

## Good Bye Donald Horne

Since the last edition Australia has lost Donald Richmond Horne, one of its official national treasures. Donald Horne, among many other activities in his life had campaigned for tolerance because he was a lover of human beings and a passionate believer in liberal democracy. He also wrote on constitutional and parliamentary reform, most particularly in two publications, *Change the Rules!* And *Changing the System* in which he advocated electoral reform and fixed parliaments (which at the time did not exist in Australia).

For these reasons, and because he was a friend and colleague to so many of us, I have included a number of reminiscences on Donald in this edition of the journal.

## ***THE YOUNG EDUCATED BY DONALD\****

**Glyn Davis<sup>1</sup>**

The only kind of revolution possible is a cultural one. Simply to change the people in control of parliament or of the means of production is no revolution. It's a *coup d'etat*' (Dr Jim Cairns). Discuss.

So began a 1980 exam paper set by Donald Horne for a course on Australian political culture. Across barely a dozen questions, Horne quotes Cairns, Murray Edelman, Antonio Gramsci, Robert Menzies, Sol Encel, Dennis Altman, Keith Hancock and Denis Kavanagh. In three hours, political science undergraduates at the University of New South Wales were invited to consider the theory of hegemony, the distance between description and reality within political institutions, Australia as a home-owning democracy, the influence of middle class affluence, the monarchy as a bastion of conservatism, Australian political pragmatism, the idea of political culture dominant values and Australia as a derivative culture.

Here was a course determined to place 'Australian politics in a wider cultural context than the narrowly "political."' It was no longer enough to know what it meant to be Australian. The teacher must understand, and communicate, how social relations are shaped and maintained.

Seeking some sense of this man, we students read all the early books — *The Lucky Country*, of course, in its various editions, but also the histories, the discussion of Britain in *God Is An Englishman*, the novels and the polemics. The later autobiographies, more reliable clues perhaps, were not yet published, though honours students sometimes received notes scrawled on the back of rejected mss. paper ('he's describing a girl with blond hair. There's a line through the page. Perhaps she rejected him').

Teachers illuminate a subject but provide only partial glimpses of themselves. The pattern of the books, the trajectory, was not immediately apparent. We could discern only an optimistic reading of Gramsci (prevailing values can be subverted), harnessed to an interest in the concept of a national culture. In *Money Made Us*, Donald argued that by 'nation-building', he did not mean discovering rivers or building power lines, 'but only the true nation-building: the ways people see themselves as a nation. Nations exist in the mind.' In the courses he offered at the

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start of the 1980s, Donald focussed on the mechanisms which build a culture. Whether discussing political parties or the mass media, he moved away from institutions and explored instead the technology of hegemony. The ideas floated in lectures, worked up in seminars flowed through to *The Great Museum* and, more directly, *The Public Culture*. Through teaching Donald developed motifs which have now characterised Donald Horne's work for a decade.

The curve from social observation to explanation carried into public life. Praised by the *National Times* as a pleasing baritone for his rendition of republican anthems at the Sydney Town Hall, Horne was prepared to argue about the consequences of November 11 1975 not only on political grounds — a disgraceful intervention by a disgraced plutopotentate — but on symbolic ones. How could we imagine ourselves a nation if we accepted these limitations?

Later, as chair of the Australia Council, speeches reflected his academic concerns and their consequences for artistic activity. Launching the Institute for Cultural Policy Studies at Griffith University in 1987, for example, Donald tackled the nature of modern industrial societies, the idea of 'mass' and 'high' culture, the concept of hegemony, the justification for public support of the arts and the need for a cultural framework when making funding decisions. In answers he defended the Council, defended peer review as the basis for individual grants and suggested the ABC, like the Australia Council, should foster innovation and look to minority concerns.

It could have been followed by three questions in three hours, so familiar the range of concerns, so close the nexus between the practical problems of being chair and the intellectual interest in making cultural policy.

Back at Griffith for a graduation speech, now retired, Donald offered his own history of the journey. The lucky country should now become the clever country, one which recognised its own deficiencies. *Ideas for Australia*, a book and a cause, would remind us that we can make our own history. Australians needed to value ideas and intellectuals as they valued sports stars and entrepreneurs.

It seems impossible to avoid cliches when writing about teachers. All professors become warmly remembered characters, subtly shaping the passing generation of undergraduates, friendly, lively, accessible and tolerant of the gauche. That they may also have been occasionally irritable or bored is an occupational hazard. Yet Donald Horne was an exceptional teacher, not only in the bare brick classrooms of Sydney, but in suggesting how an intellectual might contribute to their native land.

Discuss.

## ON DONALD HORNE

### Helen Irving<sup>2</sup>

‘No one is ever as famous as they think they are,’ Donald Horne once said in response to a comment I had made about another prominent Australian. I often think of this observation, as I do the many others I heard from Donald over the years I knew him. It is true, and it is significant. There are adult, literate Australians whom I know personally, who have never heard of Donald Horne, and he understood this too.

His comment, of course, was not just about personal vanity, but was part of a wider social and historical perspective that he held, in particular his dislike of parochialism. He despised narrow, self-generating and self-aggrandizing perspectives on the world. I learned from him the expression ‘parochialism of time’ as a wonderful way of describing people’s ignorance of history, their tendency to believe not only that their own values were entirely superior to the past, but that nobody else could ever had held them before they came along. Donald’s own knowledge of history was very wide. He was, indeed, much more of a historian than many might imagine, and although he wrote mostly about the world of his own lifetime, he infused it with an anti-parochialism, of both time and place, wrapped in an irony about the present, and with an extraordinarily powerful eye for both continuity and change.

In the course of countless lunches, I learned much history and biography and political theory from Donald, as well as unique ways of looking at ordinary things. Indeed, looking and describing were his special gifts, and a philosophy of *looking* was something he was working on in his last years. He and I had in common an ungovernable habit of staring at strangers on public transport, and we amused ourselves with a scenario of being assaulted or arrested for our voyeurism. I learned from him the defence of staring as an aesthetic experience. I learned that doing things for their own sake was important. I learned that ‘high spirits’ was an underrated factor in historical change and that leaders sometimes make political decisions in such a mood. The invasion of Iraq, Donald thought, probably had a lot to do with high spirits. He was fascinated by Iraq, by the devastation and destruction, by the incredible mess that the invasion had created, by the way in which, in his view, the whole thing had been utterly *fucked up*.

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What I never learned from Donald, surprisingly and sometimes frustratingly, were other people's secrets. He lunched with many people, but I always felt that each occasion was fresh and unique. He could never be drawn, not by me at any rate, into discussion of what others had said to him, although he must have been the recipient of many confidences.

In the years I knew him — the last thirteen years of his life — he was older and gentler than he once had been. I doubt that I would have been sufficiently robust for our friendship to have survived under his earlier, fiercer self. I witnessed (and suffered) the occasional outburst, but mostly what I saw of his impatience was conveyed in his shrug. Subtle and sudden, accompanied by a quick down-turn of the mouth, it conveyed all sorts of things: boredom, irritation, even contempt. He was more generous with his time and his thoughts than anyone else I have known. He was a great conversationalist, but he was quick to bring a topic to an end if it did not interest him. And he would not hesitate to do so, very effectively, with a shrug.

Donald was impatient with many things: ignorance, self-indulgence, self-importance, irrational emotions, the defence of irrational emotions, fuzzy thinking, salacious interest, and ambition. He hated people 'fussing around'; he hated interruptions. But beyond the borders of these constraints, he was happy to talk about almost anything. He treated people who were considerably younger than himself as if age made no difference at all except to the length of memories. He had no inhibitions in seeking out and forming friendships with individuals decades younger than him. He remained endlessly curious about things that older people often lose interest in or find daunting: travel to unfamiliar places; movies; technology, new causes, new ideas. Always new ideas, new projects, new directions. Even dying was a new experience, and he was writing about it, literally with his last breath.

There are Australians who have never heard of Donald Horne, but they all know the name of his most famous book. I once reflected on this, and suggested that he should change his name by deed-poll to 'Lucky Country'. And, indeed, we can now imagine these words on his gravestone: 'Here Lies the Lucky Country', and it would be true not only in the way that Australians came to misuse the term that irritated him, but also in the sense in which he first used it in 1964, to describe a country that, like a fools' paradise, thought of its own luck as its special virtue.

The secret of writing effective social commentary, Donald said, was to say things that people already believed but had not yet learned to articulate. It is impossible to imagine Australia without Donald Horne to play this role. Perhaps, now, we will finally have to grow up, and start to do the job for ourselves.

## ***DONALD HORNE: PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL***

### **Paul Reynolds<sup>3</sup>**

Donald Horne was the best known public intellectual of his time, and yet was not originally an academic. He was one of that rare breed of creative writer and thinker who transcended disciplines and the boundaries of professional life, being able to, in the modern jargon, ‘think outside the square’.

He will always be remembered for writing ‘The Lucky Country’ which, as is widely known, was an ironic title but has since become a well worn phrase to describe Australia in the broadest sense. Perhaps it is not read widely today. If so, that is a pity because it offers a very perceptive insight into the state of the state and society as the Menzian era was drawing to a close. Donald Horne dismissed the (then) Country Party as a pressure group, refusing to see it as a legitimate political party, but, most famously, reinvented the debate about a republic. In the mid 1960s that seemed to be an example of harmless eccentricity, indeed I so regarded it when I had to review it in a seminar paper for an MA class in Australian politics (at Auckland University). I was still of that opinion when I arrived in Melbourne in 1971 to begin my PhD in Australian politics, but rapidly changed my mind, as I suspect many of my generation did, with the dismissal of the Whitlam Government.

What is less widely remembered is that Donald wrote a gloomy postscript to ‘The Lucky Country’ following the dismissal, ‘The Death of a Lucky Country’. Of all the books spawned by the crisis, this was the most savage and passionate because it encompassed all that he despised and opposed in current political and constitutional arrangements. For me the highlight of the book was the chapter that compared, through a quite dazzling extended metaphor, the notion of Whitlam as King and why the populace finally turned on him. This was Donald Horne at his best as a writer. It was, simultaneously, original, witty, audacious, supremely ironic (Whitlam was dismissed by the Vice-Regal representative) and totally thought provoking. I was always of the opinion that this chapter alone deserved far wider circulation and comment than it received, notwithstanding the torrent of words and gallons of ink written about the incident and its context, not least of all by EGW himself.

Donald Horne had many roles in public and intellectual life, better chronicled by others more closely acquainted with the details of his career. On a final note, I first

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encountered him at an Australasian Political Science Association conference in 1973 when he delivered his usual witty, elegant and thoroughly original paper on 'Politics as a Court'. This was to see contemporary politics through the eyes of a pre democratic royal court. For a young political scientist in the making it was an indication of what a master thinker could do by taking a highly original perspective and playing with it in front of an appreciative audience. It was, at once, stimulating intellectual discourse and superb theatre. In short, a very Donald Horne combination.

## ***WISE HEDGEHOGS AND CLEVER FOXES\****

**Macgregor Duncan, Andrew Leigh and David Madden<sup>4</sup>**

In the wake of Donald Horne's death, countless column inches have been spent recalling his greatest work, *The Lucky Country*. Much has been made of the fact that the book's ironic title has been greatly misunderstood. Yet the irony continues, for amidst all the focus on Horne's turn of phrase, there has been little reflection on the ongoing relevance of the book's central thesis.

With few exceptions, most obituarists have treated Horne's 1964 bestseller as a critique of its era. It is held up as a book that captured the deep concerns that many Australians felt in the midst of a seemingly endless period of plodding Conservative government.

Yet *The Lucky Country* should not be regarded like fondue — new for the 1960s, but a mere curio today. Forty-one years on, the book speaks as powerfully to our generation — born after it was published — as it did to the baby boomers who bought the first copies.

In *The Lucky Country*, Horne warned of the danger of taking our country, our way of life, and our prosperity for granted. Horne argued that the Australia of the 1960s allowed its imagination to 'gum up', leaving the nation to drift aimlessly in a self-satisfied haze. Alas, a similar critique might be levelled at Australia today.

While Australia has come a long way since Horne wrote *The Lucky Country*, many of the fundamental issues he raised remain. The Australian economy may be growing nicely, but when it comes to exports, we are still very much a 'dig it up and ship it out' country.

We are also still wrestling with our national identity. This is not just about Republicanism — the cause that Horne did so much to advance. While it is more important than ever to articulate stories and values that can speak to all of multicultural Australia, our leaders rarely stray from the familiar terrain of Anzac and the outback.

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\* *Canberra Times*, 16 September 2005. Reproduced with permission of the authors

<sup>4</sup> Macgregor Duncan, Andrew Leigh and David Madden are co-authors of *Imagining Australia: Ideas for Our Future* (Allen and Unwin, 2004).



Meanwhile, new challenges have arisen. The growing gulf between the salaries of CEOs and ordinary workers, the decline in social capital, the erosion of civil liberties, environmental degradation, and inadequate national infrastructure are just some of the problems that — in the absence of real leadership — are becoming entrenched. Our failure to address these and others exemplifies the complacency that Horne so vividly warned against.

It was Horne's example and the ongoing relevance of *The Lucky Country* that prompted us to write (with Peter Tynan) *Imagining Australia: Ideas for Our Future*. In it, we argued that if Australia is to fulfil its potential, we need to rejuvenate our imagination. Australia is a nation still under construction, and today's citizens, just like our forebears, are all the builders. This sort of thinking imposes on all Australians a responsibility, as custodians of the Australian project, to make sure that we do not stand idly by, that we do all that we can to help our country fulfil its potential.

In his famous essay on Tolstoy, the great Oxford philosopher, Sir Isaiah Berlin, wrote that individuals can be divided into two categories: hedgehogs and foxes. The wise hedgehogs know only one large thing, understanding the world through a single grand vision. The clever foxes, on the other hand, know many things, pursuing seemingly disparate ends along unconnected paths.

There are hedgehogs and foxes in Australia today, and both types of thinkers are crucial to our future. But our big-picture painters rarely trouble themselves with the world of specific and detailed policies. And our policy experts often debate the detail among themselves without a sense of the larger canvas.

As a Daily Telegraph journalist, editor of *The Bulletin*, professor of politics, chair of the Australia Council, Horne knew this better than most of Australia's public intellectuals. Both a hedgehog and a fox, he offered up imagination and ideas, challenging Australians to look beyond the present, with its pettiness and preoccupations, and into the future, with its possibilities and potential.

In his original plan for Australia's capital city, Walter Burley Griffin envisaged that the hill now occupied by Parliament House would be home to a ceremonial Capitol building — a pantheon of Australian art, culture, and civic values, commemorating the achievements of the Australian people. Such a Capitol will most likely never be built; but inspired by Horne's call for us to look to the future, perhaps we can attain it a more spiritual sense. Donald Horne taught us that the great Australian dream ought not to merely be owning a house. It is, or should be, to help forge a better nation; for the brief time that the opportunity lies in our hands.

## ***A CELEBRATION OF A LIFE: DONALD HORNE***

### **Elaine Thompson<sup>5</sup>**

When in 1974 I first arrived at the School of Political Science, UNSW Donald Horne was already there. I assumed that this mature man in his fifties had been a fixture of what was an eclectic School. To my surprise Donald was a ‘new boy’.

The then god-professor, Doug MacCallum was dedicated to a number of apparently contradictory positions: rabid anti-Stalinism (at a time when left wing Marxism was almost *de rigueur* in Schools of Politics); a commitment to liberal toleration of well-argued ideas especially from students; and a willingness to take risks with his appointments to the School. When Anglo-centrism was almost universal Doug had appointed to a smallish School, an Austrian, a German, an Indian, a Chinese, a Hungarian-Australian — and Donald Horne. Later Doug was to appoint Australia’s first African-American political science professor.

While Donald was ‘Anglo’ Australian (a term he hated), he had no degree, no formal academic background, no ‘academic’ publications, and had been in advertising and journalism. Moreover he wrote best-selling books in the most stylish and accessible prose: attributes that made him suspect to academia. His continued popular success and absolute refusal to use footnotes infuriated many academic colleagues.

Donald was at the time of his first entry to UNSW in 1973 (I believe) just emerging from the ideological coterie that dominated the School of Political Science, a coterie that include d Doug and Owen Harries. While distancing himself from many of their beliefs, Donald continued close friendships with these men and their wives, cherishing good arguments. With others in the School nothing short of war prevailed with shouting matches over policy, a tactic Donald employed deliberately having learned it from his time with Frank Packer when Donald had been editor of *The Bulletin* and *The Observer*.

In my first year Donald and I arrived at a School meeting with separate proposals for a new first year Australian politics course. With arrogance peculiar to the young freshly minted PhD I was offended that this man should challenge my entitlement to such a course. Smart tactician that he was Donald suggested we combine. We did

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and ran a then unique course in Power and Democracy in Australia, from which I learned more than the students.

His contributions to UNSW were extraordinary, especially to students (many of whom of course repudiated him). He introduced a new way of understanding politics as public theatre and as public culture and introduced the idea of exploring reform, rather than dry so-called disinterested analysis.

He created Australian Studies and developed a Masters degree in that area. All the time he produced book after book; campaigned as a public intellectual; led the fight over the dismissal of Gough Whitlam — loved every minute and embraced life to the fullest.

He chaired the Faculty of Arts for a while and turned that position into a powerhouse for reform. He went on to chair the Australia Council, again turning what had been a weak position into one of leadership and initiative.

Donald was then appointed Chancellor of the University of Canberra, again changing a ceremonial to a hands-on position. He spent two years running a program called Ideas for Australia, funded by the federal government in a specially created position for Donald. In conjunction with Bob Carr he developed the NSW intellectual program for the celebration of the Bicentenary of Australian Federation, a program that proved outstanding if for nothing else than the lecture series broadcast repeatedly on the ABC called the Barton lectures. Political pamphlets and books were produced and Donald continued his deep dedication to a tolerant Australia. He was disappointed that his philosophical introduction to the ideas behind Australian democracy, *The Avenue of the Fair Go* was not better received.

Yet Donald was remarkably relaxed about the ‘fate’ of his books saying that, like so much in life, book sales were out of his hands.

Another aspect to Donald’s writings arose from his time with the Australia Council, partly out of which came his book, *The Great Museum*. That sociological exploration of the way countries present their cultures was enormously well received internationally especially in France and has been translated into many languages.

My education and glorious ride across thirty years of fun, enthusiasm, learning, campaigning for change and public performances with Donald as leader, teacher and most of all friend began with our lecture series together, was consolidated through the farce of 1975 and continued to the end. He involved me in much of the public activities of his last thirty years. He edited chapters I wrote for some of his edited books and pamphlets and I saw — as he removed words from my texts — that it was possible to write clearly. I (among many others) had the joy of reading first drafts of his writings, some of which he threw away. I learned from that also.

I shall miss wonderful lunches at the Horne's home with his wife Myfanwy deftly manoeuvring both the food and the structure of the discussions. At such lunches and parties at the Hornes I got to enjoy laughter and conversations both serious and frivolous with wonderful people, most particularly the Horne family but also, for example, Frank Moorhouse, Gough and Margaret Whitlam, Ed Campion, and Bob and Helena Carr.

I shall miss wonderful lunches with just Donald; I shall miss the surprises and perspectives he brought to living.

We will all miss the *enfant terrible* and public intellectual faces of Donald Horne. I shall miss my friend. ▲

