

“In quotation marks: the Australian public intellectual”

The ideas and ideals of Australia: *The Lucky Country* turns sixty
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In *The Lucky Country*, Donald Horne labelled Australia a ‘nation without a mind’.¹

As a journalist, he dismissed those who aspired to be intellectuals. This was a European term, ill-suited to an egalitarian nation. When it appeared in a publication Horne edited, ‘intellectual’ was often surrounded by quotation marks.

The irony is amusing. For in the years after *The Lucky Country*, Donald Horne became the walking definition of a public intellectual — someone who spoke to issues, wrote widely, marched, lectured, taught, and provided pithy witticisms for media profiles.

Trained as an Andersonian at the University of Sydney, Horne began with a deep scepticism about reform.² Governments might imagine they can influence the deeper currents of life, but their attempts will be frustrated by unintended consequences.

It was theory which encouraged raised eyebrows, if not mockery, toward those who imagined political activism can matter. This made Horne a radical conservative³ — a freethinker perhaps keen for change, but philosophically doubtful it was possible.

And yet, Donald Horne demonstrated intellectual honesty when his confident worldview was tested. Horne recognised institutionalised racism in Australia but, as editor of *The Observer*,⁴ saw no point antagonising his audience by campaigning against the long-standing White Australia Policy.

As he later reflected:

*There was not yet a chance of surmounting the prejudices of the Australian people.*⁵

Others disagreed. In 1960 a group of students and young academics from the University of Melbourne began meeting as the Immigration Reform Group.⁶ They proceeded as intellectuals

¹ Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, Penguin Modern Classics edition, 2008, p. 10.

² <https://www.blackincbooks.com.au/books/donald-horne#:~:text=From%20a%20position%20of%20doubting,seminal%20book%20The%20Lucky%20Country.>

³ [https://thesydneyinstitute.com.au/blog/the-luck-and-life-of-donald-horne-from-unpopular-conservative-to-national-favourite/.](https://thesydneyinstitute.com.au/blog/the-luck-and-life-of-donald-horne-from-unpopular-conservative-to-national-favourite/)

⁴ <https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/C277907.>

⁵ https://pmc01.sharepoint.com/_layouts/15/DocIdRedir.aspx?ID=PMCdoc-942854510-13240.

⁶ <https://www.naa.gov.au/students-and-teachers/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/promoting-migration-reform-pamphlet-control-or-colour-bar#:~:text=The%20Immigration%20Reform%20Group%20proposed,hostility%20to%20Australia%27s%20immigration%20policies.>

do — talking through the issue and formulating arguments in favour of repealing the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901.⁷

They were polite, thoughtful and conventional. The Group wrote to members of Parliament, held public lectures, and published a pamphlet called *Control Or Colour Bar?*⁸ This argued that migration should not be based on skin colour. It is said many in the Immigration Reform Group had spent time in Asia or become friends with Colombo Plan scholars in Australia. Certainly they argued it was time Australian migration policy turned to Asia.

The compelling case presented by the Immigration Reform Group was taken up by politicians, officials and journalists.⁹ In 1966 the Commonwealth shifted quietly from racial criteria to a skills and character test for immigrants.¹⁰ This is still in place more than half a century later.¹¹

Ideas can matter. Change is possible.

This proved a liberating insight for Donald Horne.

As he now realised, reform could be led by people “doing one of the things only intellectuals can do: good, bad or indifferent, they were providing new concepts of what was going on and new concepts of what could go on.”

“Despite myself,” he conceded, “I was an intellectual, if not in quotation marks.”¹²

Some have argued the decades which followed *The Lucky Country* proved the high-water mark for Australia’s public intellectuals. In a recent reflection on this sixtieth anniversary, Frank Bongiorno lists just some of the books in what he calls “the age of generalisers” — *The Australian Legend*, *Australian Accent*, *The Australian Ugliness* and *The Tyranny of Distance*.

In 1993 Barry Jones offered his list of Australia’s leading public intellectuals. He could suggest only 17 names.

By 2005 the *Sydney Morning Herald* felt sufficiently confident to list Australia’s top 100 public intellectuals.¹³ It surveyed many prominent thinkers to build the list. Yet there was still some need to apologise.

In the words of journalist Michel Visontay:

Intellectual is an uncomfortable word in Australia, and we live in an age when euphemisms are found for uncomfortable words. These days people tend to be categorised as smart, clever, bright rather than intellectual – the response of a culture

⁷https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20130409082945/http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/archives/exhibitions/protest/stories/Immigration_Reform_Group.html.

⁸ The pamphlet was published in 1960, and revised in 1962. See Promoting migration reform - pamphlet 'Control or Colour Bar?' | naa.gov.au and <https://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM00747b.htm>.

⁹ <https://www.naa.gov.au/students-and-teachers/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/promoting-migration-reform-pamphlet-control-or-colour-bar#:~:text=The%20Immigration%20Reform%20Group%20proposed,hostility%20to%20Australia%27s%20immigration%20policies>.

¹⁰ <https://digital-classroom.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/end-white-australia-policy>.

¹¹ <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/working-in-australia/skill-occupation-list>.

¹² Donald Horne, *Into The Open*, HarperCollinsPublishers, Australia, 2000, p. 35.

¹³ https://pmc01.sharepoint.com/_layouts/15/DocIdRedir.aspx?ID=PMCDoc-942854510-13246.

*driven by speed and solutions rather than inquiry and confrontation; a society that glosses over awkwardness.*¹⁴

The 2005 list was dominated by men — some still prominent — and by anxiety about the category.

For instance, does media commentary count? Celebrity? And where — then or now — are the new voices?

Tellingly, no one has repeated quite the same survey of public intellectuals in recent years.¹⁵ As Frank Bongiorno asked in a 2017 essay in *The Conversation*:

*Who will be the next Donald Horne? ... Australia has its public intellectuals, but it is hard to think of any who quite manage Horne's range, insight or authority.*¹⁶

Clearly there is work today which builds on the Donald Horne tradition. Julianne Schultz's *The Idea of Australia* takes up the challenge with an imaginative search for the soul of the nation.¹⁷

In *Shrinking the Nation*, Graeme Turner traces the decline of traditional media, the rise of misinformation, and hyper partisan challenges to democracy.¹⁸

The Voice referendum encouraged a raft of compelling and often confronting books on race relations in Australia, while AUKUS provokes thoughtful commentary on international and defence issues. Ross Garnaut continues his timely contributions on economic policy and climate change¹⁹, while Kate Fitz-Gibbon is among many important voices addressing gender-based violence in our community.²⁰

We have publications aplenty — established journals such as *Griffith Review*, *the Australian Book Review*, *Meanjin*, *Overland* and *Quadrant*, along with new e-publications such as *Inside Story*, substacks and virtual think tanks. There are regular policy arguments through the *Quarterly Essay* and *The Monthly*, and excellent policy book series through La Trobe, Monash University Publishing, MUP and NewSouth among others.

All that alongside long-standing platforms such as the Boyer Lectures and countless podcasts, including a broad suite of Radio National programs.

So this is not a question of supply but of relevance: is anyone listening? There are public intellectuals aplenty, but is there an audience?

¹⁴ https://pmc01.sharepoint.com/_layouts/15/DocIdRedir.aspx?ID=PMCdoc-942854510-13246.

¹⁵ In 2023, *The Australian* published a list of "Australia's living legends of research" containing a number of the same names as the SMH top 100: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/special-reports/research-magazine/australias-living-legends-of-research/news-story/8384e1bb6bd8f7bc966b0386a3927084>.

¹⁶ <https://theconversation.com/donald-hornes-lucky-country-and-the-decline-of-the-public-intellectual-80743>.

¹⁷ <https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/book/Julianne-Schultz-Idea-of-Australia-9781760879303/>.

¹⁸ <https://www.uqp.com.au/books/the-shrinking-nation>.

¹⁹ For example, <https://www.blackincbooks.com.au/books/lets-tax-carbon>.

²⁰ <https://newsouthbooks.com.au/books/our-national-crisis/>.

When Frank Bongiorno worried about the loss of roving commentators in the Donald Horne tradition, he included academic specialisation as a major constraint.²¹

More fundamentally, he cited changes in the public culture.²² For Donald Horne, thriving media and publishing industries gave access to large audience and sustained opportunities for argument.

That world is in sharp retreat, replaced by social media tribes which broadcast but do not engage. Media commentary selects some prominent minds for cancellation and can make attacking the public intellectual a contact sport.

Think of the treatment meted out to Marcia Langton, Larissa Behrendt, Gillian Triggs, Yassmin Abdel-Magied, Margaret Simons and Robert Manne.

Such concerns are not new. In a 2001 *Australian Humanities Review*, David Carter shared similar worries. Still, he concluded, “history as battleground is preferable to the great Australian silence.”²³

The question of influence is something I long pondered as a public policy academic. Does anyone read the careful evaluations of service delivery through contracts, the work on improving public consultation, the textbooks on policy-making?

In 2023 I went from someone who taught about Cabinet to sitting every week at the note-taker’s table, listening to and recording the debates among ministers.

From that perch I see something of how public ideas filter into policy choices.

There are issues driven by the voices of experience — think Rosie Batty and Grace Tame on domestic violence and child safety, or Brittany Higgins on the workplace culture in Parliament.

Others are inspired by the life-long contribution of thought leaders — Tim Flannery on the environment; Pat McGorry on youth mental health; Anne Summers’ work on gender equality. Each speaks with an authority which matters — and ministers sometimes cite the contribution of thought leaders in Cabinet submissions and reports.²⁴

From the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the influence of established and emerging First Nations intellectuals has mattered in the debate on constitutional recognition. Defeat at the ballot box in no way devalues that sustained contribution.²⁵

As you would expect, the influence of economists, medical researchers, urban planners and others with specialised skills is particularly strong in their policy domains. Cabinet submissions cite findings from studies when presenting recommendations.

²¹ <https://theconversation.com/donald-hornes-lucky-country-and-the-decline-of-the-public-intellectual-80743>.

²² <https://theconversation.com/donald-hornes-lucky-country-and-the-decline-of-the-public-intellectual-80743>.

²³ David Carter, ‘Public Intellectuals, Book Culture and Civil Society’, *Australian Humanities Review*, Issue 24, December 2001, available at <https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2001/12/01/public-intellectuals-book-culture-and-civil-society/>.

²⁴ For example, Anne Summers: A woman for our time | UnCover - The University of Canberra

²⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-14/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-debate-2023-in-pictures/102938722>.

There are people within government, such as Assistant Treasurer Dr Andrew Leigh, who press the case for evaluation and evidence. Andrew places a premium on randomised control trials to shape policy deliberations and has encouraged rigour in testing policy proposals.²⁶

The influence of historians and philosophers can be traced to the education of those in Cabinet. Think of John Maynard Keynes and his belief that practical people, “who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.”²⁷

In practice, 13 of the 23 current Cabinet members²⁸ hold an Arts degree²⁹, often in conjunction with a law qualification³⁰. Six were trained in economics, commerce or business³¹, one holds a bachelor of psychology³², one a bachelor of science³³ and one a Cert IV qualification from TAFE³⁴. The remaining minister went straight from school to journalism before entering politics.³⁵

A significant number also hold a masters-level qualification — often in public policy, international relations or legal specialisations — and one has a PhD in political science.³⁶ There are numerous honours graduates³⁷, a diploma in modern languages³⁸, a Fulbright scholar³⁹, and an MBA⁴⁰ in the Cabinet room.

So a university education is all but ubiquitous for contemporary ministers. Many encountered the humanities through their studies. The same is true for senior officials and military officers; I recall the Chief of the Defence Force discussing the Melian Dialogue from the *History of the Peloponnesian War* when considering Australia’s strategic position as a small island between two powerful states.

Which is not to overstate the influence of campus days. It is a long journey from tutorials and student politics before any politician takes responsibility for some major area of policy.

²⁶ Data and Evaluation: A Match Made in Policy Heaven | Ministers' Media Centre.

²⁷ J.M. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan, 1936), p. 383. See <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/key/date/2010/html/sp100224.en.html> and <https://harpers.org/2010/11/keynes-the-unseen-power-of-political-ideas/>.

²⁸ Ministerial arrangements: Changes to the Cabinet and to the Ministry; Ministry list as at 29 July 2024 | PM&C.

²⁹ [Senator the Hon. Katy Gallagher MP](#); [The Hon. Dr. Jim Chalmers MP](#); [The Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP](#); [The Hon. Catherine King MP](#); [The Hon. Ed Husic MP](#); [The Hon. Mark Dreyfus KC MP](#); [Senator the Hon. Penny Wong](#); [The Hon. Tony Burke MP](#); [The Hon. Mark Butler MP](#); [The Hon. Michelle Rowland MP](#); [The Hon. Bill Shorten MP](#); [The Hon. Clare O’Neil MP](#); [The Hon. Jason Clare MP](#).

³⁰ [The Hon. Mark Dreyfus KC MP](#); [Senator the Hon. Penny Wong](#); [The Hon. Tony Burke MP](#); [The Hon. Mark Butler MP](#); [The Hon. Michelle Rowland MP](#); [The Hon. Bill Shorten MP](#); [The Hon. Clare O’Neil MP](#); [The Hon. Jason Clare MP](#)

³¹ Economics: [The Hon. Anthony Albanese MP](#), [The Hon. Pat Conroy MP](#), [The Hon. Chris Bowen MP](#)

Business: [The Hon. Bill Shorten MP](#)

Commerce: [Senator the Hon. Murray Watt](#); [The Hon. Dr. Jim Chalmers MP](#)

³² [The Hon. Amanda Rishworth MP](#).

³³ The Hon. Richard Marles MP.

³⁴ The Hon. Julie Collins MP.

³⁵ [Senator the Hon. Malarndirri McCarthy](#).

³⁶ The Hon. Dr Jim Chalmers MP.

³⁷ [The Hon. Richard Marles MP](#); The Hon. Pat Conroy MP; [Senator the Hon. Penny Wong](#); [The Hon. Mark Butler MP](#); [The Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP](#); [The Hon. Michelle Rowland MP](#); [The Hon. Clare O’Neil MP](#); [The Hon. Jason Clare MP](#).

³⁸ [The Hon. Chris Bowen MP](#).

³⁹ [The Hon. Clare O’Neil MP](#).

⁴⁰ [The Hon. Bill Shorten MP](#).

The blunt realities of politics, the power of organised interests, and almost-hourly scrutiny by media are the bracing forces which shape immediate choices. All policy is compromise, and the influence of intellectuals will be, at best, a small part of a big picture.

Terry Eagleton recently wrote:

*Intellectuals differ from academics in ranging across a number of disciplines, but also in bringing ideas to bear on society as a whole. They are typically both polymaths and polyglots.*⁴¹

Perhaps, but from a policy perspective the influence of intellectuals is most acute when knowledge is highly specialised and germane to a pressing question.

For instance, when government considers the future of media regulation it consults cultural policy experts. When it thinks about social cohesion, numerous academics contribute to the thinking. Writing about ethics informs discussion on integrity in public life, questions of animal cruelty, or right to die legislation.

Sometimes ideas do find an audience.

As we mark 60 years since *The Lucky Country*, we celebrate one model of a public intellectual. As Ryan Cropp records in his recent biography, Donald Horne spent the second half of the twentieth century sketching out “first drafts of many of the distinctive shapes of our modern political culture.”⁴²

Donald Horne built his audience through media in a way not open to all. He engaged intellectually but also as an activist — as Mungo MacCallum observed, Horne was “always a participant, never just an observer.”⁴³

The distinguished membership of the Australian Academy of the Humanities makes clear there are many ways to be a public intellectual. And though we might despair about the fragmentation of the public realm, Academy members remain prominent voices in Australian debate.

As Horne wrote in his memoir, *Into the Open*:

*Ever since I can remember I have been addicted to keeping the conversation going.*⁴⁴

May we all keep talking, sharing and advocating, informed by deep understanding of the humanities, and in pursuit of this Academy’s vision of a tolerant, inclusive and clever nation.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Terry Eagleton, ‘The Excitement of the Stuff’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 46, No. 19, 10 October 2024, available at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v46/n19/terry-eagleton/the-excitement-of-the-stuff>.

⁴² Ryan Cropp, 2023. *Donald Horne: a life in the lucky country*, La Trobe University Press, p. 5.

⁴³ Mungo MacCallum, ‘Donald Horne 1921–2005’, *Overland*, Issue 182, 2006, p. 93.

⁴⁴ See Donald Horne, *Into The Open*, HarperCollinsPublishers, Australia, 2000, p. ix. Note Stephen Garton quotes this in ‘Eulogy delivered at Donald Horne’s funeral, September 21, 2005’, *Griffith Review*, Edition 10 – Family Politics, 2005.

⁴⁵ About the Australian Academy of the Humanities.