

An imaginary encounter: Walter Murdoch meets Kevin Rudd

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A CENTURY ago, Walter Murdoch wrote a book for school pupils called 'The Australian Citizen: An Elementary Account of Civic Rights and Duties'.

The Australian Citizen addressed children in the language of sophisticated but accessible political economy and theory. Frequently reprinted, it proved a roaring success and became part of Murdoch's frequent movements between academic and popular culture.

His nephew, the newspaper proprietor Keith Murdoch, encouraged Walter to transcend the cloisters. Accepting the challenge, he became a much-admired public intellectual whose syndicated columns reached several hundred thousand readers each week, over many decades.

A liberal before that word was scarred in Australian political discourse, Murdoch wrote monographs and edited anthologies of fiction, verse, and politics in addition to offering regular meditations on culture: a remarkable feat.

The Australian Citizen is a work of its time, supportive of imperialism and laden with prejudice about race and gender.

But the book is also and equally of our time, brilliantly rehearsing the dialectic between individualism and collectivism.

And in the now-defunct Argus newspaper of September 15, 1951 - one week before a referendum that nearly saw the Communist Party banned - Murdoch signed a letter drafted by numerous prominent intellectuals in favour of the 'No' case. Like them, he opposed the Party, but was alarmed by the plebiscite's assault on ideological pluralism and

criminalisation of dissent.

The 'No' campaign won by the slimmest of margins, with the states and the people evenly split. But it was a great victory for civil liberties against what Murdoch deemed 'entirely damnable and a piece of pure Fascism,' as his biographer John La Nauze put it.

The 1950s were not only marked by the anti-Communist referendum. In 1954, Australia signed the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Sixty years later, how would a small-l liberal and supporter of human rights like Murdoch react to Kevin Rudd's stop-the-boats policy, which aims to prevent refugees escaping to Australia by sending them to camps on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island?

Murdoch died before Gough Whitlam changed immigration policy and made profound commitments to human rights - reforms that continued under Malcolm Fraser, but have since been compromised by both parties. I imagine Murdoch's ideological and practical views would have evolved as per those two giants rather than later, lesser figures.

He would have been aware that Australia, and the Labor Party in particular, were birthed through racial inequality: the genocide and criminalisation of indigenous people, the White Australia Policy, the self-interested rejection then embrace of Asia, and the suburban idyll of autarky.

But even today, it's hard to confront these issues. I appeared on CNN in 2001 to talk about Afghan refugees off the Australian coast. The anchorman could not believe my account of the nation's history: 'So are you telling us that the Australian government is racist?'

The fact is that a racial state is at the core of how the country was founded, gained its independence, controlled its indigenous population, and determined immigration policy.

These days, Australians proudly proclaim themselves multicultural. But they accepted less than 1 per cent of the world's refugees last year - people fleeing violence and oppression, in many cases related to Australia's junior imperial work in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This affluent country thrives on enabling the greatest ecological crisis in world history. That gives it special responsibilities. One is environmental; the other, human.

Safety for those in peril on the sea combines these themes. A fundamental precept of ocean-going life, it governs the law, animates sailors, and inspires hymns, stories, and dreams.

Yet Rudd says asylum seekers who come here by boat without a visa will never be settled in Australia. He is no sailor, and no defender of human rights.

Who is this shameless populist addressing when he denounces the most vulnerable among us? It is the beating, poisonous heart of 19th-century ALP and governmental racism.

That history must be transcended and rejected, just as Rudd apologised to indigenous Australians for what he called a ‘blemished chapter in our national history.’

I’ve migrated many times - to India, the US, Australia, Mexico, and the UK. My mobility was familial and voluntary, rather than a necessity. I am white, middle-class, and comfortable with the requisite languages.

But anyone who has migrated knows the pain, fear, and hope of mixing cultural maintenance and adaptation.

For refugees, the experience is especially poignant, dangerous and meaningful.

My guess is that Walter Murdoch would recognise his adopted nation's obligations to support the human rights of boat people. For The Australian Citizen is very sophisticated by contrast with today’s coin-operated, poll-driven leaders. That heritage should be this country’s lodestone: solidarity, not selfishness; decency, not bastardry.

Toby Miller will deliver the 2013 Walter Murdoch lecture at Murdoch University on August 27.
