



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong  
Research Online

---

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

---

2005

# Death, Decline or Atrophy? The Necessity of Politics

Anthony Ashbolt

*University of Wollongong*, [aashbolt@uow.edu.au](mailto:aashbolt@uow.edu.au)

---

## Publication Details

Ashbolt, A, Death, Decline or Atrophy? The Necessity of Politics, in Battin, T (ed), *A Passion for Politics: Essays in Honour of Graham Maddox*, 1 edn, Pearson Education Australia, 2005, 1-13.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

# *A Passion for Politics*

## **Essays in Honour of Graham Maddox**



**Edited by Tim Battin**

# Death, Decline or Atrophy? The Necessity of Politics

*Anthony Ashbolt*

While thinking about the contemporary state of politics, it is very difficult to shake off a recurring image from the brilliant television series *A Very Peculiar Practice*.<sup>1</sup> In that show, a wonderful aging character was writing a book about the parlous state of higher education in Great Britain. 'Death of the University' muttered Jock into a portable tape recorder, between swigs of Scotch, as he wandered around campus despairing at the shattered values and distorted priorities of the new university. Jock spoke for all of us who care about education. I hope to be speaking to all of us who care about politics. And Graham Maddox was, and is, but one colleague and friend with an abiding passion for the values of education and the necessity of a vibrant political life. Yet his passion shone through like few others.

It needs to be acknowledged that Graham and I had almost as many disagreements as agreements about politics, so I begin this essay with some trepidation. I always found Graham's conception of politics to be a little too narrowly connected to the State, a little too under the sway of constitutional niceties and somewhat dismissive of Marxist theory. Having cut my teeth on radical politics at an early age, I was perhaps perplexed at his late conversion to the social democratic side of politics (which had always struck me, despite my occasional membership cards of the ALP, as hopelessly compromised). Somehow, his 1975 transformation failed to impress a child of the Sixties. Yet I always admired his commitment, his passion, his anger and also his great love of music. Seeing him conducting Handel's *Messiah* was a transcendent experience. So, too, was hearing him lecture on the weaknesses of republicanism or the breaching of convention in 1975. I could not fault his conducting but, at times, particularly with regard to 1975, a certain bypassing of class analysis bothered me.

And so it was, that when he gave me a draft of his manuscript on the betrayal of Labor tradition under the Hawke Government (Maddox 1989), I took him to task. There were, I pointed out (rather patronisingly) varying Labor traditions, some of which (like White Australia) deserved to be dumped. Class compromise was, I suggested, hardly invented by Hawke. Moreover, I recall being particularly sceptical about his near deification of the Whitlam era. As a student activist and member of the ALP at that time, betrayal of principle, tradition, and solidarity, combined with the embracing of opportunism and unseemly careerism, seemed standard Labor fare. It appeared to me, then, that he had overestimated the extent to which the Whitlam Government was a genuine reformist government rather than one tinkering at the edges of what was soon to become neo-liberal gospel.<sup>2</sup>

As it turns out, we were both right and wrong. I rejected enthusiastically any sense of Labor tradition and successful implementation of reform. Graham, in turn, was too concerned to identify clear breaks with a partially mythic past. While hardly halcyon political days, the Whitlam Government achieved a few remarkable reforms. Arguably, also, Labor's subsequent development did not constitute a complete betrayal of past social democratic ideals. Nonetheless, the 1980s (and this is the period when my posting at New England meant I worked closely with Graham) did establish the basis for what was to become by the latter part of the '90s a neo-liberal nightmare, one in which some things he cared deeply about — democratic accountability, the importance of political opposition, the necessity of egalitarian ideals — were trampled upon. This essay, then, touches on a few subjects close to Graham's heart and yet does so in ways that Graham would not necessarily approve of. I think he always suspected I admired the motto of a small (but not unimportant) San Francisco group in the 1960s: 'Opposed to Everything'. So, too, he was perplexed by my defence of the feminist doctrine 'the personal is political', and probably perceived my faith in the 1968 slogan 'All Power to the Imagination' as evidence of an unstable temperament.

### **Old Labor, New Ideals and The Death of the University**

A little over thirty years ago, the Australian people elected a Labor Government committed to new policies in many fields, including health and education. Some commentators regarded the Labor platform for change as too sweeping, too radical, too bound up with a 'crash through or crash' philosophy. Yet this was a period of high ideals, of reaching out for the seemingly unattainable. The spirit of the 1960s, of social and political rebellion, was still present and, in that context, for some other more radical observers and participants, the new Whitlam Labor Government in Australia was a rather mild political corrective after many, many years in a conservative wilderness. In retrospect, two domestic policies stand out — universal health insurance, secured through the original Medibank, and free (or, to be precise, no fees) higher education. *Free* higher education — what sort of mad utopia was this? One that lasted until the late 1980s. To cut a long story short, a Labor Government under the sway of economic rationalism decided, in the late 1980s, that Australia could no longer afford free higher education, and a partial user-pays system would be introduced (the current HECS system). I recall both Graham and I sharing platforms at the time in Armidale opposing the effective imposition of higher education fees. As usual on such occasions, an unwarranted optimism was in the air, as we believed, to some extent, that popular protest would prevail. Yet we worried also that a healthy public sphere was being compromised, if not gutted. And it was our worries more than our optimism that proved prescient.

The point is that Australia could have then, and could still, afford 'free' higher education if government had different priorities; priorities towards public education instead of private schooling and public health instead of private insurance, as just two examples. The introduction of HECS was but one signal that universities would be governed by the cash nexus: by money, by a tendency to reduce everything, even learning, to a commodity (a tendency already pronounced in society at large — this,

after all, was the greed is good decade — and one which was transforming citizens into consumers). And thus it was that democratic citizenship gave ground increasingly to market forces and genuine politics began to wither away. The university was merely one element in a public sphere under assault.

Combine the introduction of HECS with the commencement of full-fee programs for foreign students and eventually for domestic students, corporate endowed chairs, dramatic workload increases for academic staff, the massive expansion of a bloated and incompetent managerial sector, a student population understandably concerned only with their own future rather than that of the world around them (sometimes compelled to hold down a few part-time jobs just to survive), a scholarly culture corrupted by the search for money in whatever form...combine all of these things and more and, yes, the university began to experience severe bouts of ill-health. The fact that I can still write this means that the university is not dead yet. The idea and the practice of critical thinking lives on, even as universities succumb willy-nilly to the type of managerial language exposed so cleverly by Don Watson in *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language* (Watson 2003; also see Maddox 2000: 329-30).

When you receive the latest document from the university blathering about mission statements, benchmarks, world's best practice, outcomes, quality assurance, graduate attributes, innovation (for innovation's sake, one must presume), literacies — run a mile or, if you have your future in mind, submit and ask for more punishment, and one day you, too, might be a Vice-Chancellor. Don Watson is right — our public language has been infected by the ugly formulations emanating from American business schools. This is not just a matter of language because it deforms policy and degrades and corrupts the university (as well as the wider community). Unregulated market forces erode community in the wider world and fuel an unbridled individualism. Within the universities, a self-seeking entrepreneurial style cloaked in managerial discourse has swept over what used to be known as a community of scholars. Politics, in general, has suffered a similar fate or, rather, politics has itself helped generate the dissolution of a vibrant public sphere.

### **Politics and What Used to be the English Language**

In his famous essay 'Politics and the English language', George Orwell contemplated the corruption of communication and, in particular, the perversions of political language (Orwell 1957). Words were used increasingly, he argued, to obscure downright lies or to camouflage real meaning. Academic verbosity and political sloganeering were savaged. His musings have particular resonance now in a world of mass-mediated images and language. As I write, The United States and its allies are engaged in a war on terrorism. This, at any rate, is what we are told by the US President (and his minions) and a compliant mass media. The terms 'war on terror' and 'war on terrorism' are embraced meekly by journalists who accept the language of those in power. To suggest that responsible journalists might have referred instead to a war mainly on an innocent and beleaguered people (specifically in the context of Afghanistan and Iraq) would be to fly in the face of contemporary mass media logic that, far too often, simply accepts the language used by politicians.

This is not always the case but, in the wake of September 11, the US and Australian media have been unabashed in their flag-waving (Mahajan 2002:79-92; Parenti 2002; Broinowski 2003: 26ff.). We can all point to exceptions like *Radio National*, which does allow reasoned debate on a wide variety of issues. The exceptions do not, however, undermine the rule. Thus the war on terrorism becomes part of our daily language just as pacification was in Orwell's day:

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out to the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification* (Orwell 1957:153).

Orwell probed expertly language designed to desensitise and to limit our capacity to think critically. That journalists should now be complicit in this process constitutes a sad reflection upon the state of our contemporary mass media. It was thus ever so, I can hear certain cynics grumble. And they have a point. Yet never have we lived through a period so subject to the dictates of the mass media. Television news and Hollywood films merge. *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers* become part of the war on terror.

Which Australian journalist has even bothered asking whether there can be a war on terrorism? Richard Barnett put it succinctly nearly a decade ago:

For a terrorist group with one consuming passion...violence is an effective weapon because the panic it creates can change public attitudes in ways that serve the group's goals. But a state, however heavily armed, is at a disadvantage when it lashes out violently in response. Airstrikes and economic sanctions are blunt instruments that neither punish the planners and perpetrators of terrorist acts, who know how to fade into the night, nor discourage further violence. Both are far more likely to hurt innocent people and fuel murderous rage against governments reacting in such a manner (Barnett 1996).

This was just as prescient as Chalmers Johnson's *Blowback*, which (like his recent *Sorrows of Empire*) should be compulsory reading for journalists (Johnson 2000; Johnson 2004). Johnson, however, travelled from right to left. Our journalists are much more interested in the sodden words of one who has done that memorable trip from Trotskyism to the corridors of power. Christopher Hitchens is regularly hauled out to excoriate the left. He has, without a doubt, a deftness of touch at times but those times are becoming infrequent. Once the author of *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (Hitchens 2001), which argued that the great man should be subject to war crimes hearings, he is now proud to count Paul Wolfowitz as a friend. Suddenly, he is a respected and regular political commentator, while the sober scholar, and genuinely interesting political analyst, Chalmers Johnson, gets rare media attention. This is typical of media superficiality and prejudice.

Politics is presented to the public as surface material, something bound up with celebrity gossip and scandal, on the one hand, or something dull, disillusioning and ultimately lifeless, on the other. The media are especially good at dealing with surfaces and less able these days to explore deep and complex questions about

politics. Take one example from recent events: during the parliamentary visit of President George W Bush, the Green Senators Bob Brown and Kerry Nettle interjected while Bush was addressing Parliament. Was this taken to be an example of robust political debate, a necessary intervention on behalf of Australian citizens held on Guantanamo Bay without charge? No, our mass media slipped into a collective spirit of moralising: it was a disgrace, an embarrassment, childish, juvenile and so on, as journalists who wouldn't be able to differentiate between ethics or morality, on the one hand, and a febrile quest for disinformation, on the other, dared to wax lyrically indignant. No question about whether Bush should even have been addressing Parliament (there is a strong argument he should not have been), let alone any question that the issue raised by Brown and Nettle transcended polite diplomacy. The Green Senators were being actively political but the media stamped on them declaiming that they, the media, would determine the nature and boundaries of debate.

And so it had been throughout the build up to the invasion of Iraq and also has been in the aftermath of that invasion. Crusty old warriors from the defence backwaters are dragged out as experts, spokesmen for right-wing think tanks are presented as men or women of enlightened disposition, government officials are founts of wisdom even when that wisdom is a measly 'but we didn't know'. Meanwhile, critical authorities are mostly excluded, sidelined or placed on a panel where their utterances are almost bound to appear somewhat strange (except for the fact that the Orwellian doublespeak issuing from the mouths of others itself seems fundamentally peculiar).

### **Are the Announcements of Death Premature?**

Carl Boggs and Peter Marden, amongst others, have written important works about the death or decline of politics (Boggs 2000; Marden 2003). Boggs, in particular, pinpoints the corporate infiltration into political everyday life that results in a withering away of genuine contestation. Marden, however, opines that 'end of...' debates are 'both highly presumptuous and ridiculously premature' (Marden 2003: ix). He may have a point but if politics is dying, and at the very least it is rather ill, then the mass media share a large proportion of the blame. Far from being critical and independent vehicles of enquiry, too often they have been channels for government propaganda. Recently, *The New York Times* has apologised editorially (26 May 2004) for its slavish support of the government line against Iraq's WMDs. The Australian press has issued no such apology, which is somewhat surprising given that well-known antiwar campaigner Rupert Murdoch owns over 70 per cent of the papers.

Apologies, however, are insufficient. They obscure the regular avoidance of genuine questioning, of proper investigative reporting, of the real job of news journalism. The exceptions to the rule are few and far between, as noted by Carl Bernstein some years ago (Bernstein 1992). Bernstein observed that the work he and Woodward had done at the time of Watergate was simply the work that others should have been doing. Instead, he lamented, an 'idiot culture' prevailed in which the ravings of a maniac on daytime television were given equal credence to political commentary. A cynic might interject that they do have equal validity and that, in a sense, is what the

idiot culture is all about. As Dwight MacDonald pointed out over fifty years ago, a real problem with mass culture is that it renders all things equivalents: 'Renoir and a roller-skating horse are, after all, "equally talented"' (MacDonald 1952: 13). Since MacDonald's time, politics has become part of mass culture and that is one reason why its prospects appear bleak. There is hope but it lurks in unexpected places and arises almost unannounced. Indeed, it can take the mass media by complete surprise, as with Seattle in 1999. The problem is that the media are dozing in a dreamland of complacency, triviality and manufactured news.

### **Sound Bites and PR Spin**

Much of the reporting in the wake of September 11 reflected the current dominance of the sound bite in the mass media. The sound bite — that quick slice or grab of a few seconds or a few words — automatically simplifies, reduces, and reifies (Scheuer 2001, Adatto 1993: 62ff.). It slides past historical complexity and helps reproduce propagandistic frames proffered by those in power. 'The war on terror' is a perfect sound bite — it resonates with moral fervour and discreetly hides its true meaning. The demonisation of one individual serves as another ideal sound bite. Osama bin Laden personified evil; so, too, Saddam Hussein. Yet those with historical memories recognise this as a recurrent tendency in US propaganda. History does, indeed, repeat itself tirelessly and endlessly. Reporting of the US war in Afghanistan mirrored that at the time of the US invasion of Panama in the 1980s (which was a training run for the so-called first Gulf War). Substitute Noriega for bin Laden (or even, up to a point, Hussein) and the story is remarkably similar. Both had received support and finance from the CIA, both then turned into evil monsters (but the CIA or American connection was forgotten). The respective invasions resulted, so the story went, in few civilian casualties and were remarkable successes. There is a difference — the war (or severe conflict) in Afghanistan continues and US claims of great victory have been rendered mostly hollow, as much of the land lies devastated and ruled over by a motley crew of war lords, sometimes parading as the Northern Alliance or *mujahadeen*. Similarly, Iraq is still talked about by politicians as a noble victory when most of its infrastructure lies in tatters and a sizeable proportion of the population rallies to resist the occupiers. Note the use of words here — 'resist' and 'occupiers' rather than 'celebrate' and 'liberators'. Note also the recent warnings that moderate Iraqi Muslims may well be turning into the Islamic fundamentalist warriors so feared by the US administration (Ware 2004: 16-21). Blowback, indeed. And still we are told by those who have made Iraq a haven for terrorists that Iraq is, you guessed it, a haven for terrorists. Blind to the vicious irony, journalists convey these sentiments as if they were profound observations about international affairs.

Language is important, indeed vital, but so, too, in this media age is image. Manipulate the image and you manipulate the mind. Take the powerful image of Saddam Hussein's statue during the invasion of Iraq. This was an image arranged and put out in the public sphere by the Rendon Group, a public relations firm contracted by the Pentagon for many wondrous tasks, including organising happy Kuwaitis to wave American flags during the first Gulf War (Rampton & Stauber 2003: 1ff. & 42-3). When our foreign news comes direct from public relations

people, it is apparent that politics cannot live for long. Recall the embedded journalists, so embedded that they might just as well have been military personnel. Yet Bush and Blair and Howard tell us that an evil tyrant has been removed and democracy is just around the corner. Journalists, being little more than ventriloquists' dummies, faithfully convey these words. There are exceptions, of course — Robert Fisk of England's *The Independent* being the most notable. Moreover, both the BBC in Great Britain and the ABC in Australia had some independent coverage, some critical questioning of governmental lies or distortions (and I do not use those words lightly). Yet, both the BBC and ABC were condemned for their biased coverage — the Hutton inquiry established that the Blair Government was owed an apology by the BBC when all along it was obvious to some of us, and must now be obvious to most, that the BBC was telling more of the truth than the Government (Gearty 2004). So much for independent inquiries these days. With regard to the ABC, its television coverage was overwhelmingly biased towards the Government (the expert commentary on the 7.30 report, for example, was provided by strategic and military apologists for the Government). ABC Radio was more independent but hardly revealed systematic antiwar bias. Yet we had the laughable series of lengthy complaints by the Minister for Communications, Richard Allston, which merely established that the intellectually impoverished Senator (or his hacks) had no idea what constituted bias, on the one hand, or good reporting, on the other.<sup>3</sup>

### **Political Amnesia**

The commercial media, in both the US and Australia, tended to parrot government policy without question. Any US-imposed government automatically represents progress — such was the way things were and are portrayed, usually, in the American and Australian media. The *mujahadeen's* historic and brutal role in Afghanistan was either unknown or forgotten and they became saints (under the guise of the Northern Alliance — language can be so convenient) to the devil Taliban. It did not seem to matter that individuals switched allegiance from the Taliban to the Northern Alliance with unseemly haste. So, too, despite the occasional set back, progress was being forged, supposedly, in Iraq. First, sovereignty, then democracy — this advertised progression was premised upon so much forgetting as to be astounding. How many journalists questioned what sort of a sovereignty, let alone democracy, it would be in which the US occupying forces alone numbered 138,000; in which the future US mission will probably be the largest American diplomatic presence in another country; in which 14 US military bases had been, or were in the process of being, constructed and in which much of the country's public infrastructure had, in defiance of the fourth Geneva Convention, been privatised (Warde 2004: 1-2; Klein 2004: 43-53)? To respond that government officials shield themselves effectively from questions is insufficient. The mass media routinely reported the transference of sovereignty without as much as a smirk.

In the name of democracy the tanks came rolling in, in the name of liberation innocent civilians were slaughtered, in the name of civilization Iraqi detainees were subjected to pornographic torture. And, as Susan Sontag noted, the word 'torture' was studiously avoided by officials and most journalists — 'abuse' sounds so much

more tame, the stuff, after all, of rock videos these days (Sontag 2004). She also alluded to the Americanness of it all:

Even more appalling, since the pictures were meant to be circulated and seen by many people: it was all fun. And this idea of fun is, alas, more and more — contrary to what President Bush is telling the world — part of “the true nature and heart of America.”

Perhaps it was this aspect of the barbarous torture that enabled our Government to do a quick sidestep — ‘Our troops weren’t involved’, as if this exonerates Australia from anything to do with the invasion by the coalition of the drilling...(oil?, well that is another matter). And note also the constant use of ‘civilian contractors’ — some of them are ‘civilian’ (of sorts) but many are mercenaries. War has been privatised and why not when so much else has been? The answer, of course, revolves around ethics and politics. Both ethical and political accountability disappear in war-making that is partly privatised. ‘We did not know’ takes on a frightening authenticity in this context. They did, however, know that Iraq’s infrastructure was being parcelled out to friends of the Bush administration and this type of privatisation poses an immediate threat to any form of democratic promise.

There are few genuinely independent commentators left to observe United States behaviour in the foreign arena. Within America, the press and television are, in the main, conduits for government propaganda about ‘the war on terrorism’. Any critical questioning of US policy is seen to be treasonous. Yet, as noted before, the temper of the times is changing ever so slightly. *The New York Times* has apologised, and for quite some time the drums stopped beating loudly in *Time* magazine.<sup>4</sup> So now, the formerly supine American media are raising critical questions, although most blame (particularly in the wake of both David Kay’s WMD report and the Senate Investigative Committee), is being, conveniently, sheeted home to the CIA *not* the Government. Forget that Wolfowitz is on the record saying WMD was a pretext, forget the conflicting evidence, forget that previous weapons inspectors like Scott Ritter were blasting apart the claims and forget that invited weapons inspectors had failed to find anything just before the invasion. Yes, political amnesia rules, accountability disappears, and another fall guy appears (not, of course, before this fall guy, the CIA, discredits absolutely the Pentagon’s favoured son, Ahmed Chalabi). Most importantly, what our mass media ignored or forgot was that this was a brilliant intelligence *success* for the Bush administration, not a failure (Engelhardt 2004). You do not need to be a genius to establish that the crew behind *The Project for the New American Century* were in control of foreign policy and the strings they manipulated depended utterly upon intelligence ‘failure’. Of course ‘we didn’t know’ or ‘we were misinformed’ — that is the point and that was the plan. The fact that lies can accumulate in a knowledge vacuum is at least partly the responsibility of a docile and obedient mass media. Dissenting voices can still be heard. Nonetheless, standard reporting is uncritical, at times fawning, and overwhelmingly susceptible to government ‘spin’.

## **Abstract Citizenship and the Erosion of Politics**

The mass media's sacrifice of its role as a critical observer of contemporary life contributes to a withering away of citizenship. Yet, arguably (and Alan Wolfe developed this perspective many years ago) the very process of rendering citizenship 'abstract' began with the rise of what Harry Braverman called 'abstract labour'. As Braverman argued, under capitalism labour is compartmentalised, divided into specialist tasks, increasingly subject to managerial control (Braverman 1974). With the rise of time and motion studies, the factory system is Taylorised and the worker is stripped of any real power over the production process. Management assumes power over the labour process itself and this is represented actually and symbolically in the very structure of the factory (with management offices overlooking the factory floor). Apply this analysis to politics generally, as Alan Wolfe has done, and we witness the rise of an abstract citizenship; that is, a citizenship abstracted from any genuine participation in the processes of power (Wolfe 1977: 257-321). Stripped of its true character, citizenship (a foundation stone of democracy) becomes managed, controlled, bureaucratised, impersonal. All this (to extend Wolfe and Braverman's earlier insights) develops rapidly in the period of late capitalism, and just as we have seen workers' rights sullied under the impact of neo-liberal policies, so also citizenship has been denuded in progressive stages. Such an outlook is present, to a degree, in the work of scholars like Robert Putnam and pundits like Hugh McKay. They tend, however, to fail to locate it structurally in conditions of the capitalist marketplace and their solutions can be little more than therapeutic psychobabble dressed up in compromised terms like 'social capital'. (For anyone trained in Marxist political economy, the term 'social capital' is simply vacuous.)

In short, to use Alan Wolfe's words, politics is 'floating somewhere above society rather than being a part of it' (Wolfe 1977: 312-13). A democratic social contract is severed and power is concentrated in the executive branch of government and senior levels of the bureaucratic machine. 'We did not know' suddenly becomes 'nobody knew' because nobody is in control, just an impersonal board of executive officers with no place in a chain of accountability and answerable to no one, not even their unknown selves. This is beyond Orwellian. Indeed, 'doublespeak' has become 'nospeak'.

As we see our mass media blindly accepting and regurgitating the latest meaningless sound bite from John Howard ('We've moved on') it is possible we are witnessing the steady erosion, if not death, of politics in Australia. Politics in a democracy requires rich and informed dialogue. It hinges upon genuine contest and debate about ideas, policies and visions. 'We've moved on' is, by contrast, the politics of the instantaneous, the here and now, the sound bite. It signals a politics without memory and government without the very capacity for accountability. The refusal of Government figures to acknowledge, let alone apologise, for their lies (and not only lies about Iraq — 'children overboard', indeed) is an outrageous affront to democratic sentiment. Until recently, the major political opposition in Australia was effectively becalmed by sound bite politics. 'Me too' was the only sound it could mutter when fear of a public predetermined and packaged by the public relations

industry predominated. With Latham's ascension to the Labor leadership, there was a glimmer of hope, a sense of alternatives. Yet, following Labor's defeat at the federal election, the standard soul-searching has produced the inevitable sacrificing of soul at the altar of political expediency. Mindless factional deals, the accommodation of hacks, time-servers and loyal but dull operatives, the positive gestures towards the ruling class (affectionately dubbed the business community) — this is the stuff of Labor tradition today. In such a context, the prospects of a democratic resurgence appear bleak.

Faith cannot, however, be put in political parties alone, and the growing strength of Green politics (understood broadly rather than just electorally) may be indicative of political renewal. The Australian people need to be reminded constantly of their capacity for citizenship, for active engagement in political life. When up to half a million people marched, in Sydney alone, against the impending invasion of Iraq, a strong signal was sent to government. That signal, however, was ignored, popular feeling was trampled on and we were fed lies and more lies and a grovelling mass media peddled them with enthusiasm. In this instance, however, the Government's shrugging aside of popular action in the streets did not mean that the state will always treat people with contempt. It really depends upon the degree to which decisions have been made and are set in stone. If there is still room to move, protest can be of the utmost significance. Government unresponsiveness to the Iraq protests simply proved that, despite the blustering dishonesty of Howard, troops had already been committed.

There will still be moments when it is vital for the people's presence to be felt in the streets. To imagine otherwise permits the triumph of defeatist amnesia. 'Never again' is becoming a tired old slogan, but we, as citizens in a formal, if not substantive, democracy, cannot afford to forget once more. We must remember the lies told and the crimes committed in our name and we must hold not only politicians but also (and perhaps most importantly) the media accountable. The very act of remembering, of speaking truth to power, may just bring politics back to life. First, however, we have to remember what politics is and is not. For too many opportunists, those who get aphrodisiacal kicks out of power, and political scientists, politics is a cynical game. Yet, as the late Paul Wellstone, a populist Democrat Congressman, once remarked forcefully:

Politics is not about power. Politics is not about money. Politics is not about winning for the sake of winning. Politics is about the improvement of people's lives. It's about advancing the cause of peace and justice in our country and in our world. Politics is about doing well for people (cited in Franken 2003: 205).

Such is the spirit that informs Graham Maddox's work. May he live long enough to witness a genuine politics rise again out of the ashes of corporate greed, government unaccountability, public distrust and rising despair. The rebuilding of a vital public sphere is the urgent task of our times.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Written by Andrew Davies, *A Very Peculiar Practice* was produced by the BBC between May 1986 and April 1988. It was a savage critique of Thatcherism and its impact upon the public sphere, particularly education and health.

<sup>2</sup> A delicious trail of intrigue surrounds Penguin's almost non-publication of *The Hawke Government and Labor Tradition*. Suffice to say it involves an embittered character at Penguin who had, so it seems, something to do with the Hawke Government, if not Labor tradition.

<sup>3</sup> The complaints were investigated and found seriously deficient: ABC Complaints Review Executive, 'Determination of a series of complaints from Senator Richard Alston, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, on 28 May 2003'. Note that, initially, only 2 of the minister's 68 complaints were upheld and, as a media scholar, I would have thrown those out also. Take John Shovelan's admittedly sarcastic (but not merely sarcastic) observation: 'Oh the civility of this US military. The daily Pentagon briefing begins with an illustration of its mercy and kindness' (p. 97). This was a clever reflection on the actual brutality of combat, on the hypocrisy of the Pentagon, on the stripping of humanity from the language of power. Indeed, it is an example of excellent journalism. Alston even had the hide to complain that there was 'minimal coverage of Australia's troops in the conflict and their strategic achievements' (p. 5), when such coverage was restricted severely (indeed, effectively banned) by the Government.

<sup>4</sup> One of the early indications of *Time's* partial rethink was the headline **The Mess in Iraq** (9 June 2003).

## References

- Adatto, K 1993, *Picture Perfect: The Art and Artifice of Public Image Making*, Basic Books, New York.
- Barnett, RJ 1996, 'The Terrorism Trap'. *The Nation*, 2 December. *The Nation* on-line archive, <http://www.thenation.com>, 8 October 2001.
- Bernstein, C 1992, 'The Idiot Culture', *Focus* section of the *Weekend Australian*, 13-14 June, (originally published in *The New Republic*).
- Boggs, C 2000, *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere*, The Guildford Press, New York.
- Braverman, H 1974, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Monthly Review Press, New York.
- Broinowski, Alison 2003, *Howard's War*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne.
- Englehardt, T 2004, 'The CIA Did It', *TomDispatch.com* (a project of the *Nation Institute*) <http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?emx=x&pid=1538>; 11 July; 12/7/04

- Franken, A 2003, *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*, Dutton, New York.
- Gearty, C 2004, 'A Misreading of the Law', *London Review of Books*, 19 February, on-line edition, [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n04/gear01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n04/gear01_.html) ; 16/7/04.
- Hitchens, C 2001, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, Text Publishing, Melbourne.
- Johnson, C 2000, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, Henry Holt and Company, New York.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2004, ? *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic*, Henry Holt and Company, New York.
- Klein, N 2004, 'Baghdad Year Zero: Pillaging Iraq in Pursuit of a Neocon Utopia', *Harper's Magazine*, September, 43-53.
- Macdonald, D 1983 [1952], 'Masscult & Midcult', in his *Against the American Grain*, Da Capo Press, New York.
- Maddox, G 1989, *The Hawke Government and Labor Tradition*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2000, 'Australian Universities in Crisis', *Prometheus*, vol. 18. no. 3, 327-32.
- Mahajan, R 2002, *The New Crusade: America's War on Terrorism*, Monthly Review Press, New York.
- Marden, P 2003, *The Decline of Politics: Governance, Globalisation and the Public Sphere*, Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Orwell, G 1962 [1957], 'Politics and the English Language', in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- Parenti, M 2002, *The Terrorism Trap: September 11 and Beyond*, City Lights Books, San Francisco.
- Rampton, S & Stauber J 2003, *Weapons Of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq*, Hodder Headline, Sydney.
- Scheuer, J 2001, *The Sound Bite Society: how television helps the right and hurts the left*, Routledge, New York.
- Sontag, S 2004, 'Regarding the Torture of Others', *The New York Times*, 23 May.
- Ware, M 2004, 'Meet the New Jihad', *Time* magazine, 5 July.

Warde, I 2004, 'Iraq: A License to Loot the Land', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (as part of *The Guardian Weekly*), May.

Watson, D 2003. *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*, Knopf, Sydney.

Wolfe, A 1977, *The Limits of Legitimacy: Political Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism*, The Free Press, New York.