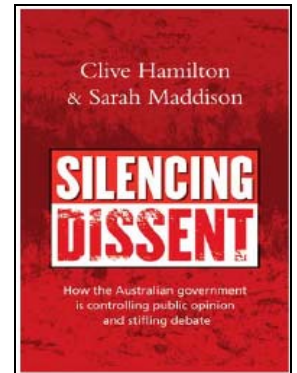


On 7 February 2007 Peter hosted the Canberra launch of an important collection of essays, **Silencing Dissent: *How the current Australian government is controlling public opinion and stifling debate***

Deeply disturbing, *Silencing Dissent* raises serious questions about the state of democracy in Australia. – Robert Manne, Foreword.



Peter's speech follows:

It is my privilege to be asked to launch this important book, including as it does contributions from authors representing such a wide spectrum of public life.

Geoffrey Barker, Helen Ester, Harry Evans, Ian Lowe, Andrew Macintosh, Stuart Macintyre, Andrew Wilkie, Sarah Maddison and Clive Hamilton have done Australia a service in documenting the impact of what Robert Manne in the foreword describes as a 'conservative-populist counter-revolution'.

I entered parliament at the beginning of the Howard government era with views that by and large reflected the fair go ethic of post war Australia, with the vital exception of course that as a nation we have never properly addressed our indigenous shame, and our indigenous peoples have *never* had a fair go.

Silencing dissent is not entirely new in this country of course. Australia experienced the spillover of the McCarthyist efforts to root out dissidents and silence dissent in the cold war fifties and sixties

Indeed the ASIO crackdown on the left during the 50s and 60s included observation and files on potential anarchists such as boxer Jimmy Carruthers, Rev Alan Walker, Peter Finch, and Lloyd Rees.

Lionel Murphy ordered his famous raid on ASIO headquarters in 1973 on the grounds the organisation wasn't letting the Labor government know about right wing fascist sympathisers in the country – who'd slipped in with no difficulties from Eastern Europe after world war two to carry on the Balkan war from these shores, complete with bomb attacks in Australian cities. Only trouble is, ASIO had few if any files on the fascists; they'd been concentrating on the Simon Townsends and left wing revolutionaries like Chips Rafferty.

Whatever the comparisons between the 50s and now, this book details how broad are the targets of this latest conservative crusade. Robert Manne argues in the foreword to this book how the past ten years have seen what he calls 'the increasingly authoritarian trajectory of the political culture' in this country...how the country seems asleep to this 'kind of conservative-populist counter revolution' this 'systematic silencing of significant political dissent'.

This in turn has impacted on free speech, the justice process, the independence of the public service and ministerial responsibility and accountability.

I believe we won't be able to prevent further erosions of accountability and freedoms unless we have truly democratic parliaments, properly representative, guaranteeing proper scrutiny and amendment processes. And it won't happen until 45% of the primary vote allows just 45% of the power, in either house.

Proportional Representation is the answer, and while we have it in the senate, it is immediately corrupted by the preference system and above the line ticket voting.

To seriously run as an independent candidate for the senate requires compliance with a seriously flawed voting system designed precisely to dissuade genuine independents from running. That effectively silences dissent and scrutiny big-time.

As we've seen since 2004, a government in control of both houses of parliament will ride roughshod over the parliamentary processes in an even more cynical fashion than is usual in our winner take all system.

Robert Manne says he's puzzled about the absence of powerful scrutiny of the drift of the nation in this undemocratic direction ...he says large parts of the nation have seemed to be asleep.

I agree. But I do sense a recent hint of an awakening from that slumber. That sleep was largely induced by cynical political exploitation of greed through tax cuts, middle class welfare and the deliberate breakdown of collective lobbying ... the workplace is the prime example.

The Thatcherite mantra of the primacy of the individual over society, which our current PM patiently waited 15 years to implement, gripped much of middle Australia.

Those workplace changes, family tax benefits, disproportionate funding of non government schools all fed this new selfishness.

Record credit card debt, record mortgages, record consumerism, the rise of the stock market as a gambling casino rather than raiser of capital has also fed this self-obsession or as Clive Hamilton so cleverly puts it, Affluenza.

The bottom line dividend has, by and large, become far more valued than the social dividend.

The outcome is a two-part society, but the weakest part has little ballot power.

To be employed is to work but one hour a week, and the casual and underemployed, perhaps 20% of the workforce, are told they should be relaxed and comfortable as part of the strongest economy in 30 years.

Self indulgence on the one hand, and simply trying to stay afloat on the other, have seriously dulled the critical scrutiny of public policy by voters. They don't care or they don't have the energy to care. By and large the media has fallen into the same stupor, ready consumers of government spin. And overlaying everything else is an insecurity born of the terrorism threat, real or perceived...but certainly fed at every opportunity by the government under the guise of improving security.

The government also has a vested interest in fostering a public disconnect even disinterest with politics, dispensing short term political and financial fixes to the electorate every two and a half years, driving wedges between sections of society, dog whistling and feeding prejudice ...all supported by the hysterical tabloid media and shock jocks.

In this atmosphere of self-satisfied or too-stressed public myopia it is hard to raise any outcry from outside the ranks of the politically aware about the suppression of rights, free speech and dissent. The price of dissent can be tighter laws, intimidation, threats or pursuit of dissenters through protracted corporate lawsuits.

Ian Lowe's chapter in this book shows for instance how scientists have been silenced because their climate change message, and suggested solutions, don't fit the current government's fossil fuel and nuclear agenda.

Elsewhere the ABC has in recent times - with a *chief censor* now appointed - been shamelessly stacked with political appointees because it dares to consistently question government policy.

While Hawke and PMs back to McMahon had their problems with the ABC, I cannot remember a more concerted attack on the ABC's independence than we've seen recently.

Helen Ester's chapter on the media outlines the concerns of the diminishing old guard of the press gallery here about the increased focus on strategies to block and control access to information. Indeed the gallery is more and more being sidelined as the government takes its spin directly to those outlets more sympathetic, more pliable, less questioning – notably morning talk radio.

Whistle blowers have been dismissed as lower rank underlings, out of touch and treated with official contempt.

Security services have been politicised and leakers have been hunted down by federal police to the tune of 33 thousand staff hours covering 64 leaks from government agencies between 2000 and 2004 according to Andrew Wilkie.

NGOs – even pensioner and welfare groups - have been silenced through defunding. The military has been seriously compromised, if not politicised, with Tampa and the children overboard disgrace the obvious example.

Universities - once the forge of political philosophy - have been seriously defunded and political activism starved through voluntary student unionism.

Senate inquiries brought about by cross bench, independent and opposition MPs are gone – again reflecting how vital it is that the Australian electorate restores a balance of responsibility through proper and fair nomination and voting processes for that house in the short term and the Reps down the track.

Among the authors in this book is Harry Evans, Clerk of the Senate, who has been courageous in speaking up about the erosion of democratic processes in the supposed House of Review. For his trouble Harry has been accused of 'culpable ignorance.'

He'll wear that as a badge of honour, coming as it did from Senator Eric Abetz, who's in parliament courtesy of a Tasmanian party ticket and senate quota half the size of a mainland lower house electorate enrolment.

As Harry Evans points out, what is the chance the Howard government would allow seven of its own senators to vote with non government parties to set up the scrutiny of bills committee as happened in 1981 during the Fraser years.

Harry highlights something that should concern all who profess a love and understanding of democracy - that current legislation restricting rights, intercepting communications, detaining individuals, indeed properly scrutinising bills at this most critical of periods in our history – is now beyond the control or amendment of non-government representatives who after all represent more than fifty per cent of the primary voting support.

And as he points out, a government with control over lawmaking has the power to alter the electoral law to favour its own re-election.

As well, restricting the purview of the parliament to hold inquiries and call whomever it wants as witnesses also guts our democracy by protecting government from criticism and necessary dissent.

It is encouraging though to see public opinion beginning to shake off the shackles of post September 11/Tampa fear and seriously questioning, if not condemning, our slavish and self-damaging foreign policy kowtowing to American global agendas.

The AWB scandal and the deliberately narrow terms of reference to insulate ministers and advisers, on top of Tampa, kids overboard, Siev X, Pacific Solution, refugee detention, the insane Iraq invasion, the global warming inertia and misinformation – have all started, I pray, to rub the sleep from our eyes.

There's also been a vital and growing public reaction to human rights issues such as David Hicks, West Papua and the general politics of fear, as well as the loss of employer-employee balance in the workplace.

The fact is you can't keep a lid on dissent forever, however much you try and control the information flow.

By condensing so much, by authors of such stature, into a highly readable if disturbing publication Clive and Sarah, Allan and Unwin, the contributing authors and unwittingly our governments of the past decade or so have given us all a wake up call.

I can only hope it's widely read and discussed – especially in the media - because if we don't wake up, then like Rip Van Winkle, our world will be a far more undemocratic, disturbing and controlling place if we sleep for another 5 let alone 20 years.

The frog's last chance to leap from the warming water is very nigh.

I take great pleasure in launching Silencing Dissent here in the national capital and invite Clive and Sarah to the microphone.

*Peter Andren
Independent Federal Member for Calare
7 February 2007*