THE SENTIMENTAL BLOKE

PHILLIP ADAMS became a communist in his teens, and an advertising agency director in his 20s. He is a well-known broadcaster and commentator. He presents Late Night Live on ABC Radio National, and is a columnist with the Weekend Australian. He is thought a strong possibility to become the next Managing Director of SBS Television.

In one of your newspaper columns recently you lampooned the Liberal Party for believing in God, Sovereign and Theory (GST), but above all Theory. Do you see it as a good thing that it now seems to be the Right rather than the Left which is wedded to the pursuit of abstract principles?

It certainly helps you see where they’re coming from, doesn’t it? It is very new to them, and I don’t think they’ll keep doing it, particularly after the experience they’ve had with the GST—and also perhaps observing what’s happened to Bush. But it is a sort of role reversal. Our tradition—by which I mean the Left in the broadest and fuzziest sense—has always been burdened with theory, and now we’re groping around trying to find another one.

Does the Left really need another one?

Yes, I think it does. I think the world needs another one. Because all there is now, apart from a few energetic people on the fringes, is just a big wobbling mass in the middle. It’s awfully hard to see fundamental differences of belief systems. I was interested to read the introduction to Paul Kelly’s recent book The End of Certainty, because it’s so committed; it’s a really gung-ho piece of writing in favour of what he calls the realists, versus the sentimentalists. Now I’m still a sentimentalist. I still feel that, if we...
were wrong, we were wrong for the right reasons, whereas if these bastards are right, they're right for the wrong reasons. And if you put it to Kelly, is he convinced, if his juggling really starts accelerating, that there'll be any attention to social justice at all, there's a little silence and then he says “no, I'm not”. And I think everyone senses that.

I'm perfectly willing to give up a lot of the intellectual baggage of the Left; I didn't go into a great emotional decline when Bob Carr told the Fabian Society that socialism was dead. I don't really care what the mechanism is as long as, at the end of the day, there is social justice.

I suppose the problem with those sentiments for people who are involved in day-to-day politics is that they have something to say about ends, but not means.

I concede that; I've never been very good at means. What I've done, I've done through contacts, through networks. I'm a member of the ALP but I've never been to a branch meeting—I've got a special dispensation. I'm at a distance from all those grass-roots processes, and I've never really understood them or been comfortable with them. I've always tended to focus on abstract ideas, rather than on how you get from A to B. In my experience you did that by talking to the prime minister. So that really devalues my political experience.

Many people see the Right now not just as the ideologists, but also as radicals. If that's correct, are you happy to be counted among the conservatives?

If you're playing those sort of word-games, then yes, I suppose so. The fact is, all of us are creatures of our time. My influences when I was growing up were a lot of romantic Comms, and you don't really escape that. Like most members of the Communist Party I used to go into the International Bookshop and buy all the Russian volumes of Marx and Engels—even though I didn't read much of it.

What's extraordinary at the moment though, is the fluidity of the situation, the way no-one can predict outcomes. It's almost as though Chaos Theory has come into politics. Not long ago you could talk to some of the really heavy-hitters from major English newspapers, and they'd tell you that Major had had it, and the election would be a triumph for the Labour Party. A week later, the same people are telling you that not only did the Labour Party lose the election, but they are now effectively destroyed and can never win again. Then there's another crisis for Major. We all heard that the Republicans had permanent tenure of the White House—and a year ago I would have thought that was plausible. We now know that that wasn't true. So there's this extraordinary volatility, and in this volatility, a lot of things can happen.

It's because people have no memory, I think. People live in this huge, instantaneous 'now' of the media. They're very susceptible to change, which means you have opportunities to change views quite radically—with the recognition that those same views are likely to change as radically again. History no longer moves in a long, majestic procession; time is shattered. Television has shattered time with commercials and fast editing. You're in Yugoslavia one second looking at the war, then you're in a Milo commercial, then you're back in Somalia. And I don't think any political theory begins to take this into account. That, to me, is the dilemma of the Left and also of conservatives, because they're still living in another world.

So within that wobbly mass, as you called it, where do you locate yourself? Does it still make sense to you to talk of being on the Left?

I hope so. I use the Left not so much as a position, but as a direction. I think socialism has gone for all practical purposes for the next 20 years—we'll have to brush it off and bring it back later. Certainly communism's looking just a little bit shop-soiled. But I think we'd be mad to give up all the language that we use, all the shorthand. It's still a useful piece of shorthand.

Is it more important to you to be considered left, or to be considered liberal?

I'd much prefer to be considered left than liberal. But I'm in a context where I've got to be very careful what I do. I've been the permitted leftwinger in rightwing publications for a long time, often used to prove their diversity. As long as they've got a couple of characters there like me and Humphrey McQueen, they can say it's OK. Things have changed dramatically in this respect. I remember the legendary editor of The Age, Graham Perkin, bemoaning the fact that he couldn't find a good rightwing columnist—he felt the paper needed one, just to sharpen the dialogue. And now editors believe, with some conviction I think, that the opposite is true.

And is it?

If you go through the names of people writing in left-of-centre publications, so many of them are very ancient. They're my generation and even older. There aren't a lot of new voices that you could take to Paul Kelly or whoever and say, look, this is really good. Especially stylistically—the Right are now the great stylists, certainly in the US.

When Robert Hughes was in Australia recently he said that, as far as the art world was concerned, the function of democracy was to safeguard a space for elitism. Is that the space you see the ABC occupying?

I find the Julie Burchill phenomenon interesting; the attitude that says that popular culture is where it's at, and the important thing to write about, usually with approval, is the latest Amie Schwarzenegger movie. There's been a decay of high culture, of what used to be elitist, and a very strong move towards populism. It's now OK to look at commercial television or to go to Hoyts cinema complex and get your rocks off there.

If you look at Radio National, the poor old thing is vulnerable to attack from without and indeed from within, because it gets such miniscule audiences. Now privately I can say, yes, but we know who listens. If you did it as a Who's Who, rather than counting the numbers, it would be very impressive. But you can't save its bacon by saying that Bob Carr listens every night while he's driving between meetings, or that Tom Fitzgerald never misses the program. It doesn't matter.
So how do you justify its existence?

Well, I don't think I have to really. In practical terms, you just do pious things like pointing to the ABC Charter and saying that this is the only program area that accords to Charter. But I'd also defend it because if you took it off the air, I don't know where the new ideas would trickle in. I had a public blue with David Hill about it once. I said "look, let's concede that the ABC is leftwing and biased. Let's be honest about this, Radio National's a seething hotbed of political correctness". Surely we can justify that by pointing out that it's a fart in a windstorm compared to the overwhelming bombast and bigotry that's pouring out of commercial radio. Now David, of course, can't accept that argument; he can't even allow it to get on the table. And I can see why he can't.

Do you accept the description of yourself as an intellectual?

No. It's a faintly embarrassing word, it's always made me laugh a little when I see people applying it to themselves or to others. I'd prefer to be called a dilettante.

But you're clearly interested in ideas.

Yes, although not necessarily political ideas. They're often ideas which have absolutely no political connection. In fact, one of the things that makes me less passionate about political issues is that in politics you can reach a stage where you just think the answer is obvious and then you move on to look for other areas.

To what extent do you think ideas play a role in domestic, day-to-day politics?

I remember asking the parliamentary librarian in Canberra who uses the library, and she said "virtually nobody". She said you could guess who goes in; I did, and I was right. Apart from those individuals, National Party members are the biggest users, because they've got longer train trips. So basically I don't think politicians read any more than Australian businesspeople read. Very few of them in my experience are comfortable in the world of ideas. They wait until an idea is bitting them on the bum and then they react to it—and even then it's usually just the stuff that the pollsters alert them to.

The ALP is a case in point. Bill Kelty and I have been working on a plot to revive the flagging fortunes of the ALP by making some dramatic structural changes. It's an idea which in its essence involves turning almost every second issue into a conscience vote, rather than simply having a lot of party dogma that allows intellectual laziness on behalf of the mass of parliamentarians. The way the party is structured at the moment militates against the penetration of ideas, or even of genuine debate.

You once said that the monarchy, having outlived its usefulness, would also outlive its uselessness. Do you still think that's the case?

Not in Australia. It doesn't anger people very much any more, and finally it's easier to laugh things to death. We've dumped so much of the imperial connection already, and what's left is so fragile and so tenuous that I think the fight's almost over. I think the conservatives will stop fighting on it, just as they stopped fighting on imperial honours.

Do you think that will turn out to be a significant moment for Australia?

Not terribly, I wouldn't have thought. Because it won't be achieved through passion, but rather through osmosis. And if you write down a list of the issues that we thought we were going to galvanise public opinion 10 years ago, most of them have just disappeared. Abortion doesn't have anything like the effect it's had in America. No-one's really discussing bringing back capital punishment. Maybe there's something in the water here that makes us less passionate, less angry—something which in its own way is just as capable of facilitating social change as activism.

Tolerance in Australia, I've often argued, isn't a positive virtue so much as a lack of intellectual energy or lack of passion. But it's produced a society where, for instance, we've coped pretty well with the AIDS crisis—better than any other society that I can think of. We went from being one of the stiffest censors in the world, to being the most laissez-faire. We just gave up on things like that. Eventually we just said 'Oh fuck, who cares?'. And that's not a bad national motto, when you contrast it with other nations that care too much. And so Australia probably gets further than most other societies without too much conflict. There is one huge anomaly, though, in this picture—our attitude to black Australia. I think when the fallout from the Mabo case starts to involve land claims, then things are going to get very nasty.

Do you still get a lot of hate mail?

No, not much. And that's another measure of the fact that nothing makes people angry any more. If I felt like it—and sometimes I did—I used to sit down and write a column that I knew would get sugarbags of mail. If you were to give me that job today, I'd find it very hard. When you expect anger, or at least some reaction, you don't get one. I find now that I can do a piece even on commercial radio about the desirability of the total decriminalisation of all drugs. People just ring up and say "yeah, that's a good idea". It's moving from tolerance towards passivity.

Probably the only exception is environmental issues. When we started to promote the greenhouse problem through the Commission for the Future, there was an almost apocalyptic view among greens, almost like Koreans waiting for the rapture. We had a big meeting in Melbourne with an American scientist who'd done some of the first computer models on greenhouse. There was a palpable sense of disappointment in the room when he said the oceans weren't going to go up six feet. They wanted to hear that it was the end of the world. They also wanted to hear that the enemy was the multinational corporation. When he said, well, it's termites farting and cows belching and gas rising from rice paddies, there was the same sense of disappointment. So the green movement has picked up a lot of the same wafly, romantic, quixotic feeling that used to be a part of the Communist Party.

MIKE TICHER is ALR's assistant editor.