

## What has happened to political ideas?

*Professor James Walter*

Let me start by giving you a brief road map of what I am hoping to do. Firstly, I want to talk about the mood of change that is clear in political life — the move towards a concern with social issues and social concerns. I want to suggest that, to some extent, our political leaders have lost the language and the rhetoric to deal with that, to mobilise us and to inspire us. It has not always been that way. If we look to the past, we can find other models; not that I am suggesting that we need to go back to the past. In fact, we need to go forward. But it is important to say that it has not always been that way.

I then want to argue that it is the preoccupation with the economic above all other things that has made it more and more difficult to talk about what I think is truly political. I will give a brief history of why I think that has happened. I then want to take up the question about the relevance of ideas, because some, economists among them, will argue that there is simply no space for political ideas anymore. I will end with some gestures towards what we can do about it.

For two or three years, it has been fairly clear that there is a pressure to rethink, and to move away from, the preoccupation with economics that has dominated public life in the 1980s. We can see it not only in Australia, but also in the United States. The election of President Clinton on a platform that promised concern for social issues was one sign. Living in Britain in 1992, I noticed that in the run-up to the national elections in that year, there was a decided renaissance of a quasi-Keynesian rhetoric in the press, and some cautious gestures towards that, too, in the conservative party.

Last year in London one of the pre-eminent Thatcherite think-tanks, the Institute of Economic

Affairs, published a book *Reinventing Civil Society*. Its release was accompanied by a press conference at which the author of the book, David Green, criticised Thatcherism for putting emphasis on the economy at the expense of a sense of community. He said that 'competitive markets coordinate the efforts of people who may be self-interested, even selfish, but they do not create solidarity'.

In Australia, too, it is very clear that the shift has been under way since about 1991. 'Fightback' — paradoxically the Liberal Party's program — may have marked the high tide of economic rationalism in Australia. In part, it impelled the Labor Party to begin the move towards the social, registered first in 'One Nation'. Of course, the Liberal defeat in 1993 has pushed that party also to attempt thinking in broader than purely economic terms. In parallel, there has been a spate of books questioning the wisdom of economic rationalism. For example, from the left, there has been Michael Pusey's *Economic Rationalism in Canberra (1991)* ; from the right, John Carroll and Robert Mann's *Shutdown (1992)* ; and from the centre, Hugh Emy's *Remaking Australia (1993)* .

That debate is obviously going to continue. The debate about the wisdom of internationalising the economy will go on. I do not want to talk directly about that today. That is, I do not want to be diverted by this debate about economic alternatives, although it is an important debate. Rather, in the face of all of these books that do raise questions and other alternatives, I want to ask: what has this lengthy preoccupation with economics above all things done to the status of ideas in politics? Despite this pressure to rethink, we are in a real quandary. There is this urge to rethink politics, yet our political leaders seem capable only of gestures. They have lost the language for addressing the social. Could it be that the language of economics has driven out the language of politics?

Consider the evidence. A year ago Paul Keating said that we were fitted up with the policies and rhetoric of the eighties; we had to change that and to change our position. On the eve of the 1993 election you will recall that he called for a more caring and compassionate society. Yet what does he think such a society might look like? I have combed through his public statements, speeches, lots of transcripts of interviews and so on and the best I can come up with is this quote of Mr Keating's:

I want policy changes to make the place the kind of social democracy it ought to be: a new basis of our wealth, a new basis of employment with a nice social policy wrap around it. A place which is complete, inclusive, kind and gentle — a nice place.

There is very little content here. It may be a view that allows space for others to dream about what the 'social policy wrap' might be, and I do not underestimate that. Certainly, we can see alternatives beginning to emerge, for instance in the area of child care and, to some extent, in the white paper on employment, *Working Nation*. The notion of a social policy wrap may allow space for others to take up those issues, but it is not a vision that itself suggests ways of tailoring social policies. That is not to say that Keating does not have ideas: he has plenty of ideas. He can speak at length about Australia's economic integration with Asia. He can speak

about our history, although I think in substantial areas of that he is usually wrong. And he can speak about the need for a republic. But it is not clear what life will look like in the fully internationalised economy, or what the transition to a republic might mean at the level of every day life.

If it is forgotten that politicians once could be more explicit, and once could articulate a political vision as opposed to an economic vision, then re-read Ben Chifley's 'Light on the Hill' speech, Gough Whitlam's policy speeches, or Robert Menzies' 'Forgotten People', a speech that was broadcast in 1942. I take Menzies' 'Forgotten People' as an exemplary model because it comes from the other side of politics — a side that we now think has been less concerned with social issues. There is a wonderful elaboration and analysis of this model in Judith Brett's book *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People* (1992), but I want to take one issue to remind you of what other sorts of rhetoric might look like.

In Menzies' speech you find a very clear representation of where the people to whom he casts his appeal are located. His imaginative appeal is to an audience which he sees as 'poised between the Socialist State with its subordination of the individual to the universal officialdom of government', and, 'the rich and powerful who control great funds and enterprises and are able to protect themselves, though in a political sense they have shown neither comprehension nor competence'.

The moral ground, the ground for politics, therefore, lay between the state and economic élites. Not surprisingly, Menzies conceived politics as the highest of civil vocations. The speech continues with a powerful metaphor for life outside the state and outside the market: the real life of the nation, according to the metaphor, is in the home. Menzies extends this metaphor to talk about what he calls 'homes human', 'homes spiritual' and 'homes material'. I think it is a metaphor that would be difficult to sustain today, but it does have some conception of what, beyond politics and economics, brings us together. He goes on to say: 'Patriotism springs from the instinct to defend and preserve our homes'. This is a mobilising speech and one that is clear about moral values, whether or not you agree with it. As it happens, I do not agree with it, but it is significant that we have lost this sort of rhetoric.

Of course, Keating is not alone — as I am arguing — in having this difficulty in conceiving the social. I would suggest that there is no politician presently capable of persuasively articulating the links between government, economy and society, because none of them can conceive clearly of that third element — the social. Certainly neither Peter Costello nor Alexander Downer offers better hope, despite both professing an attachment to softer liberalism — the sort of liberalism that will attend to people's needs as well as to market demands.

When pushed, Downer will make statements such as: 'We will aim to provide greater social stability and cohesion in Australia and to do that will involve some change'. But what sort of change? He is not saying. The opposition seems to accept the common wisdom that it should say as little as possible and provide as few hostages to fortune as possible, because governments lose elections; oppositions do not win them. Indeed, 'Fightback' has been

represented as a strategic error. They now think it offered too much detail; it was too open for attack.

I have to say, first, that elections are sometimes won by parties with programs and ideas. Arguably the Curtin government won in 1943 because of its program. Menzies probably won in 1949 because of what he promised. Whitlam certainly won in 1972 on the basis of detailed policies. Second, 'Fightback' may not have been a strategic error; it may have simply been wrong, that is to say, out of synchronisation with the sort of movement in ideas to which I referred earlier.

What the people want today is clear. Hugh Mackay's *Reinventing Australia: The Mind and Mood of Australia in the Nineties* (1993) ends by pointing this out:

Ordinary Australians speak of the need for more open communication about the nature and direction of our society; the need to experiment with more imaginative redeployments of available work; the need to 'get our values straight' and to rebuild our sense of being a community.

How did we reach this quandary where politicians are no longer able to come up with the ideas that will respond to such a need?

As I reflect on this, the thing that strikes me about the last two decades is how the shifts politicians have felt forced to make to keep up in the new world market have undercut the intellectual underpinnings of social life. That has led to a politics where the values and ideas that once gave meaning to political negotiation have been discarded. Much of what we value in the modern world has been created by a partnership between state and private enterprise, with politics as the sphere of negotiation between what was essential to create economic growth and what was needed to protect the broader interests of the community. Until the 1970s in Australia, support for this proposition was implicitly bipartisan, though that still left room for real conflict over the correct balance — should the state or business dominate within this bargain? It still left room for ideas about how the community should be defined, about what was politically valuable and about what was really in the community's best interests.

Every postwar leader up to and including Malcolm Fraser worried about and traded in ideas. Look, as I have suggested, at Menzies' 'Forgotten People' speech, Chifley's 'Light on the Hill', Whitlam's book on Labor and the Constitution, Fraser's book on Australia and, indeed, his regular columns in the *Australian* now. The issue is not whether we agree or not with any of these representations; it is just that they existed. Of course, Fraser and Whitlam were still the differing voices of what Paul Kelly in *The end of certainty: the story of the 1980s* (1992) called 'the Australian settlement'. By the 1970s, the conditions that made that settlement possible were rapidly changing. It was not that Australia in the 1970s suddenly lost the plot, though this is what we are always told, even by Paul Kelly. Instead, it was the arrival of a world market at full strength. It was the capacity of corporations to move in and out of countries according to production benefits, and the capacity of international financial

markets to exert discipline on nations by directing or withdrawing capital flows. It was a new ball game in which we were told that the only way to stay on top was to stay competitive.

It was thought that this diminished the power of governments to control their own affairs. Corporations would move offshore or there would be a capital flight, if conditions were not to the liking of the market. So, it undercut the conditions of a politics which was about achieving the best bargain for the community between the state and private enterprise. That was a politics that seemed to make sense only within nations. The game now transcended individual nations. Politics could no longer 'deliver', at least not in the old familiar terms. At once the old intellectual agendas — a product of the Australian settlement — were outmoded.

There was a new orthodoxy in economic rationalism. That new belief provided at least one idea about where the future lay and it gave politicians an out. They were not responsible for the dislocations we faced since these — they were persuaded — were the costs imposed by the deluded polices of the past. In any case, we should not look to governments for redress, since the market provided the only goods worth having. There was a new bipartisan consensus about the primacy of economics, albeit again allowing for slightly different emphases.

Once committed to this rhetoric — this techno-specialism — politicians became more and more prey to their advisers. They became less reliant on their parties, the grassroots or the community — none of whom could be expected to understand the economy. Indeed, I think by conflating the market and society, they lost the ability to conceptualise the community.

A residual effect of this has been a quite explicit antipathy to political ideas. There is the constant argument that all the great systems of ideas have failed. Marxism has failed, Keynesianism has failed and even economic rationalism has not delivered; all we are left with is pragmatism. P.P. McGuinness is a constant exponent of this sort of view.

Then there is the related argument that, in the current context, political ideas are simply not possible; they are irrelevant. Here for instance are the views of a Canberra economist who responded to an earlier expression of my argument. He suggests that my anxieties about political ideas 'betray a considerable nostalgia for the world in which political action was decisive and took priority over economic life'. His argument was that the world has changed fundamentally and that the great unifying ideas belonged to an era when the nation state

... was reasonably closed and social engineers could try to implement a cohesive political vision. In the open world of the present, owners of high technical and organisational skills, of capital and technical know-how have become highly mobile amongst nations.

Confronted with political demands or with 'footing the bill for income redistribution, being regulated away from their individual aspirations', these people 'will simply take the economic option of walking away and placing their assets and their skills elsewhere'. Political actions, even political ideas, are thus undermined:

Political commentators and leaders who try to recreate the past when political ideas had primacy are not likely to win the day, even if they offer us the comfort of a return to the familiar. Political leaders who grasp the full implications of the fundamental, technical and economic shifts of the past decade and who develop a political culture that attracts mobile productive resources are likely to command the future.

Those are two versions of the argument that political ideas are outmoded; that they are not a productive concern in the context in which we now have to live.

The most sophisticated version of the argument, though, is to be found in Francis Fukuyama's book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). In that book he claims that the triumph of the liberal ideal within every polity and in the international market-place simply makes political thinking outmoded. This is one of his closing comments:

Idealism will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. There will be neither art nor philosophy — just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.

Alternatives, in other words, will be unthinkable. Fukuyama argues for the spectacular abundance of liberal economies and suggests that, as the whole world moves this way, there will be a 'common marketisation' of international relations and a 'homogenisation' of consumer culture.

But what if this does not happen? Think for instance of the United States, which is still one of the most productive economies in the world. Has relative economic success led to safe cities, social equity or a reinforcement of the social world? Or is the social fabric more and more precariously sustained? I think the latter. I think if you look at the civic breakdown in Los Angeles, or if you look at any of the devastated cities of the industrial era, like Bridgeport — which is boarded up and is only occupied by the ever growing underclass — you have to think the latter; that the social fabric is more and more precarious there, despite relative economic success. Yet, there in the United States Fukuyama surely is right. Alternative ideas are virtually unthinkable. If that is the case there is no way out. This reminds me of nothing so much as the central tenet of George Orwell's *1984*: 'Even when they became discontented as they sometimes did, their discontent led nowhere because, being without general ideas, they could only focus on specific grievances'.

I guess in the mid-1980s most of us thought, with relief, that there was much to suggest that this pessimism had been misconceived. Liberal values and 'free' economies had triumphed; the authoritarian communist regimes were in their last days. Yet those who would too readily turn their backs on this little book, relegating it to history as an expression of the 1940s despair, should be reminded that the fable is centrally about language. In particular, it is about a form of language and a habit of thought that made alternative views, and hence

political action, impossible. Orwell shaped his conceit around a fabricated language, 'Newspeak', and a controlling bureaucratic agency, the Ministry of Truth. The more I read it, though, the more I am reminded that the various attempts to proclaim the end of ideology — Daniel Bell's in the 1950s, as much as Francis Fukuyama's in the 1990s — have had as their avowed aim, the assertion that ideas other than their preferred one of individualistic liberalism will become, literally, unthinkable. The agency in their scheme is history, not bureaucratic fiat, and the means are market-driven media industries, not 'Newspeak'. But is the effect far different? Where there can be no debate, there can be no politics.

What can we do? One of the tactics must be to revive economic debate, to insist that there are alternatives. But the second, and more important for my purposes here, will be to revive politics. Of course, those two are linked. The revival of politics will not simply involve adopting ideas from the past, but rather will identify the processes whereby political thinking can be resuscitated. The economist whom I quoted raises exactly the right questions. They are the questions that must be countered if such processes are to be retrieved. Are political projects luxuries only thinkable within a closed state? Is political vision always related to social engineering? Is the discipline exercised by those who control capital, technology, knowledge and administrative skills as untrammelled by politics or the community as he believes? That all boils down to a foundational question: can a particular geopolitical community such as Australia strike its own terms in dealing with the world economy?

I think each of those questions can be productively answered in ways that point to constructive alternatives. I do not have time to do that in detail here, but let me point to where I think some of the beginnings can be found. We do not need to look back to a golden age of protection in the 1950s to defend the mixed economy. Contemporary examples of economic success fostered by an active state abound. Look, for example, at Tom Fitzgerald's *Between Life and Economics* (1990), the Boyer lectures from a couple of years ago, and his account of Japan. His is not an unfamiliar argument, but I think his is a wonderful title; that is exactly where politics should be — between life and economics. He makes a well argued case for the managed economy that we see not only in Japan, but in Germany, in the newly industrialising countries of Asia, and so on.

Planning is not necessarily tied to closed systems or to social engineering. It can be cooperative and active and predicated on continual change, as Hugh Emy argues in his recent book *Remaking Australia* (1993). At its best, it is attuned to gaining strategic advantage in the international market, rather than erecting barriers against it. The point is, precisely, a concerted adaptive strategy and the recognition that the state is and must be an economic player in its own right. The economic success of such strategies, as demonstrated by the more communitarian economies, such as Japan or Germany, is itself the warranty for state intervention. But if the state is to be such a player it must retain planning capacities. It must aim not for deregulation, but for better regulation.

It is those capacities that Australian governments have seemed intent on giving away, as Geoff Dow has argued in several recent issues of the *Australian Journal of Political Science*. The fact that cogent arguments for alternatives to free market orthodoxies and coherent defences of a

newly relevant mixed economy can be mounted constitutes a necessary condition for the revival of politics. Only when alternatives can be voiced; only when the dominance of one big idea is eroded and it is recognised that social life is about debate rather than prescription, can political imagination re-emerge.

Above all, though, we have to remember those elements that Menzies simply took for granted in his speech referred to earlier: that there are the different modes of state, market and community. In fact, most importantly, that beyond both state and market there is a community. Politics is about mediation between the state and the market in the interests of community. The new fount of political ideas will depend upon rethinking the nature of the ties between people and recovering the language of community.

Most of the time we do not make such clear distinctions between state, market and community and, of course, it is a very problematic area. The idea of the nation as something that contains all these elements and that binds us together is under criticism on every side. We are going to have to think again about what our common interests are and not assume that they are captured by something like a national identity or that they are easily encapsulated in political symbols. In fact, instead of the debate I am calling for, there has been a lot of debate about what I call the politics of symbolism — the flag, the monarchy, the republic and so on.

The debate about some of these issues may help us to recover a language of community, but I think there are deeper questions we have to attend to first. Nonetheless, those distinctions that I have mentioned are to some extent fictional. They are ways of thinking about behaviour. And at all times each of those modes — state, market and community — is interdependent. They cannot be separated out easily. State regulation survives only as long as it is sustained by relative consensus emerging from community loyalties. Markets operate only within a sphere secured by the state. The sense of collective well-being is maintained only as long as political action is seen as effective against the intrusive dominance of the state and the fragmentation induced by disparate economic imperatives. In other words, it is all to do with balance and negotiation. This last is the proper sphere of politics: parliament as a restraint on executives and the state, but resort to state agencies as a restraint on the market. The key danger to democratic politics is when people feel powerless to effect change. One of the first needs in reviving political debate and political ideas is to insist that we are not entirely hostages to the international market. For that, we have to go back to the arguments that I have mentioned from people like Tom Fitzgerald, Hugh Emy and others in Australia and from William Keegan, David Harvey and others overseas.

But, that done, we will need to reconsider the nature of our civil society. The old ideas of identity will not wash. I think this reconsideration is starting to happen. The current debates about citizenship, citizen rights and entitlements are part of this — ways of finding a common interest. By insisting on being treated as citizens, and not consumers in a market-place, we may recover the language of community. By insisting that we are a community with options and that our course is not entirely dictated by economic imperatives determined elsewhere, we may reinvigorate the political debate and the generation of political ideas.



**Questioner** — I was wondering if you would comment on the role of media in all this. I am thinking of the interview with the Prime Minister during the week on ABC ‘Lateline’, which I found unrelentingly economic, though with a few token non-economic questions thrown in at the end. It was almost the sort of interview you might expect with the Treasurer. But, given the range of domestic political issues, I thought it was most disappointing.

Also I think the interview was conducted at a level of detail which I found extremely difficult to follow and I wonder whether that is part of the alienation of the general community from the sort of political debate which is going on. We can have 15, 20 or 25 minutes of discussion with the Prime Minister about whether interest rates are going to rise in the next three or four months at, I think, a level of detail which very few people would feel able to participate in.

**Professor Walter** — I should first say that I missed the ‘Lateline’ interview. When I picked up the paper the next morning I was furious because I thought, ‘What if Keating has actually said something new about the social sphere?’ The newspaper reports seemed to indicate that I did not have to worry about that.

I do think that there is a large question here, not just about the media, but about the role of the intelligentsia. By the intelligentsia I mean not just academics, but all those who deal in ideas — the media, writers of all sorts, teachers, journalists and so on. Intellectual life has become very specialised and professionalised in the last two decades and part of the problem is that the role of public intellectual — the figure who will stand up and speak and try to articulate things in a public forum — has sadly diminished. I wrote a book some years ago on ministerial advisers, but I have to say that the growth of a very specialist private office structure, where it is assumed that the main qualification to make sensible inputs is, as it were, a very specialist qualification, has been a problem.

As for the media, I think it is fair to say that you do not get alternative views in the media at all, with the possible exception of Ken Davidson in the *Age*. Again, one need not agree with everything that he says, but the papers do not suggest to us that there are ways of modifying or rethinking these things.

Even now, when I think there is pressure to change — and again this is not unique to Australia — there has been only one answer to our problems. To criticise it and say that it does not answer everything, is not to say that economic reform was not necessary; it is not to say that we should live forever in the 1950s. It is simply to say that there may be room; there may be margins for rethinking the social issues and rethinking the role of the state. Indeed, around the world you can, if you look, find ways of that being done, but you do not get that from the media here.

There is also a great celebration of the entrepreneurial spirit in the media. It has gone to a large extent now, but in the 1980s it was theatre. Economics was theatre. If you read the financial pages, for those who were assumed to be in the know, it seemed to me that it was very much theatrical. It was about ‘big doers’. Paul Keating talks about his admiration for big doers, and economic journalism was about the big doers who cut a swath through the world.

I think the media is starting to register the move I have been speaking of, but it is moving fairly slowly. It is not getting through on the economic pages.

Between 1990 and 1993 I was working in England and, of course, that is a great social laboratory for seeing what this economic pre-occupation does to the social fabric. But, most of the best sources of ideas were in papers such as the *Financial Times*, which actually covered in great detail things like the Docklands disaster. You had, as it were, perfect case studies of the failure of an idea. Here was a problem that no government had been able to solve since the war — the supposedly derelict wastelands of the docks — and the market would solve it. It would not cost the public anything because the risks would be taken by private enterprise. Essentially, every aspect of it went wrong, and it cost the public a huge amount because the banks and financial institutions were so exposed by this failure, that the only way they could recover was to increase interest rates on our mortgages, loans and so on. In effect, there had been a market solution that had failed and the community still bore the cost. The *Financial Times* was terrific on that. It was terrific on the closing of the coal fields and the attempts to privatise the electricity industry and why that was costing more. It is possible sometimes that just relentless, close-grained reading of what is really going on, even in the financial press, shows you some of the errors. But it has not yet happened in Australia.

**Questioner** — I would like to add a sceptical note to what you have been saying. One thing that is striking if you look at the figures over that period is that governments have got much bigger. You have talked about the specialisation of intellectual life. There has been a deep specialisation or professionalisation of political life. One might argue that this has led to political classes which are much more isolated from the societies in which they live, such as this building. A friend of mine calls it the ‘forbidden city’ and it is not a bad term for it.

You can see this throughout the western world. For example, we had John Major saying, ‘We don’t need a referendum on getting closer integration in Europe because we’ve already had a general election on it’. However, in that general election you could vote for the Tories, who are in favour of integration with Europe; the Labour Party, which is in favour with even more integration with Europe; or the Liberal Democrats, who are in favour of even more integration with Europe. But you had a choice.

I note not only these sort of economic questions, but also the way politics has become more isolated as governments have become bigger and the pressures on politicians have got bigger. They just do not have very much spare time. Where do they do their thinking? Their staff are getting bigger, but they are run off their feet. Just the sheer scale of government activity which has got bigger in this period, may be undermining it. Politics in the petite, everyday sense, may be undermining politics in the capital ‘p’ sense you are talking about.

**Professor Walter** — I would agree with most of that. There is no question that that sort of specialisation of political élites, too, has gone on. The barrier has been maintained because there has been this implicit argument that anyone outside the circle cannot be expected to understand the economy. We have to wrestle with that.

There is a breakdown in the ways of communicating between the electorate and between the political élites. The electorate is told there is no alternative, and it is this denial of communication that we have got to address. And in a sense, that is going to happen for better or worse, because of the sort of point that Hugh Mackay made about what people want. In other places this is leading to changes. Look at eastern Europe, for example, where we said to them, 'Now you are free of the command economy and the dominant state, the free market will solve your problems'. People were prepared to buy that for a while, but it has not worked. There is a swing back to the left; back to the former communists who were regarded as being completely outside the new realm. In Hungary and Poland they are being swept back in. Elsewhere, things are simply unravelling as in Russia.

At some point the political élite have to respond to this sort of need and open that barrier again. They have to concede that they do not have all the answers, and that the one big answer we have been sold is not going to solve all our problems, or they are going to face real breakdowns. The real problem for democracies is obviously when people feel powerless. I do not think that is happening yet. As I said, I think the pressure to change is under way. The difficulty is that we have got to rethink civil society and rethink the language of community to capitalise on that trend.

**Questioner** — It seems to me that I have been living in a different country to the country you have been living in. I did not regard the 1950s and the 1960s as a period of very great intellectual ferment from which we have escaped to a period where there is now this tremendous uniformity and where real problems are not discussed. That is just not the world I remember. The world I remember is much more a world where during the 1950s and 1960s there was a uniformity which seems to me to have been disturbed in the 1980s and 1990s.

Now, it is true that market forces have become more important in many regards, but it does seem to me that people are asking all sorts of questions about what to do about single parents, what to do about the long term unemployed and how to cope with alienation. It seems to me that this idea of consensus, which was to some extent Hawke's great hallmark, works much better than I expected it to work. It just does not seem to me to be true at all that political ideas did not exist in the 1980s and 1990s, and that the 1950s and 1960s were that marvellous period when we all talked about a large number of issues.

Nor do I agree with you that there are not columnists in this country who differ from the dominant line. If you want to look at the *Financial Review*, look at John Quiggin. If you want to look at the *Australian*, look at Phillip Adams or look at Humphrey McQueen. It is just not true that there are no dissident voices. I do not see this ideological uniformity existing now or a dearth of political ideas around now as compared to the marvellous period you were talking about.

**Professor Walter** — I must have expressed myself very badly on that earlier period. I did say at several points that, of course, we cannot go back to the 1950s and 1960s. The conditions that sustained the sort of economy that we had then simply are not there. Nor do I think that it was a time of great ferment and stimulating ideas. In fact, I said for example that

we could not go back to the model that Menzies suggested. I was trying to say that there was a clearer sense of those three spheres existing then even on the conservative side of politics, and that that has been seriously eroded.

It is not a question of going back and somehow thinking that the answer is there. It is a question of going forward and recreating the conditions for the interdependence of the three modes to be productive. As for the 1980s, I am not suggesting that there were not ideas around. In my view, they were not political ideas. That is what I am trying to argue. We have to recover a language of politics.

As for the third point, of course we have Humphrey McQueen, Phillip Adams and so on. I was talking about the financial press. They do not actually publish in the financial pages of the papers to which you referred. There is some room for dissidence and critique, but it does not cut much ice, it seems to me, when you turn to the financial section and read what is happening there. I think the best account of this is a very good forthcoming book by Graeme Turner, *Making It National*, which will be published by Allen and Unwin towards the end of this year, which spends several chapters analysing the media on these issues and from which I was glossing considerably. I think there is a case to be made.

**Questioner** — Would the political language you are referring to refer to communitarianism in the global village? In that respect, the crucial element would be distance so that in so far as world communication is concerned — electronically or by satellite — you have communication with the world, but physically we need to look towards the development of community centres which are accessible to all people.

It is probably a matter of local community self-sufficiency and, possibly, even local access to the law, for instance. You have already referred to the matter of a sense of identity and this would give people at the local community level in the global village a different or enhanced sense of identity through more participation in the decision making process. Involved in this would be certain cooperative endeavours which could involve long-term unemployed in the production of food, dealing with health, workshops and things like that. Therefore, in relation to planning, what you need to do is have an awareness of better community facilities at the local level, which are accessible to all members of the economic society.

**Professor Walter** — I would agree with that. As many of you will be aware, there is considerable contemporary literature on rethinking civil society. A great deal of it concerns the issue of where you start, and a lot of it is arguing that you do have to start at the local level. Obviously, in those local networks and associations you do learn about connections with others, responsibility, obligations and so on.

There is, of course, the issue of how you get these many little polities, as it were, together into a political entity. There is a real question about whether we have a common interest. Does Australia as a geopolitical entity have a common interest? I think it does, but there are articles that say there is no national economy, for example. There are articles that argue that the whole thing cannot be put back together again in some crucial way. I think that the way to do

it is to think about processes and citizenship and to look at what happened. Let me say instantly that I am not suggesting a return to the 1890s or the ideas of the 1890s, but the fact is that the Australian state was self-consciously constructed. The acts that created the federation and the constitution were carefully worked out. They did not emerge from tradition.

Helen Irving's work seems to suggest this. It is far from the view that Manning Clark put that federation was all a slide into complicity with imperialism, we could have been a republic and were not, and so on. Helen Irving's work on the contrary suggests that federation became a genuine popular movement and that we do have this heritage of a state that is, in a sense, self-consciously constructed. We can learn about that process and we are going to have to do that again. I think these debates about citizenship, rights and entitlements are the starting point now. They are the way of thinking about what it is that binds the many little polities together in a productive way.

**Questioner** — I notice from your brief résumé that you have written a number of books. It just sparked off the question in my mind about university intellectuals, whether in fact they are giving sufficient dissemination of their ideas through other media such as television, for instance. The level of debate on the radio seems to be more intellectual or slightly more in depth than what we get on television, which tends to be somewhat glib and all fairly rushed.

If you think of the '7.30 Report' or something like that, you get a few minutes from various people. Occasionally, when a university lecturer has appeared on a television show such as 'Good Morning Australia', I have noticed — just as a general member of the public and a former public servant — that where there has been a university person, suddenly the level of incisive thinking in the debate has risen markedly. But we do not seem to be exposed to it very often; besides, who reads learned tomes? They are read mainly by other intellectuals. I wonder if university people such as yourself have considered popularising some of your ideas?

**Professor Walter** — I think that is a fair comment. I think that is also part of that specialisation of intellectual life that I talked about earlier. There has been debate for some time about the levels of jargon and inaccessibility of many academic books, and the extremely arcane levels of theoretical debate. For some time there have also been powerful arguments against this and arguments for popularising and for being accessible. Some years ago Ken Inglis wrote a very good piece on this. Judy Brett has written quite a bit about this and tried, I think, successfully, to deal with the very complicated questions about Menzies in an accessible way in her book on Menzies.

There are two or three problems. I understood, for instance, that Ken Inglis tried to get *Australians, a Historical Library*, published by Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, reissued in a paperback edition. They tried to consolidate that work so that it could be used for schools and they immediately ran into problems with the economics of the publishing industry. That project, which looked very promising, fell through. There are all sorts of issues like that which come up.

One is confronted by a difficulty of debate when one goes on radio or television. Some of the questions that you want to deal with cannot be answered in a two-minute grab. I certainly find this on the few occasions that I do it. This may be my problem, but I think some things take longer to elaborate. It is not so much a question of language, but a question of space.

On the whole, the electronic media has some difficulties with that, except on shows such as Phillip Adam's late night radio show, 'Late Night Live'. I think the whole debate about the obligations and responsibilities on intellectuals to be public intellectuals must be pushed further.

**Questioner** — Are you saying that basically we are moving from an apolitical stance to a non-political stance, or vice versa? If not, perhaps this is a dialectic moving us towards those issues which we really should be focussing on. This is almost a learning process; moving away from perhaps the constructive political ideals to those ideals which will actually benefit society maybe in 10 or 15 years. This is looking from Australia, particularly.

**Professor Walter** — I am saying that the strategies that we have adopted have not delivered what was promised. There is a real potential for disruption and breakdown if those strategies are not addressed. One of the answers to that would be, 'The economy is picking up now and some of our anxieties will be satisfied. Have faith and last a bit longer.'

I think it is even more important now that the economy is picking up to think about the other issues, and for us to demand that things be changed. I am not arguing that there is a sort of wilful, apolitical period and we are going through some learning curve and things are going to get better. I think every period has to be assessed in terms of the context facing the people who are trying to deal with it at that time. The 1980s and 1990s were a time when it was very difficult to resist the economic paradigm, because the things that we thought had worked in the past were breaking down. The world had changed so rapidly that we needed some framework, and this was the framework that came to hand.

I am trying cautiously to say that we cannot, of course, blame everything on our political élites. It is not enough simply to say that those policies have not produced the outcomes that people were hoping for. Unless we can learn from that, we are not going to move on productively to the next stage.