

Danny Boy



They cheered, the 30,000 who converged on Melbourne's Bourke Street on the first Friday of January. Danny Johnson stood on a platform and they cheered when he said interest rates should be reduced by four or five or six percentage points. They screamed "No!" when Danny Johnson asked they if they wanted Paul Keating to be the next Prime Minister.

How did this happen to Danny Johnson? How did he get to the point where he was introduced to the adoring, teeming throng by Australian Small Business Association national director Peter Boyle? How did he get to the point where he was able to lead

a march that included placards warning of the Fabian Society conspiracy and one that read: "Armed forces against inept government"? How? Demolition Danny, the little feller from Warracknabeal in western Victoria, a small businessman. All he did

was send a letter to his local paper denouncing the Kirner and Hawke governments. All he did was give voice to the pain and frustration of all the "little people" and the people in the bush.

The angels visited Danny Johnson and they were draped in the pages of Rupert Murdoch's *Herald-Sun* newspaper. Danny Johnson, the sort of person that newspaper editors would normally snub at a social function, became very useful. In the quiet news time before Christmas, he was perfect front-page news for the *Herald-Sun* which, under its new editorial management, could not be accused of

looking favorably at anything emanating from the Labor movement.

Johnson was calling on Victorians to stand up and be counted, to destroy the Kirner government, to destroy union bosses, to denounce all politicians, to march on Melbourne, the home of all this evil.

For the *Herald-Sun*, anxious to tap into anything that makes Labor look bad, Johnson—bald, bearded and in his 40s—was beautiful. It was one of the great partnerships; the *Herald-Sun* provided the publicity, anti-Labor groups of all shades did the organising. But they were almost too smart for themselves. After the Melbourne rally on 4 January, there was virtually nowhere else, in political terms, to take the protest.

Certainly, the *Herald-Sun* made the most of the impressive turnout. (One of its journalists, a former radio talk-back host, penned a glowing piece, claiming that the march was made up of "ordinary" Australians, that the "rent-a-crowd elements were on holiday". Where do they go, and do they get concessions for travelling in a group?) A couple of television journalists the following day, reporting on Johnson's claim that unnamed people had urged him to enter politics, even likened him to Lech Walesa.

But, in truth, the so-called Save Australia rally—and whatever similar demonstrations the Small Business Association can organise in other

capitals—will produce nothing of lasting benefit. Everyone knew that Joan Kirner's government commands little more than 30% support (that is, most Victorians hate it). What it showed was that many of the people trying to point out the problem should probably be pointing to themselves.

Let's share some of the thoughts of Danny Johnson, as told to an *Age* reporter. "I am not clever enough to say we want this or we want that. I need people to help me say what we want as policies. I am not qualified to do it all myself," he said. He hoped the rallies would attract people with answers. He did not know what the right policies were. On whether the "right" policies would be painless policies, he said: "I just cannot answer that. I would hope so, but I don't know...All I want is just a better deal for Australia and Australians." He blamed the Kirner government for not fighting harder to reduce interest rates. On how to cut interest rates without adverse trade effects, he said: "That's a very hard question for me to answer...If they can run a great country as America at 10% (rates), then surely something can be done here."

Mr Johnson blamed the federal government for the national debt. At the suggestion that most of the debt was private corporate debt, he said: "Who lets big corporations borrow more than they can ever hope to repay? I don't know what the answer is. All I am saying is there have been so many disasters, so many people

burnt, that it's got to be looked at. "I just want good honest representation, sensible policies, not squandering taxpayers' money...All I want is a government who can just implement the correct policies to restore the economy. I don't know why you keep hammering at me when you obviously know I have not got the answers. I am exactly what the papers say I am: a demolition contractor. All I want to do is wake people out there who can give you answers."

As the Americans say, 'there is no there there'. Not one idea. Sorry, there was one idea; that was to tell the world he had no ideas. The Labor cause is very ill in Victoria. The political wheel has turned and looks fixed to favour the conservative forces for many years. But the Save Australia rally was a politically unrealistic, futile exercise. The marchers have petitioned the Victorian governor, Dr McCaughey, to sack the Kirner government, but their attitude towards the only person who can replace Kirner—Liberal leader Alan Brown—was a disgrace. They told him they didn't want him at the rally but made certain he had to turn up. Then they abused him. Alan Brown is by no means a lovable figure, but the television pictures of him being harangued by one marcher were enough to make you want to send the Liberal leader a 'Best Wishes' card. That's how bad things can get in Victoria at the moment.

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Rural Revivalism

Danny Johnson was the prophet of a simple faith, declaring, "I'm just starting something that I hope will bring to the fore the right people who can institute the changes we need to get this country on the right track."

Sixty years ago, during the Great Depression, the Advance Australia News Service espoused exactly the same naive faith in the *Ouyen Mail*:

One is convinced that if we had honourable men at the head of our governments and honourable men in places of

importance, honourable leaders in Australia, they could sweep away unemployment without the slightest difficulty.

Several commentators have already remarked on the parallels between the two periods. Since the January rally, there has been some talk that Danny Johnson's rural movement heralds a

return of the proto-fascist movements which menaced labour in Victoria and New South Wales during the Depression.

As is now well-known, thousands of ex-soldiers and "loyal citizens" joined vigilante outfits to protect Australia from communism, most of them convinced that violence might be necessary if Australia were to be saved from the socialism of the Lang and Scullin Labor governments.

In the Riverina, a populist leader named Charles Hardy held the national headlines for a few weeks. He was hailed in the mainstream press as "the Cromwell of Riverina"—a revolutionary title if ever there was one.

Like Danny Johnson, he talked of Anzac, lower taxes, an end to politics and the evils of Labor. In his efforts to "save Australia" he called for the secession of Riverina from Lang's New South Wales and for the creation of a provisional government of experts, supported by local branches set up on quasi-fascist lines.

But how far do the parallels between the two periods extend? And what are the differences?

Then, as now, world commodity prices were falling. Banks were foreclosing on debts, unemployment was rising and farmers were blaming Labor governments, trade unions and socialists for their difficulties. And then, as now, rural people were bitter in the knowledge that city folks and city politicians seemed to have no idea of the hardship of life in the bush.

The secret armies were not the only conservative response to labour during the depression. While the militia enlisted in private, a public organisation, the All for Australia League, began signing up "citizens". It appealed to patriotism, decency and male pride.

On 2 March 1931, the All for Australia League was introduced to Danny Johnson's hometown of Warracknabeal. The organiser was a Mr F M Thompson. In words that Mr Thompson explained that the new organisation was "a non-political or-

ganisation". It was "the voice of the people...a plain organisation of Australian citizens, formed for patriotic purposes". In short, he declared, it was "an Australian political vigilance committee".

Now clearly, there is a menacing construction which could be placed on those final words. Thompson was well aware that secret, paramilitary units of the so-called White Army had



recently been formed in country towns throughout that region. But Thompson was one who saw the dangers of vigilante violence and who believed that the Labor governments could be ousted by conventional political pressure. In fact, he warned off White Army members, telling them that:

All over Australia meetings are being held by serious, sensible people, talking of rebellion and secession. This should not be going on in a country such as this.

In my book on these events I've told the story of how the White Army actually mobilised throughout the Mallee-Wimmera on 6 March, only four days after Mr Thompson's speech.

The mobilisation was probably a mistake, a sign of the indiscipline inherent in the militia's decentralised structure. But the scale of the stand-to indicated how widespread were the fears and misapprehensions which induced conservative men to resort to extremist action.

Since the early 20s, paramilitary citizens' groups had been used as

strike breakers. But, as we now know, they never intervened in the political process itself. Mr Thompson got his way. The All for Australia League transformed itself into the United Australia Party—the non-political party.

When the conservatives finally forced elections in New South Wales and Canberra, they were able to mobilise the disaffected "citizens" behind the conservative cause. They won an election by depicting Labor as a bunch of liars, criminals and traitors, and unionists as the dupes of communists. Plan B—the plan to mobilise the secret armies—proved unnecessary.

In my view, those who talk of a re-emergence of the secret armies are guilty of sensationalism. The farmers of Victoria are not about to fix bayonets and march on Spring Street, And if some did, they would achieve nothing. Too many of the objective conditions which provoked the male citizens of 1931 to enlist in covert militias are absent. Their Australia was divided by racism, by industrial unrest and by the immeasurable trauma endured by returned soldiers and the women who cared for them. Throughout the 20s, ideologues of both the Left and Right attacked liberal democracy. There were acolytes of both Stalin and Mussolini who advocated violence as the sole road to salvation. Each was an incitement to the other to use force.

These preconditions are far less evident today. But that is not to say that the forces which assembled for the march on 4 January can be written off. They overtly challenge the attempts to create a just, pluralist society which has come so far since World War Two. As the banners of the marchers made plain, the politics of respectable thuggery are still capable of stirring loyalty and passion. If the conservatives were able to turn this kind of 'me-only' patriotism into votes, the result would be the politics of red-neck 'commonsense', a politics which vilifies concern for wage justice, the environment, women's rights and multi-culturalism as so much tomfoolery—or as something worse.

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Gulfest

By now the media — and everybody else — have woken up to the fact that the anti-Iraq war is a TV war. "The first war ever to begin on live TV," as one reporter gleefully put it. It has worked wonders for the ratings of the debt-beleaguered Ten network and established once and for all the supremacy of CNN's style of coverage, forcing the other US networks to imitate it.

But while the media fill in the dull patches by reporting about the media reporting the war, we are entitled to ask whether the usual liberal soul-searching about war, censorship and the media really goes far enough. As television entertains us with the Pentagon-controlled pool footage, perhaps we should entertain the hypothesis that the media have become a dangerous weapon in war rather than its liberal conscience.

As the black CNN reporter in Baghdad with the unlikely name of Bernard Shaw and a magnificent baritone voice said: "Wherever you are in the world, ask yourself, why are the governments of Iraq and the US allowing this report from Baghdad to get out of here to you'."

TV was implicated in the process which led to war. In competing with each other the US networks fought to implicate themselves in the diplomatic endgame towards war. American ABC's Ted Koppel dined with the Jordanian royal family, then secured an exclusive briefing from the Iraqi foreign ministry to pass on the message he had elicited from Jordan. Not to be outdone, Dan Rather went after and got an exclusive interview with Saddam for CBS. The political talking heads followed news-anchor celebrities into the fray. Bush sent Iraqi TV an eight-minute video tape putting the US position; Saddam replied by sending US TV networks a 90-minute video. On the eve of the US counter-invasion of Kuwait, James Baker, George Bush and Iraq's Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz all appeared live, while pre-recorded Saddam was beamed from Iraqi TV. When a diplomatic letter can take three days

from out-tray to in-tray, why not go live on CNN and blast off a diplomatic retort and a propaganda release for the general public simultaneously? New media technology is reducing the time between diplomatic moves and counter-moves, not to mention the time between diplomatic gambits and publicity stunts.



The politicians and the military fight too to present their chosen images. The Bush campaign was stage managed by Sig Rogich, a former Las Vegas advertising man with interests in property and casinos. Rogich had a set specially built at Dhahran for Bush's pre-war warm-up visit, complete with neat rows of F-15 and F-16 warplanes lined up in shot as a backdrop. Rogich stage-managed images of Bush walking tall against desert sunsets, Bush the war veteran talking man-to-man with the troops. Given that last November US polls showed 50% of the US population were opposed to the war, this expensive spectacle had its uses — support for the Bush war went up to 60%.

The Pentagon has also found out how to use TV as a weapon. One wonders if it is any accident that the US airstrikes seemed to be timed to make the US east coast evening news. Peter Smark in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and other veteran journalists have begun reminiscing about how in Vietnam journalists 'told the truth' about the war, thus hastening its end. Which just goes to show what a slim grasp on history much journalistic writing displays. Only a few independent journalists stood against the tide of imperial opinion. Just to be on the safe side, the Pentagon has greatly restricted media access to its dirty little wars — not to mention the complete lack of coverage of those fought by the CIA.

Given the multinational nature of the anti-Iraq force, an office called the Joint Information Bureau (JIB) has been set up, whose purpose is to manipulate what we see from the Gulf. To my knowledge only John Pilger, writing in the London *Guardian*, has acknowledged its existence and its purpose. That the JIB would use the media to convey an 'acceptable' version of the war was evident even before it began. TV news showed pictures of hundreds of military transport aircraft landing in the Gulf. The fact that in this hastily prepared invasion planes were being despatched half-full was not mentioned.

In going in to battle with each other for ratings, the media happily surrender to the demands placed on them by the military machine. Even when they firmly believe they are shooting in the cause of liberal good sense and free speech, they violently defeat that objective by turning the moral need to know into sheer fascination. Meanwhile we flip channels from the tennis to the news and back again, to keep track of the score.

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