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INFORMING THE PUBLIC:
IS THERE A PLACE FOR
A CRITICAL HUMANITIES?

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In this talk, I wish to present some reflections on the public role of the humanities in Australia today—reflections that have been directly provoked by my experience over the first year of my presidency of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. This experience has demonstrated the difficulty of dealing with what I have come to regard as the contradiction between the Academy's need to maintain its access to the ear of government—a fundamental political objective—and our equally fundamental academic objective of pursuing our teaching and research without being compromised by their political repercussions. Once one takes over an executive role in this organisation, it becomes very clear that this contradiction is embedded in the Academy's function as a lobby group and as an elite component of the critical capacity of a democratic society. Over the last year, I have been impressed by how dramatically these two formations of our role have come into conflict, sometimes on a daily basis. Ultimately, however, my talk will not really be about the role of the President, or even of the Academy. My focus is upon the necessity, for the humanities in general, of finding ways to service and maintain both sides of this contradiction.

I took over the Presidency in November 2004. November is the month when the humanities must gather itself to repel attacks on its credibility provoked by the tabloid media's ritual ridiculing of the announcement of successful projects in the ARC grants round. November 2004 was no exception. A number of AAH Fellows were mentioned by name in an article written by Andrew Bolt, published first in the *Herald-Sun* and then in the rest of the Murdoch metropolitan papers, and their work was traduced. Research from across the spectrum of the humanities was targeted, from classics to contemporary gender studies, but it did seem that certain kinds of topics were regarded as sillier than others: gender, sexuality or popular culture. As President, it was important that I should speak out against such an article and defend the range and integrity of contemporary research in the humanities. Finding the avenue through which this might be done proved a little more difficult than one might have expected. *The Australian Higher Education Supplement* was at first disinclined to publish a response, but the *Herald-Sun* published our letter straight away.

Perhaps the reason why we were successful there is that Dr John Byron, the Executive Director of the AAH, tailored a letter that fitted extremely well with the tone and style of the newspaper, while nonetheless presenting a clear and effective response. I learnt a great deal from seeing how John developed this letter, demonstrating how important it is for us to respond in ways that do not simply opt for a stuffy and indignant statement of the value of what we do. There is a need to think about this as a communication problem, not just an image problem, and the

Byron letter (which appeared over my signature) is a good example of how we might defend the humanities in a forum such as the *Herald-Sun*:

Andrew Bolt seems pretty sure of his opinion about Australian Research Council grants, but his view on what is worth funding does not have a very good track record.

Last year he laughed at a study of mobile phone culture by Gerard Goggin, describing it as an example of the pursuit of 'self-indulgent theories and neo-Marxist fancies'.

The mobile phone industry disagrees: the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association, the industry peak body, has joined Australia's leading social scientists in a world first to develop a research agenda into the social and cultural impact of mobile phones.

Gerard is a major participant in this project.

Private enterprise does not spend good money to support self-indulgence or fantasy, and neither does the ARC. In this case, the ARC got it right and Andrew Bolt got it wrong.

There was more to come, however. Shortly after the publication of the ARC results, news leaked out that Dr Brendan Nelson, Minister for Education, Science and Training, had overturned several of the ARC recommendations for funding—rejecting two or three projects, reputedly, in the humanities. This was widely regarded as a reaction to Andrew Bolt's ridicule of the ARC outcomes in 2003. Attempts to publish an Academy response to this, too, were frustrated by *The Australian's* Higher Education editor, who only seemed to find our contribution newsworthy after Bolt used his next column (the third in a row!) to attack another of our Fellows—herself a columnist for *The Australian*.

The appropriate approach for such a response took some fine consideration. It was crucial that the Academy resist what was clearly the application of political pressure to the peer review process, and thus a distortion and politicisation of the research assessment managed by the ARC. Not only was it important to defend the integrity of the assessments provided by humanities researchers, but it was also important to defend the integrity of the ARC. Against this, however, was the fact that to some extent the refusal of the humanities grants was intended for public consumption. The news had clearly been leaked to the columnist concerned and could be construed as providing him with the satisfaction of knowing that the Minister had acted on his concerns. Under such circumstances, generating even a limited public outcry could have a number of undesirable consequences.

There was a danger that this action could simply help to reinforce the impression that the Minister had stood up to the university elites by championing 'common sense' against 'postmodern trendiness'. There was also the danger that any

intervention risked building up pressure that might result in the individual researchers concerned being named and their projects further exposed to the ridicule of the media and politicians. It would not be the first time this kind of thing had occurred, but there were particular reasons to feel that this would be a very damaging experience for the researchers concerned and that efforts should be made to avoid such an eventuality. More contentiously, perhaps, but nonetheless importantly, a major outcry from the Academy risked offending the only friend the humanities had found in the current government, and certainly the only Education Minister in recent years with anything good to say about us.

On balance, it seemed as if a response was required, and I wrote an opinion piece for the *HES* that defended the work of the individuals named in the Bolt article as well as the integrity of the ARC's peer review process. In addition, I wrote to the Minister outlining the Academy's concerns about what we saw as an attack on the integrity of the ARC process, and requesting a meeting. Eventually, we received a polite response but our request for a meeting was denied. In a third initiative, I also tabled our letter to the Minister at a meeting of the National Academies Forum and asked the presidents of the other three academies to endorse it. Although several of the academies were sympathetic to our letter, they all declined to endorse it. At the end of this process, it was not hard to feel that the humanities were very much on their own in this battle, and without a great deal of power to influence how their work was regarded, not only by the public but also by their colleagues elsewhere in the university system.

Such events, of course, take their place within a wider, and also contradictory, political and cultural context where the shift to the right we have seen in Australia's political 'culture wars' over the last decade plays a significant role, but where, on the other hand, I would suggest, the humanities have won significant political ground and gained significant institutional support. Among the components I would include in sketching out such a context is a general and sustained post-1996 backlash against 'elite' cultural institutions (the universities, the ABC and the SBS, the National Museum and so on), aimed at reducing these institutions' sense of privilege, undermining the confidence with which they addressed their class or educational constituency, and thus challenging their cultural and political authority. This backlash has taken considerable assistance from a mass media that is increasingly antagonistic to leftist or centrist cultural criticism. We can see evidence of this in, particularly, the print media's treatment of the range of responses to the war in Iraq and to the international case for the so-called 'war on terror', and in the reluctance (except by *The Australian*) to investigate vigorously the Tampa and 'children overboard' incidents. In most of these instances, opinions that opposed government policy were not reported with respect; in fact, it became almost routine for those who spoke out against the government agenda to be characterised as traitors, bleeding hearts, Howard-haters or anti-American—and thus dismissed from serious consideration.

These are the obvious reference points, of course—and probably mark my card as a Howard-hater! But there are other, more recent, moments as well. Those I have in mind demonstrate the media's sensitivity to anyone who might be seen to constitute some kind of cultural elite claiming the right to speak on behalf of the nation. *The Australian's* editorial attack on David Williamson during October 2005 is a case in point. Further instances would include the 2005 controversy about postmodernism's reputed influence on the English syllabus in Australian schools (again, generated in *The Australian* by Luke Slattery), which was exploited as a means of attacking the new humanities as well as a critical or politicised humanities.

There are more, but it is important that we don't oversimplify the context in which I am locating this set of observations. Running against the grain of these examples, it is key to acknowledge that the Academy of the Humanities, and the humanities in general, have also gained significant ground in the effort to include fully the humanities within the National Research and Innovation System. Among the list of achievements to which I can refer in support of such a claim are the following: the revision of the National Research Priorities in 2004; the invitation for Professor Iain McCalman to join the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council; the success of a humanities proposal in the 2005 ARC Centres of Excellence round; the federal government's support for the development of the Council of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS); the incorporation of the Academy into consultations about the proposed Research Quality Framework; and Education Minister Brendan Nelson's sustained public advocacy of the importance of the humanities.

As a result of this complicated context, there is more at stake than there used to be. I don't just mean this in the broadest terms—where we are witnessing the erosion of particular rights and liberties that had hitherto underpinned the ethics of a multicultural society. I am also referring to the humanities' hard-won gains in influencing how government and the university sector have conceptualised research. As a result of such gains, it has become even more crucial that we consider carefully what kinds of public roles we wish to play—in terms of our relation to government and to public debate—so that we can not only inform the public but also advance the institutional and political interests of the humanities in Australia. As I see it, the options available to us include the following.

The traditional defence of the humanities. This clearly articulates the value of what we do for a civilised society, refuses economic or pragmatic arguments that might limit our achievements and underestimate our importance, and continually demands recognition and authority.

The strategic/political approach. This is a more nuanced and relatively pragmatic approach that accepts what we can get, builds relationships, provides good and considered advice, and behaves like a responsible citizen while watching for opportunities for doing more—essentially a political approach but one that will regularly deliver opportunities for us to play a more critical role.

The 'small target' approach or the 'pragmatic buckle' This is an entirely pragmatic approach that scales back our ambitions and accepts the invitation to become the communicator for the research sector, and to take our place as useful assistants to the research efforts of the sciences—something that would be gratefully acknowledged by the sector and by government.

All of these strategies, even including the last, have something to recommend them, but they also have significant downsides.

One of the things that might help us to decide on the appropriate strategy is a better understanding of what we are up against—particularly when we look at our primary interlocutors in the media, who by and large do not respect humanities intellectuals. My research field involves dealing with a great deal of popular cultural forms that delight in ridiculing the kind of analysis I produce—and so I have some sense of how this works. For instance, Andrew Ross, in his very useful book *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York, 1989) insists that popular cultural forms are not the way they are simply because they have failed to be better. Although much elite criticism spends its time pointing out these forms' inferiority when compared to more sophisticated examples, Andrew Ross argues that this is a waste of time. Indeed, it may simply reinforce the principles that motivate the production of such material in the first place. Popular culture is the way it is, not because it has failed to be something else, he suggests, but because it is explicitly and deliberately designed to offend those standards of taste and discrimination identified with the intellectual class, which have been used as a means of denigrating the tastes and behaviours of everybody else.

The point that I take from this is as follows. To the extent that Ross's diagnosis applies to Andrew Bolt, or to the editorial writer for *The Australian*, and their audiences, there is little point in the humanities taking the high ground and merely offering what I have described as the traditional defence. To reiterate, the point of the media's attacks on the humanities is that it is *meant* to offend us, and to console those for whom we have expressed little respect in the past. Responding indignantly, expecting this to be enough to encourage our critics to change their mind, is simply pointless. Rather, perhaps, we need to employ a grim tenacity, hanging on to our position without letting this kind of noise distract us. Such a strategy would focus our attention on those battles we need to win—which are not with Andrew Bolt, the media or the public, but with our universities or the government—and these, indeed, are going better now than they have for a while. We have made ground.

Yet, as I argued earlier on, the humanities must not only defend its institutional or political position and, we hope, prosper; it must also provide critical scrutiny of our society and culture. Sometimes, it has to be admitted, the strategies required to defend our political position can stand in the way of this fundamental duty—that of providing the critical dimension of the public sphere. This is the central concern that has emerged for me over this first year of my presidency of the Academy—the

conflicting imperatives that shape our responses to the political environment in which we find ourselves at the moment. The ‘small target’ strategy, in particular, is extremely tempting, but it runs the risk of making the humanities irrelevant. If the humanities are not involved in the process of informing opinion in this society, to whom should we cede that capacity? If there is no other agency, and I don’t think there is, we need to work out how best to pursue both of our objectives—how to survive and prosper while still providing critical scrutiny. This, I believe, requires a critical humanities with the courage to speak, the authority to claim a space for its ideas, and the imaginative capacity to do so in ways that are not easily dismissed.

This problem will be raised in many different ways over the course of this year’s annual symposium, and there will be a number of solutions offered. In order to take my next step now—that is, to think about how might we deal with this, where we might find a space for a critical humanities—I want to refer to something that draws upon my own recent research. I want to show you something I encountered while undertaking that research—an instance where imagination, wit and courage were employed in order to address a predicament that is analogous to the one I have been describing.

The project I am referring to is an Australian Research Council-funded study of the history of television current affairs in Australia, the outcomes of which have recently been published as *Ending the Affair: The Decline of Television Current Affairs in Australia* (Sydney, 2005). In many senses a relatively old-fashioned project for contemporary media and cultural studies, the book presents a critique of the performance of television current affairs in providing the community with background to the news of the day. One of the means I adopted towards this end was to compare contemporary programming with what had become known as the ‘gold standard’ in the field, the ABC’s pioneering program *This Day Tonight* (which ran from 1967 to 1978). The comparison involved some archival research and working through the *TDT* tapes as well as a range of contemporary contextual material from the print media. I have talked about this comparison at length in the book, so I am not going to cover it here. However, I do want to highlight a moment from these tapes that, I believe, enables me to demonstrate how a critical humanities might claim its place.

The moment I want to call up is from the 1000th episode of *TDT*, which was screened on 30 September 1971. The program had established a broad and loyal audience by this time, winning the ratings for the time-slot and attracting close attention from politicians. It had also become the focus for a great deal of criticism from government and conservative media outlets such as Sir Frank Packer’s Sydney newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*. As the first short-form current affairs program to insist on calling politicians to public account, *TDT* had to invent its own style of presenting stories and of interviewing politicians. Initially polite and respectful, its reporters rapidly developed a reputation for aggressive and adversarial interviewing. The acerbic and sardonic manner we might even now identify with the likes of Richard Carleton and Stuart Littlemore had become something of a house style. Fond of using satiric

humour as a means of giving the program some light and shade, as well as relishing the chance to put politicians on the spot, *TDT* quickly became something of a problem for the ABC's management. The 'smart arses at *TDT*', as they were called by some of their victims, were criticised for political bias, rudeness and impertinence, and for taking a critical or opinionated line rather than always presenting their stories in an even-handed or formally objective manner. This is a familiar problem for the ABC now, of course, as the history of such controversies has lasted into the present day, but this was a relatively new dilemma for them to face at the time.

In the 1000th episode, the program responded to its critics with a combination of 'vox pop' interviews with politicians, sober pieces to camera from Bill Peach and Peter Luck, and a hilarious sketch by Peter Cook and Dudley Moore that ridiculed and destroyed the accusations of rude and impertinent interviewing. Crucially, while the program dealt with its critics in a full frontal attack, it did so in a wry, satirical and pointed manner that proved to be extremely entertaining. The program did defend its practice by restating the principles upon which it was based—the importance of committed investigative reporting that is prepared to take a position and argue it with evidence, and the impossibility of providing a thoroughly objective analysis of contemporary political events. It did not, however, simply rely on the high-minded articulation of those principles as the only means through which they might be recommended. That is, *TDT* took none of the options I canvassed as available to the humanities: it did not mount a traditional defence, nor retreat to a merely strategic defence, and it certainly never even remotely approached the small target or the pragmatic buckle. Rather than respond to specific criticisms in ways that implicitly accepted the grounds upon which they were mounted, *TDT* in effect went over the heads of its critics in government and ABC management to appeal directly to the audience. [*At this point, an excerpt from the program was screened.*]

What struck me while watching this excerpt was the strength of the program's commitment to its mission. Clearly, the right to criticise, to trouble the powerful and to inform the citizenry were not going to be traded away for a peaceful life. Far from it: the program demonstrated that this was its fundamental rationale and it was not going to change. The second thing to strike me was the question of whether *The 7.30 Report* would be able to do this kind of thing today. Criticism of the ABC's reporting—not only on television but on radio as well—has been a constant feature of contemporary federal politics. Rather than provoking a strong and committed response, it has tended to spook the ABC into setting up internal reviews and inquiries, new bureaucratic structures to ensure formal objectivity prevails in news and current affairs, and even external 'independent' assessments of ABC 'bias'—all in the futile hope that conservative attacks on its analysis of the news could be disarmed. Such tactics are the opposite of the approach taken by *TDT* in 1971.

The crucial difference between *TDT* then and *The 7.30 Report* now is *TDT*'s greater confidence in its mission and in its audience; that confidence fed its

willingness to take on its management and its political opponents. This was a highly successful program that drew a larger audience in 1971 than any Australian current affairs program has done in the last fifteen years (even though the total population has increased by more than 30 per cent in the meantime). Its strength lay in its appeal to this audience, and that appeal was fundamentally connected to its risky and controversial nature—that is, to the very characteristics that mobilised its critics. It is abundantly clear that this is not true of *The 7.30 Report* today, and that it does not have the authority or the power to adopt such a confrontational strategy.

Now, why am I telling you this? It is because I want to draw an analogy: it seems to me that the humanities are in a similar position to that of *The 7.30 Report* at the moment. There are three components to this similarity. We are (rightly) careful to defend ourselves in ways that are not unnecessarily provocative; we (accurately) recognise our vulnerability to the pragmatics of current government funding priorities and therefore behave with circumspection; and yet there is little point in us existing at all if we do not defend our critical capacity as a fundamental condition of that existence.

I am not going to go through a whole range of ways in which we might produce the equivalent of the *TDT* response. There are going to be many presentations over the course of this symposium that take that question on. I will content myself with just two suggestions that seem fruitful, and where there is a role for the Academy in particular. The first draws upon a dying tradition that might help us think about our relation to government: the tradition of ‘frank and fearless advice’. If the public service no longer provides this—and often, regrettably, it does not—then perhaps it is up to us. The Academy can provide frank and fearless advice without apology or special pleading, drawing upon our expertise as well as upon our social or cultural authority as a knowledge elite.

Of course, we also need to think about how we deal with the public. Too often, I think, we come across as if we don’t think of ourselves as informing the public, but as simply conversing with some other interlocutor while the public is enabled to listen in. Too often, we present the products of our research as if they count more as a mode of performance, rather than as a form of knowledge. This undersells what we do, and it runs the risk of characterising what we do as, indeed, a performance rather than as a substantive contribution to knowledge.

I want to conclude by recalling my experience during one of the national ‘summit’ meetings called to discuss the expansion of the National Research Priorities in 2003. The responsibility for putting the case for incorporating humanities research into the National Research Priorities fell to Professor Iain McCalman, then President of the Academy of the Humanities. Iain McCalman’s presentation—to a group composed primarily of scientists and bureaucrats—was slightly shocking, one felt, in its uncompromisingly clear statement of the Academy’s position. Such debates are not normally conducted in such categorical and principled terms. Without the full participation of the humanities and social sciences, McCalman said, the national

innovation system would simply fail. Fail. Not be weakened, or slightly impoverished, or regrettably exclusive—but fail. I was struck by the courage and the clarity of this at the time, and it still stands as a clear example of the kinds of statements the humanities should be making every time the opportunity presents itself. It was firm, authoritative advice—something Iain McCalman was entitled to give and that discomforted many of those present. Ultimately, it was advice that was accepted. As a performance, I believe, it exemplified how one might claim the space for a critical humanities.

Endnotes

- 1 This phrase refers to what is perhaps an apocryphal story about the behaviour of ABC management when confronted with political pressure. Sometime staff representative on the ABC's board, Tom Molomby, has reputedly referred to management's inclination to give way under political pressure, and to pass that pressure on to their staff, as the 'pre-emptive buckle'.