for New York in 1993. I had expected Keating to lose the election and Bill Clinton to usher in a new era of social-democratic hegemony in North America. Ho ho. As we all know, Keating won, improbably, that year, and Clinton was an apologist for capital and little more. Though he had many of the qualities of the men I've mentioned above.

You can see where this is heading. The three Prime Ministers Australia has had since I took off are absolute artefacts of Boyd and Horne's imaginations and nightmares.

The suburban solicitor who went for morning walks in his appalling tracksuit. The Brisbane battler who picked and licked his earwax in Parliament. The Melbourne middlebrow whose voice, look, and family status became the center of political commentary.

Despite John Howard's love of the Commonwealth as an alibi for cricket; despite Kevin Rudd's keenly displayed knowledge of *Putonghua*; despite Julia Gillard's Welsh migrant stature—these politicians are the suburban fruits of a mundanity that was identified almost fifty years ago in those path-breaking works of social criticism. They are uninspiring, unimaginative speakers who are as wooden as an antique. Their anger looks like the anger of the frustrated rather than the righteousness animation of those listed above. And their patriotism seems narrow next to their forebears. They are like William McMahan, the aberrant figure in my genealogy (who once dismissed me summarily from his parliamentary office in the middle of a seemingly pleasant conversation about communism).

It's very easy to discount what I'm saying as trivial and snobbish. I am attracted to both those lines of critique, in fact. As I wrote the paragraphs above, a certain sniffiness descended on me. Here I am, living in Mexico City, whose population far exceeds that of Australia. I have spent the last two decades in New York and Los Angeles and I'm moving back to London in May 2012. I received the invitation to write this column this morning in Montréal, and am doing so tonight in Mexico. Who the hell am I to come across so high and mighty about battlers from the 'burbs?

Well, I served my time in Australian suburbia—about 18 years in *toto*, albeit not consecutively. I hated almost every moment. It felt stifling, isolating, boring, and banal. Yes, of course, this dislike stems from a sense of the abject—that suburban life might be part of me, lurking and ready to return at any moment, to engulf me in its oppressively quiet, all-encompassing yet distant embrace. And certainly, that history informs my worldview and my preference for large cities that are close to other large cities, where I can encounter radical difference as an everyday part of life in place of a cloned sameness.

In any event, if those experiences license these remarks, my position can still be criticized for its superficiality: I am not assiduously studying Australian politics; I have not undertaken either a content analysis of the media coverage or a full audit of the political careers in question; and I am not addressing policies or programs. I am speaking in an entirely impressionistic way. Nor do I have a causal explanation to account for why an increasingly urban and diverse country should return its leadership to an earlier demographic era, whereas those days saw politicians who transcended their coordinates so spectacularly.

Still, think about it: Menzies, Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke, Keating. McMahon, Howard, Rudd, Gillard. Your call.