What were the reasons for Australia's push for involvement in and escalation of the Vietnam War? Has the investment of the ruined lives of many Australian people, not to mention the Vietnamese, paid off dividends for Australia? According to Michael Sexton there were two reasons for this policy — "both unstated and normally obscured by rhetoric about the downward thrust of Asian hordes" — firstly, that it would be to Australia's advantage that America be locked into the South East Asian region by their involvement in Vietnam; and secondly, that by accepting assistance from Australia, the United States Government would feel obliged to protect Australia should it be threatened by any South East Asian source. As Sexton points out, this policy has had precisely the opposite effect: "ten years after the Australian decision to send troops, the Americans had withdrawn from the Asian mainland" — with their tail between their legs, and with total casualties of 55,000 dead and 300,000 wounded (this does not include the 55,000 US veterans who since returning home from Vietnam have committed suicide.)

The decision by the Menzies' Government was taken in a political climate in Australia where the Government in such a strong position was able to effectively gag any real public debate. It is here, according to Sexton, that implications for Australia's foreign policy may be drawn, for as he points out this system of decision-making remains unaltered. "There is, therefore, a considerable risk that decisions as misconceived as that of 1965 will be made in the 1980's — with much more disastrous consequences".

War For The Asking is a compelling book, both in its content and its message. Despite the many quoted texts it is easy to read with Sexton's lucid style and hard to put down once begun. Hopefully many people will read it and notch it up as one more contribution to the public debate that must become reality if the world is to successfully navigate the nuclear waters of the 1980's.


Donald Horne has followed Death of the Lucky Country, his 1976 essay on the end of the Whitlam Era, with another political "quickie" Winner Take All, his avowed aim being to write a short book on the 1980 Federal election and its meaning. In some respects, however, Horne's new book is more about "lack of meaning" than "meaning".

There are four important strands running through the book: the obfuscatory nature of the 1980 election campaign; an analysis of where the Labor Party is at of now; the government-forming process in Australia; and the power of the received wisdom or "common sense" in shaping the political values and judgement of the electorate. Each of these points is well worth discussing.

In a chapter entitled "Heroes, Villains and Fools", Donald Horne draws attention to how election campaigns often fail to come to grips with the important issues facing the community. For a variety of reasons the matters of real substance are played down — or even completely ignored. He argues that the 1980 election campaign was a stark example of this over-simplification of complex issues.

The central economic issue facing Australia last year was the imminent development "boom" and its likely consequences — economic, social, political. However, there wasn't, Horne says, real debate between the government coalition and Labor about these matters of far-reaching importance. Nor was there any real attempt to explain that large-scale unemployment was due to the end of the post-second world war boom; nor to explain why "managed" capitalism had failed.

Money Ethos

The coalition's lack of interest in a serious explanation is obvious enough for Horne not to pursue this point; what is more important is Labor's failure. Here he suggests that the Labor Party is inhibited by its bi-partisan acceptance of the national belief in development and economic growth, which he argues lies at the bottom of the "ruling 'pragmatism' of Australians,", a pragmatism that "sees money as the measure of all things." Under the impetus of this money ethos, enthusiasm for "national development"(in the case of Queensland and Western Australia, state development) becomes "a passion for development pursued not in rational terms of cost and benefit but for its own sake", as something inherently good. What the Labor Party needs to do, according to Horne, is to question this philosophy on two levels: first, does it make sense; but more important, to ask who will benefit; who gains, who and what loses?

Apart from these general considerations, development should be effectively taxed and big business concessions abandoned; more of the public money now spent in helping transnational and national corporations could be spent on government prospecting, government mines and government processing-plants.
As well as dealing directly with the development boom, Donald Horne deals with the allied economic and social costs: the manufacturing industry run-down; inflation; cyclical and structural unemployment; and loss of Australian control of Australian assets and resources. He develops an important point which perhaps helps to explain the evolution of his ideological position since the 1960s.

In the late 1960s the Australian business class failed the test of maintaining the national interest. It is part of the further development of Horne's "Lucky Country" thesis that Australian business derives a sense of self-importance from its old and new imperial connections; and an accession of foreign money is a measure of national importance regardless of the effect of national independence Horne won't have this. So he now casts Australian business as a comprador class prepared to sell out completely.

Despite an Australian belief that Australians are on the same side as the exploiters of other people's resources, what has been happening to Australia is a degree of Latin-Americanisation. Western Australia and Queensland are more than a little down the path of becoming banana republics; what matters is keeping the foreign companies happy. Horne stresses that it is not at all fanciful to point out that big transnational mining companies have been known to favour secessionist movements (for example, Katanga), that at least in the case of the United States, political interference by big corporations can be linked with overt diplomatic activity and covert intelligence activity.

The Labor Party

Donald Horne is decidedly ambivalent about the Labor Party. On the one hand, he suggests 1980 saw the resurrection of Labor; in electoral support, if not in seats won, the Labor Party came within one percentage point of being preferred by a majority of Australian voters. On the other hand, he stresses the extraordinary fragility of Labor's apparent realignment and how Labor fears policies and actions (for example, the pre-election mobilisation), that will put at risk its ability to form a "legitimate" government. Is Labor merely tolerated on Liberal terms as part of a two-party system, or is it a quite independent party with its own distinct policies?

Nowhere is this dilemma clearer than in the areas of foreign and defence policies. In this connection Horne writes of the long debilitation of the Labor Party and its timidity in taking an independent, Australian stance. Yet, he is timid himself about Labor repudiating the American alliance. The odds are too great. In any case, the alliance with the United States is "common sense", even if unpalatable "common sense".

Donald Horne believes that the American alliance is based on two related factors: first, Australia's "traditional vassal's view of the world"; and, second, fear of having to fend for itself. Through their long-standing association with Britain and then America, Australians, although subordinate, see themselves as part of the dominant group that runs the world. But by accepting a separate Australian identity and separate interests, they would move outside the dominant group and put their national existence at risk. All this is "common sense". Hence, the American alliance is "common sense".

Non-alignment and the American Alliance

When discussing this vital issue Horne veers between optimism and "realism"; but ultimately he shows a preference for the "realistic" option. While he acknowledges the possibility of certain contrary strands in a viable, alternative strategic imagination — the danger of great power entanglements, the virtue of non-alignment, etc — he leaves one in no doubt that in his opinion Labor has little choice about the American alliance. It is part of the dominant "common sense"; repudiation will bring terrible economic retribution; the importance of the United States' Australian bases is just so great that American intervention, perhaps in secret, will stop the election of or throw out a Labor government. In addition, if there is a divided loyalty, ASIO's adherence to the United States' intelligence community transcends loyalty to an elected Australian government. So Horne seems stuck on the horns of his own dilemma. He urges independence on Labor vis-à-vis the Liberals, but when it comes to the Liberals' international backers, the United States, he just cannot bring himself to visualise an effective Labor challenge.

In searching for an answer to his own puzzlement about why in Australia the Labor Party is seen to be a threat to the natural order of things, Horne follows many predecessors into what is a pretty vain discussion about turning the Labor Party into a "genuine liberal party". He, like others, buys the idea that if only the Labor Party severed its links with the trade unions and abandoned socialism completely, it would be acceptable to a wider spectrum of the electorate, and so not such a different case as other social-democratic parties. (In other sections of the book Horne tends to contradict this judgment).
particular, the Labor Party would be more receptive and acceptable to the “new class” — bureaucrats, technocrats, teachers, publicists, artists, intellectuals, performers, promoters and students, as well as keepers of corner stores, small farmers, owners of small businesses, etc. However, Horne forgets that the Whitlam Labor Party of 1966-72 had a significant following of these people; and in fact the Labor Party has always had the support of some shopkeepers, farmers and small business people. It has always been a social coalition, if based on the trade unions.

**Australia and the United States**

Horne makes comparisons between Australian and American societies, but the differences are more significant than the similarities. For example, the United States before World War I had a far stronger socialist movement than Australia, although there was no American Labor Party. And where is the genuine American liberal party? One of the saving graces of the Australian Labor Party is that it has many militant union affiliates. Through these affiliations there are many radical and progressive inputs into Labor Party policies; to a large degree this is what makes the Labor Party what it is — gives it its “class basis”, if you like. If the Labor Party was dissolved, then another Labor Party would be formed. Moreover, Horne is a bit inconsistent on this point. In discussion the Labor Party’s difficulties due to the prevailing “common sense”, he stresses the urgent need to create a new Labor common sense, and he also describes the trade unions as the “greatest strength of the labour movement”.

Despite Donald Horne’s pessimism about Labor’s chances of forming a government with a really independent foreign policy, he seems to believe genuinely that voting in elections matters, even if it may be largely for the sake of appearances. Horne is concerned that the 1980 election — like especially the 1954, 1961 and 1969 elections — wasn’t fair. In 1980 the winning coalition of parties, with a margin of one percent of the votes, obtained twenty per cent more parliamentary representatives. So, under every normal heading of political reform, Australia as a liberal-democratic society is uniquely unsatisfactory in terms of fairness.

**Democratic Government**

Not particularly enamoured of government, even representative democracy, Horne is inclined as a democratic ideal towards anarchism. Short of a complete radical reform towards social and participatory democracy, however, we are left, he recognises, with the need to elect a government. Under these circumstances we need fairer voting systems, public funding of elections, fixed terms for parliaments and constitutional amendments in order to entrench responsible government. Then a government supported by a majority in the more democratically elected part of parliament could not be brought down between elections by an upper house or an elected executive person.

Horne favours multi-member constituencies, providing a proportionate representation, which would come close to reflecting exactly the voting support for parties and groups. Hence, any government formed from this sort of politically representative system would be a politically democratic government — at least as far as formal rules can go in making it possible. But, as Horne readily acknowledges such changes could occur and there still may not be the possibility of a genuinely democratic government: there are powerful constraints, one of which is the power of “common sense”. It is in this area of ideology and culture that we can see an important novelty in Horne’s thinking.

**Common Sense**

In dealing with why so many people believe that unemployment is caused or aggravated by “dole-bludging”, Horne gives a simple, lucid exposition of the Gramscian marxist concept of “hegemony”.

.... the attitudes of those who command the economic system and control the economic surplus are likely to permeate society so widely and deeply, in ways of behaving as well as ways of thinking, that for many or most people these attitudes are “reality” and “common sense”. People “naturally” think and act in ways that suit the dominant class. Certain ways of behaving seem the only way to behave (p.32).

Leaving aside the point that he uses “common sense” in a not strictly Gramscian way but more or less as a synonym for “hegemony”, Donald Horne’s introduction of a Gramscian mode into his thinking is perhaps the most striking single feature of his new book. This novel strand in his thought suggests both Horne’s openness to fresh ways of viewing the reality, that he is probing, and the evolution of his ideological position. There is still a bit of the old pragmatism, but the strength of his analysis is sharpened by a distinct partisanship, for which he apologises, but in which he persists, often most eloquently.

Horne divides the dominant “common sense” into five subdivisions: the notion of Australia as a modernised, industrial society; Australia as a capitalistic society; Australia as a liberal-democratic
society; a strand of the prevailing "wisdom" based on older, pre-industrialist values, especially the Christian religion and moral code, sexism and racism; and the strand of British colonial leftovers, royalism, etc. He then illustrates how the Liberal-Country Party coalition has drawn on this "common sense" to undermine constantly the legitimacy of Labor as an independent alternative government, although the Labor Party has sometimes been its own worst enemy by upholding elements of the dominant "common sense" such as mindless economic growth, racism, sexism etc.

The Media

The dominant "common sense" according to Horne, is part of the dominant culture, and the media dominate the public culture; they are "the principal storytellers of our modern life", offering "their visions of reality, of human values and national priorities and of 'common sense'". Horne considers the different ways business and trade union news is handled in the media; the unions, "the greatest single strength of the labour movement", are constantly represented as a threat to consumers and to society. Yet he does not very fully examine the role and importance of the media, generally, or, in particular, in the 1980 election. One of the conspicuous features of the recent Federal election campaign was the "fair go" that Labor received in some sections of the media. So much so that Mr Fraser felt obliged to chide some newspapers for their lack of support for the government. Although Horne recognises the uncertainty of Labor's legitimacy, he could have more deeply considered the function of the privately owned media in creating this state of affairs. How does the media operate in helping to create this marginal Labor legitimacy?

In place of what could have been a searching analysis and some bold prescription, we have a discussion of the role of the Canberra press gallery and a case for national affairs commentators — writers who produce regular analyses of different parts of society, seen as an interrelated whole, of which they try to make some sense. There is a critique of the narrow concentration on politics as viewed from parliament house in Canberra, "hard" news and crises such as the Khehlanzi fiasco of 1975, and personal and factional rivalries, that the media dramatise. But this is of little consequence in serious media reform. What needs to be considered are genuinely competing media outlets, either reformed or new, that create the possibility of a real development of Labor common sense.

Donald Horne recognises that it may be devastatingly difficult to change some aspects of Australia's dominant "common sense". After outlining a number of fairly modest institutional changes that Labor might initiate, Horne remarks that if these be thought revolutionary, then why don't we have such a revolution. Providing through collective or communal action, the sort of labour-intensive, low productivity quality-of-life programmes needed to overcome the social effects of high-productivity advanced technology would require a social revolution and a new kind of common sense. Horne urges a struggle for a new social morality of co-operation rather than the present one of competition and exploitative "growth", a morality in which what is praised as free enterprise is the free enterprise of the many expressions of human dignity — not a mere exaltation of greed".

Slight as it is, in some ways Winner Take All is Donald Horne's most important book. While many of its best ideas lack sufficient development, nevertheless it could be the start of public discussion of several important and valuable notions. Horne has come a long way from his days on the Observer and The Bulletin, when he sometimes espoused or fostered strongly conservative views. However, there were some hints of his present analysis at least as far back as the first edition of The Lucky Country (1964) which seems to have been a sort of bench mark — a perciptent and prescient book. Nonetheless, looked at from Horne's current ideological position, it now seems quite moderate. What strikes you about Winner Take All, even compared with Money Made Us (1976), is the much greater analytical thrust that has come with partisanship and commitment. Above all Horne comes across as a strong Australian patriot with a powerful belief in a better Australia.

Whereas in the 1960s he was a social critic probing Australian attitudes and beliefs but not strongly questioning capitalism, he now sees Australian capitalists as failing to fight for Australian independence and Australian advancement. He has largely lost hope in capitalism as a progressive force. He now looks to the labour movement, specifically the Labor Party, for national leadership in the work of creating an enlightened society. Where once he was inclined to describe pragmatically, now he comments forthrightly. Even if Winner Take All finally falls short of complete satisfaction, it has laid the basis for further important developments.