

## **And Let's Always Call It the Commonwealth: One Poet's View of the Republic\***

*Les A. Murray, AO*

I gave this paper the title 'And let's always call it the Commonwealth: one poet's view of the republic.' It is actually one and a bit poet's review because the last poem I will read today is by another poet, a colleague of mine. Honourable Senators, ladies and gentlemen:

After the war, and just after marriage and fatherhood ended in divorce, our neighbour won the special lottery, an amount then equal to fifteen years of a manager's salary at the bank, or fifty years' earnings by a marginal farmer fermenting his clothes in the black marinade of sweat, up in his mill-logging paddocks.

The district, used to one mailbag, now received two every mailday. The fat one was for our neighbour. After a dip or two, he let these bags accumulate around the plank walls of the kitchen, over the chairs, till on a rainy day, he fed the tail-switching calves, let the bullocks out of the yard, and, pausing at the door to wash his hands, came inside to read the letters. Shaken out in a vast mound on the kitchen table they slid down, slithered to his fingers. *I have 7 children I am under the doctor if you could see your way clear equal Pardners in the Venture God would bless you lovey*

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*assured of our best service for a mere fifteen pounds down  
remember you're only lucky I knew you from the paper straightaway*

Baksheesh, hissed the pages as he flattened them, baksheesh!  
*mate if your interested in a fellow diggers problems  
old mate a friend in need—the Great Golden Letter  
having come, now he was being punished for it.  
You sound like a lovely big boy we could have such times  
her's my photoe Doll Im wearing my birthday swimsuit  
with the right man I would share this infallible system.*

When he lifted the stove's iron lid and started feeding in  
the pages he'd read, they clutched and streamed up the corrugated  
black chimney shaft. And yet he went on reading,  
holding each page by its points, feeling an obligation  
to read each crude rehearsed lie, each come-on, flat truth, extremity:  
*We might visit you the wise investor a loan a bush man like you*

*remember we met on Roma Street for your delight and mine  
a lick of the sultana—the white moraine kept slipping  
its messages to him you will be accursed he husked them like cobs  
Mr Nouveau Jack, old man my legs are all paralysed up.  
Black smuts swirled weightless in the room some good kind person  
like the nausea of a novice free-falling in a deep mine's cage  
now I have lost his pension and formed a sticky nimbus round him*

but he read on, fascinated by a further human range  
not even war had taught him, nor literature glossed for him  
since he never read literature. Merely the great reject pile  
which high style is there to snub and filter, for readers.  
That his one day's reading had a strong taste of what he and war  
had made of his marriage is likely; he was not without sympathy,  
but his leap had hit a wire through which the human is policed.  
His head throbbed as if busting with a soundless shout  
of immemorial sobbed invective *God-forsaken, God-forsakin*  
as he stopped reading, and sat blackened in his riches.

*Letters to the Winner*

That poem comes out of the great feral novel of gossip, a prime source of my work. If you see it as depicting the immense public treasure you were elected to manage, amid the imploring cries of the needy and the shady, I won't argue with your interpretation.

When I worked for Sir Humphrey decades ago in the Prime Minister's department downhill from this place, our way of feeding most letters into the stove was to tell their writers, truthfully, that what they had written to the Prime Minister about was really a matter for their state governments. This enormous continuing cop-out was mandated by the constitution, which did not grant the Prime Minister the powers of a supreme referee, and I have no doubt that this will be very slow to change under any likely republic. Many a fine ideal is bound to be sidetracked into that older, meaner dimension of post-colonial governing.

But perhaps my being a New South Walian, and thus a person imbued with the idea of government as a quasi-criminal enterprise, is a bias I should confess to at the outset; it may trim the wings of my political imagination so much that I am disqualified from dreaming the truly innocent high dreams of reform. We're where the chains came ashore, and they still sometimes clink in our laughter:

like: I went to Sydney races. There along the rails,  
all snap brims and cold eyes, flanked by senior police

and other, stony men with their eyes in a single crease  
stood the entire Government of New South Wales  
watching Darby ply the whip, all for show, over this fast colt.  
It was young and naive. It was heading for the post in a bolt  
while the filly carrying his and all the inside money

strained to come level. Too quick for the stewards to note him  
Darby slipped the colt a low lash to the scrotum.  
It checked, shocked, stumbled—and the filly flashed by.  
As he came from weighing in, I caught Darby's eye  
and he said *Get out of it, mug*, quite conversationally.—

from *Midwinter Haircut*

That is from a seasonal poem titled *Midwinter Haircut*, but some other things I have written about the interface of law and human skin are darker.

In the mid-1970s, when the term 'dole bludger' began to be used a lot, I wrote a sequence of police poems, not specially derogatory, despite my being a low-class Australian boy. One of them had to do with the regular police task of punishing unemployment, and was titled *Rostered Duty*:

This is the hour the Crucified Bludger is fed  
a tin dish held to his mouth and his night's stain hosed down  
before he is driven slow-slow through the fibro-tile streets  
and the message gets through to moaners, to oversleepers,  
to migrants who dream dark police, to blokes thinking Sickie.

This is hour the hurrying frowners at railway stations  
don't look but all read his placard: WORK-SHY.  
Soon, outside factory and depot, flies supping his wounds,  
he will be ignored by staff, by management, by unions,  
all too mature to look. Very few people focus,

not the realists, not the long planners, not the fellows  
with trades in demand, nor the ones proud they can shovel  
as much as God's truck can dump; self-provers and winners  
never seem him at all, and talk about him constantly.  
But everyone knows the form: on a quiet day

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passing Hey Folks PLANETWIDE Pow! Discounts/Trade Ins!  
I've been known to say to the salesfolk there not looking  
*Gooday, how's the carrot?* Yes, I've had my turn,  
served my tour with the Bludger. Every policeman does one.  
I've picked airgun slugs out of him, tuned his trannie on race days,

heard him howl in the truck bay, echoing the oil drums.  
I've supervised him and his wife on a visiting day—  
*No madam we can't let him down*—and had her scream  
into my face *ME! crucify ME, God damm you!*  
At least it's intense. Jail is drearier employment.

When he'd get randy we'd turn him face to the van.  
I think of him often, spread-Andrewed on four bolts  
parked facing the sea for a treat of a summer evening  
(when he bit my hand to the bone he saw more sunsets).  
I remember him watching the big ships loading bales

and unloading bales, as the radio quacked Production.  
*This is a shop, boys, not a nation*, a man said,  
making a gesture. A poet growled *Misemployment*  
but poets are kids. A thousand fellows in ties  
picking flyspecks from pepper with fine Government needles

or that's what it looked like said *No time to be choosy*  
*Unless he's got a job*, smiled the chief clerk, *he can't have one.*  
It was interesting duty, travelling with the Bludger,  
more to the point than backing up wives and collectors  
and once you've done it, you're never, like they say, off duty.

*Rostered Duty*

I suppose I joined the Australian republican tradition in 1954, at the time of the royal visit that year. My father and I, regretfully admitting that his beloved 1928 Dodge tourer had become an unreliable heap, had been making efforts to find some other transport to Newcastle so as to watch the Queen pass by. In the midst of our enquiries, though, I suddenly felt we were humiliating ourselves. We were all fired up to go and stand craning uncomfortably in a crowd in order to glimpse an Englishwoman to whom we, individually, meant nothing. She would be surrounded by hard-eyed guards and impeccably dressed hangers-on to whom we would be scruffy nonentities fit only to swell her progress and their vanity. How was it that no Australian could ever occupy this woman's place in our own country?

I was fifteen and I knew about unearned inheritance, but only at the modest level of farm proprietorships and the like. I had never resented any of that, but suddenly I was looking at an enormously bigger example of it and finding I could not stomach it as a basis for sovereignty over me or my sort of people. Mere chance inheritance did not seem good enough as a qualification for supreme prestige and privilege. Years later I would apply the same objection to inverted inheritance too, as in membership of something called the working class, which actual workers mostly seemed keen to escape from. That relegated people, too, and its

self-appointed bullies were no kinder than those of the exquisitely dressed caste, while being even more obtuse about poetry. But that came later.

All I knew at fifteen was what I still vividly know: that the milieu I was born into, of small farmers and forest workers up the coast, had few friends indeed in Australia's towns and cities. Within my own culture of the farms and bush villages I never knew anything but kindness and acceptance, perhaps because of networks of family and acquaintance in which we lived then—the mutual dependence of communities. How an outsider might have fared I frankly do not know, but many have come to live in our region since—as they had not back then—and their preferences for much or little contact with us seem to be respected.

I learned rejection in my first town high school just a bit later on. That place taught me that Australia's class system, which used to be played down by commentators in those days, might ridicule social climbers a bit but took truly deep offence at being ignored and treated as not worth climbing. Within our own milieu, though, we bushies thought climbing both disgraceful and impossible—women and the police can always pick you. The groups we would have to climb into had traditionally always scorned us. Some of that scorn did seep through and damage self-esteem in the bush, causing a measure of rancour and distrust of official virtues such as equality. Would equality with us be much of a compliment? But also, would equality with soft-handed suit wearers be a compliment to any of us? All this was a still unconscious background to my feelings at having been worked up by publicity to the brink of running after the darling of our scorners, the shining bearer and pinnacle, back then, of their pretensions. The very rabbit skins on the wall of the barn curled with shame at me.

Out of the Fifties, a time of picking your nose  
while standing at attention in civilian clothes,  
we travelled luxury class in our drift to the city  
not having a war, we went to university.  
We learned to drink wine, to watch Swedish movies, and pass  
as members, or members-in-law, of the middle class  
but not in those first days when, stodge-fed, repressed,  
curfewed and resented, we were the landladies' harvest.  
I had meant to write a stiff poem about that, to be  
entitled NOTES FROM THE HOUSE OF MRS HARVEY  
it might have been unkind, in part—but then, to be honest  
one did evict me for eating my desert first  
and even from the kindest, we were  
estranged, as from parents, in a green Verona,

... ..

a nail-biting fiefdom of suede boots, concupiscence, tea,  
a garden pruned by the *Herald* angels yearly.  
In that supermarket of styles, with many a setback  
we tried everything on, from Law School Augustan to rat pack  
and though in Chinese my progress was smooth up to *K'ung*  
and in German I mastered the words that follow *Achtung!*  
in my slow-cycling mind an eloquence not yet articulate  
was trying to say Youth. This. I will take it straight.

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And you were losing your bush millenarian faith—I  
remember your dread of the Wrath on first tasting coffee.  
We were reading Fisher Library, addressing gargoyles on the stair,  
drafting self after self on Spir-O-Bind notepaper  
as the tidal freshers poured in, with hard things to learn  
in increasing droves they were getting off at Redfern.

... ..

Literate Australia was British, or babu at least,  
before Vietnam and the American conquest  
career had overwhelmed learning most deeply back then:  
a major in English made one a minor Englishman  
and woe betide those who stepped off the duckboards of that.  
Slacking and depth were a single morass. But a spirit  
of unresolved life caught more and more in its powerful  
field. It slowed their life to bulk wine and pool.  
Signals had to be found. The day you gave up fornication  
we took your WetChex and, by insufflation,  
made fat balloons of them, to glisten aloft in the sun  
above the Quad, the Great Hall, the Carillon—  
and that was Day One in the decade of chickens-come-home  
that day kids began smoking the armpit hairs of wisdom.

from *Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato*

Those three sonnets come from a sequence of nine, titled *Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato*, which I dedicated to Bob Ellis in the 1970s in memory of the time at the end of the 1950s when we had roomed together as unspeakably scruffy Arts students in Abe Saffron's old Raffles Private Hotel at North Bondi. I still feel very safe in Sydney.

At the university, which I was the first of my ancestry to attend in Australia, I studied a few things formally and a lot of things informally, as poets often do. One thing I looked into was aristocracy—the romance and decentralised culture of that mafiose system which had ruled Western civilisation for so long. I did not know why I was drawn to that, but then I never know in advance why I am drawn to the subjects which will feed my work. Follow the attraction because it leads to something you need. Perhaps it was important for me to disentangle nobility and ease from snobbery and force. It was a lovely apolitical time at Sydney then, theatrical in a more overt way, and commentators point to the number of figures who would later win international renown who were at the university in those years.

Australia also had its own bohemia, called the Push, which pretended to be libertarian and, to a fair degree, was, but it also exerted heavy pressure in favour of a rigorous inversion of social mores. In that last period before pass-or-perish in universities, I could get away with my solitary self-education more easily than I might have done a little later, after 1962, when the first fraternal telegrams from Cuba heralded the return of politics.

Another subject I went into deeply at university was religion. When I got there, my one unshakeable belief surviving from childhood Calvinism, and already buttressed by experience, was a form of Murphy's Law which held that every human arrangement, and

maybe every natural one too, will sooner or later betray you; there is a dark side to literally everything.

Through poetry and conversion to Catholicism, I was to discover a principle as strong as this: that immortality is real and can be experienced in our mortal life as a quality we can evoke and embody in objects, where it will then persist as long as those objects do. Later, I would also see that a strong idea yet to be adequately embodied is a deeply dangerous thing.

The greatest thing I did at university was to teach myself to write poetry. That apprenticeship, persisted in, would mean that, despite our poverty, I would never become a bitter bush hoon, and that I would never have to rise socially either.

I thought sporadically about the republic during the early years of my writing and occasionally issued rather overheated polemics about it. Most of these were in prose, and one or two dealt with flag design, for which I seem to be no more gifted than other Australians.

I will say one thing about emblems, though—this is not written in my lecture notes, but I might as well tell you. The other day I heard that Sydney was looking for a new coat of arms. Interestingly, the new supporters are to be the Aboriginal rainbow serpent, the Eora one, and a ship's rope. They are both imaginative and very appropriate. They are great. But the main shield is still a dog's breakfast. The obvious symbol for Sydney is five gleaming brass bells on a harbour-blue field—*Five Bells*, Slessor's great poem. If you put the Opera House on the top of it for a crest, the whole world knows what city you are talking about. I sent that suggestion to the *Herald*. I hope it gets in. If I do not design the flag, I hope I may have contributed to Sydney's coat of arms.

When I had been publishing poetry long enough to venture a selected poems book, I titled it *The Vernacular Republic*, in honour of the place most of the poems, especially those of human life, had come from. It was a space many held to be a cultural desert, but I drew a lot of poetry from it. I described it in print as:

that "folk" Australia, part imaginary and part historical, which is the real matrix of any distinctiveness we possess as a nation, and which stands over against all our establishments and elites.

The book came out first in 1976. I only shudder at parts of that description 20 years later, mainly that word 'establishment', which even then had become totalitarian language. It always obscurely horrifies me to see or hear totalitarian behaviour from Australians. I feel a vertigo of identity that is not assuaged by remembering the close affinity of convicts and warders. I had written a better account of the sources of much of my work a few years earlier in a poem of the Western Australian desert. I wrote:

We are a colloquial nation,  
most colonial when serious.

Much later, in the early nineties, I would define my practice from another angle again, in a poem that touched on a farmer in our district who knew all the poetry of Alexander Pope by heart and recited it to his cattle for forty years. The relevant section of this poem reads:

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The proper study of mankind  
is weakness. If good were not  
the weaker side, how would  
we know to choose it?

I should add that the book title *The Vernacular Republic* originally appeared above a quite short poem, a sonnet, and seemed too mighty there; it demanded to preside over a whole book, and in fact stayed on the title pages of reissues of my selected and collected poems well into the 1980s, while the sonnet that originally bore it got renamed *The Mitchells*. That one goes:

I am seeing this: two men are sitting on a pole  
they have dug a hole for and will, after dinner, raise  
I think for wires. Water boils in a prune tin.  
Bees hum their shift in unthinning mists of white

bursaria blossom, under the noon of wattles.  
The men eat big meat sandwiches out of a styrofoam  
box with a handle. One is overheard saying:  
*drought that year. Yes. Like trying to farm the road.*  
The first man, if asked, would say *I'm one of the Mitchells*.  
The other would gaze for a while, dried leaves in his palm,  
and looking up, with pain and subtle amusement,

say *I'm one of the Mitchells*. Of the pair, one has been rich  
but never stopped wearing his oil-stained felt hat. Nearly everything  
they say is ritual. Sometimes the scene is an avenue.

*The Mitchells*

Around that time, I was occasionally interested in inventing epithets for ways in which Australia had contributed, usually in a very unnoticed fashion, to world culture. If America had been the bourgeois revolution, showing the way to a final swamping of the older aristocratic order by shopkeepers and entrepreneurs, I thought that we were perhaps the proletarian evolution. Some snide immigrants had described the country in my hearing as the true dictatorship of the proletariat. I had not bridled long at this, because it was possibly truer and kinder than they meant it to be.

Our one great contribution to world politics, aside from the eight-hour day, was the secret ballot, which freed the franchise for working people and provided, by making labour parties possible, a route to social welfare in several countries that did not involve mass slaughters by political police. I walked warily of terms like 'bourgeois' and 'proletarian' though, even as I gingerly and sparingly used them. Like all totalitarian terms, they were underlain by immense mass graves. Also, 'proletariat' seemed to divide the urban from the rural poor, or, say, the Wharf Labourers Federation from the equally humbly born World War II soldiers who had wanted to shoot them for sabotage.

I preferred 'vernacular' as a term not in political use and thus capable of fresh angles and insights. Proletarian folk are not allowed to rise, for example, except perhaps *en masse*, while vernacular is a socially portable style. Also, a term connoting righteous oppression would



make it difficult to think a lateral thought such as how the coming of decent pay for builders killed the higher range of European-derived architecture stone dead—perhaps in Australia first of all—and may have led to the plainness of modernism and of the vernacular styles associated above all with the name of Glen Murcutt. In my terms, I was into up-market chook sheds before he was. But there was an instinctive balancing effort in it, too. A poem that is relevant here is titled *The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever*, which reads:

To go home and wear shorts forever  
in the enormous paddocks, in that warm climate,  
adding a sweater when winter soaks the grass,

to camp out along the river bends  
for good, wearing shorts, with a pocketknife,  
a fishing line and matches,

or there where the hills are all down, below the plain,  
to sit around in shorts at evening  
on the plank verandah—

If the cardinal points of costume  
are Robes, Tat, Rig and Scunge,  
where are shorts in this compass?

They are never Robes  
as other bareleg outfits have been:  
the toga, the kilt, the lava-lava  
the Mahatma's cotton dhoti;

archbishops and field marshals  
at their ceremonies never wear shorts.  
The very word  
means underpants in North America.

Shorts can be Tat,  
Land-Rovering bush-environmental tat,  
socio-political ripped-and-metal-stapled tat,  
solidarity-with-the-Third World tat tvam asi,

likewise track-and-field shorts worn to parties  
and the further humid, modelling negligee  
of the Kingdom of Flaunt,  
that unchallenged aristocracy.  
More plainly climatic, shorts  
are farmers' rig leathery with salt and bonemeal,  
are sailors' and branch bankers' rig,  
the crisp golfing style  
of our youngest male National Costume.

Mostly loosley, they are Scunge,

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ancient Bengal bloomers or moth-eaten hot pants  
worn with a former shirt,  
feet, beach sand, hair  
and a paucity of signals.

Scunge, which is real negligee  
housework in a swimsuit, pyjamas worn all day,  
is holiday, is freedom from ambition.  
Scunge makes you invisible  
to the world and yourself.  
The entropy of costume,  
scunge can get you conquered by more vigorous cultures  
and help you to notice it less.

Satisfied ambition, defeat, true unconcern,  
the wish and the knack for self-forgetfulness  
all fall within the scunge ambit  
wearing board shorts or similar;  
it is a kind of weightlessness.

Unlike public nakedness, which in Westerners  
is deeply circumstantial, relaxed as exam time,  
artless and equal as the corsetry of a hussar regiment,  
shorts and their plain like  
are an angelic nudity,  
spirituality with pockets!  
A double updraft as you drop from branch to pool!

Ideal for getting served last  
in shops of the temperate zone  
they are also ideal for going home, into space,  
into time, to farm the mind's Sabine acres  
for product or subsistence.

Now that everyone who yearned to wear long pants  
has essentially achieved them,  
long pants, which have themselves been underwear  
repeatedly, and underground more than once,  
it is time perhaps to cherish the culture of shorts,  
to moderate grim vigour  
with the knobble of bare knees,  
to cool bareknuckle feet in inland water,  
slapping flies with a book on solar wind  
or a patient bare hand, beneath the cadjiput trees,

to be walking meditatively  
among green timber, through the grassy forest  
towards a calm sea  
and looking across to more of that great island

and the further topics.

*The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever*

If I have concentrated on the worlds of working rig and eccentric scunge, it is partly because in my lifetime our culture has moved sharply away from those, relegating them, often harshly, in favour of a new emphasis on the cultured, the prosperous and the fashionable. Someone in the arts, I thought, should provide a counterbalance to this relegation, as to any other.

I still used the republican idea as a bit of a mantra against the persistence of colonial attitudes, especially in their new guises. As my work began to be accepted overseas though, I began to leave the cringe and its resentments behind. I came to see it as very often our great excuse for individual failure, a self-righteous rehearsal for the damage it will cause.

As many do, I continued to use the republic as a daydream space for social inventions. This is a reason why it is always imminent and never comes. We love it better as a field of rosy potentials, uncorrupted by the compromises its attainment might bring. To be fair, its tiptoe advance does spare the feelings of older people whose fealty and ideals remain bound up with the absentee monarchy. That is perhaps a rare survival of political grace in what has been a harsh and hostile era.

All along, I was uneasy at certain company the republic was keeping. We were being invaded, at the cultural level especially, by language and attitudes previously foreign to us. As America slowly lost her war in Vietnam, she conquered us instead, more deeply than ever before. Our streets and dinner parties alike were taken over by the atmosphere of the baying schoolyard. A poem I wrote about three years ago memorialises, glancingly, the way things were here in Canberra in the mid-1960s. It is titled *Memories of the Height-to-Weight Ratio*. It reads:

I was a translator in the Institute back  
when being accredited as a poet  
meant signing things against Vietnam.  
For scorn of the bargain I wouldn't do it.

And the Institute was after me  
to lose seven teeth and five stone in weight  
and pass their medical. Three years I dodged  
then offered the teeth under sacking threat.  
From five to nine, in warm Lane Cove,  
and five to nine again at night,  
an irascible Carpatho-Ruthenian strove  
with ethnic teeth. He claimed the bite

of a human determined their intelligence.  
More gnash-power sent the brain more blood.  
In Hungarian, Yiddish or Serbo-Croat  
he lectured emotional fur-trimmers good,

clacking a jointed skull in his hand  
and sent them to work face-numbed and bright.

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This was my wife's family dentist. He  
looked into my mouth, blanched at the sight,

eclipsed me with his theory of occlusion  
and wrested and tugged. Pausing to blow  
out cigarette smoke, he'd bite his only  
accent-free mother tongue and return below

to raise my black fleet of sugar-barques  
so anchored that they gave him tennis elbow.  
Seven teeth I gave that our babies might eat  
when students were chanting Make Love! Hey Ho!

But there was a line called Height-to-Weight  
and a parallel line on Vietnam. When a tutor  
in politics failed all who crossed that, and wasn't  
dismissed, scholarship was back to holy writ.

Fourteen pounds were a stone, and of great yore so,  
but the doctor I saw next had no schoolyard in him:  
*You're a natural weight-lifter! Come join my gym!*  
Sonnets of flesh could still model my torso.

Modernism's not modern: it's police and despair.  
I wear it as fat, and it gnawed off my hair  
as my typewriter clicked over gulfs and birch spaces  
where the passive voice muffled enormity and faces.

But when the Institute started afresh  
to circle my job, we decamped to Europe  
and spent our last sixpence on a pig's head.  
Any job is a comedown, where I was bred.

*Memories of the Height-to-Weight Ratio*

The Marxist takeover of our republic of letters was perhaps never complete, but it was powerfully intimidating. More complete was the capture of the quality media and the whole surrounding world of higher education, publishing and culture. The milieu which my work obliged me to deal with became a horrible place. We suffered fearful losses—conversation, trust, manners, moral courage, religious tolerance, balance, resistance to bullying—and licence was given to the most awful pretension. All of Bradman Australia, we may say, was made to vanish for a long time.

The mass rallies of the 1960s solidified into a parallel government of boards and statutory bodies seemingly beyond the reach of ministers or Parliament and, despite the note of hope that is sounded at the end of this poem, nothing has changed as yet. The title of the poem is *A Stage in Gentrification*, and it was written in response to an invitation the *Sydney Morning Herald* issued to a number of writers in 1993 to contribute their view of the previous decade:

Most Culture has been an East German plastic bag

pulled over our heads, stifling and wet,  
we see a hotly distorted world  
through crackling folds and try not to gag.

Sex, media careers, the Australian republic  
and recruited depression are in that bag  
with scorn of God, with self-abasement studies  
and funding's addictive smelling-rag.

Eighty million were murdered by police  
in the selfsame terms and spirit which nag  
and bully and set the atmosphere  
inside the East German plastic bag.

It wants to become our country's flag  
and rule by demo and kangaroo court  
but it's wearing thin. It'll spill, and twist  
and fly off still rustling Fascist! Fascist!

and catch on the same fence as Hitler, and sag.

*A Stage in Gentrification*

If the late-Marxist museum which presently holds our culture in thrall has gone a bit quiet lately, I in turn had gone pretty quiet on the republic by the mid-1980s. In those years I probably spent more time considering emigration. What held me back were family reasons, plus the satisfaction my departure would give to so many. Also, I had started to succeed in a personal challenge I had set myself of attaining an international reputation from here without the obeisance of going to live abroad, and there were institutions and people I could go on defending if I stayed. The energies of the great Gramscian takeover flagged a little in the early 1980s, too, only regaining momentum from the money poured out in funding for Bicentennial projects. The elite left-leaning republic that began to constellate around Donald Horne, Tom Kenneally and Malcolm Turnbull in the late 1980s never sought my support and might have had scant room for me if I had approached it.

In the early 1990s, though, much to my great surprise, the federal government in the person of Senator Michael Tate called me back from oblivion to draft its new oath of allegiance for naturalisations. I agreed to try, and thought the thing should not be an oath. Jesus had forbidden Christians to swear those and oaths sworn by atheists or agnostics would have no force. That left only our small minorities of Jews, Muslims and some others in a position to bind themselves in any absolute way, which I consider is always risky if the contract is not to be strictly reciprocal.

I then went off to bed and slept on the project. The next morning I got up and wrote out a simple text that was utterly Vernacularly Republic in spirit, as well as being easy for new speakers of English to get their tongues around. It went:

Under God,—

which I left as optional, so that if people did not believe in God they could leave it out:

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from this time forward  
I am part of the Australian people;  
I share their democracy and their freedom,  
I obey their laws,  
I will never despise their customs or their faith  
and I expect Australia to be loyal to me.

The minister accepted my changing the oath to a pledge and the reasoning behind it. As I had anticipated, the last two lines of my draft did not survive scrutiny by his officers.

By the 'faith' of the Australian people, I had meant either their religious faith or the good faith which governed their lives. By the last line, I intended a surreptitious social revolution, which I think we must have some day. By speaking of 'the Australian people' I had hoped to torpedo divisive multiculturalism under which the country is inhabited by innocent racially unmixed Indigenous, vicious invading Anglos, who are responsible for all the sufferings of humankind, and guiltless non-Anglo immigrants, who alone possess culture and the right to be here.

If anything in the near future shatters Australia and its potential republic beyond repair, it is this strange system of racism directed against ourselves. A ghost of the Australian people idea survives in the formulation used in the rewritten pledge that was adopted: Australia and its people. At least they did not say 'peoples'.

I do not complain here. When you accept a writing commission in advertising, drama or film, the contracting party has the right to recast your words. I regret that the rewrite of the pledge made necessary by dropping its last two lines destroyed the rhythm and simplicity it had had.

My most republican action since then but before today was to launch a neo-monarchist book by Tony Abbott MHR. Many were surprised at this, but I did it to underline the right, much assailed over the last three decades, of Australians to differ in their opinions. Apart from its absentee nature and its possibly by now unintended fostering of a residual low self-esteem vis-a-vis other nations, my main objection to the monarchical system is that under it we are finally still subjects, not citizens. Of course, we are citizens in law and in the rhetoric, but we all know the government is over us holding the whip hand of force. It can conscript us, but we cannot conscript it. We can change the party which rules it, but how real is that nowadays? How much of government is governed by its elected component? Less and less, surely.

Another can of worms concerns representation. What does it mean and is it in any sense real? Do Honourable Members represent us or their parties? I do not feel represented by anybody. I am sorry if that gives offence because my mother brought me up not to give offence unnecessarily. But really, I am only represented by my poems. We were talking last night about the fact that when you go pretending to represent other people, if you are not **of** those people, you will get their life and their concerns wrong. My fear about any likely Australian republic is that it is quite likely to be what most modern republics are: merely a presidential monarchy in which the people go on being subjects with a franchise. The mild last line of my pledge points to a shift in the direction of democracy, under which people might begin to be citizens, not the in the large aggregations of elections, rallies and marches, but as individuals, set on a level footing with government by the fact that they can make truly reciprocal

agreements with it. I accept you as my government if you are loyal to me. You can expect things of me, but so can I expect things of you.

Beyond this, perhaps in the smoke of pipe dreams, lies a polity in which citizens might be above government, permitting it to administer routine matters but always subject to correction if need be. In such a world, there would be no licences: how dare government presume to grant freedoms to its masters, the people! The people would not sign petitions either. These smack of humble pleas laid before an all-powerful throne. Rather, they would agree amongst themselves what was to be done and instruct the government to get on with it.

Crime would no longer be seen as rebellion against the Crown, but for what it is: an offence against its victims and no-one else. If my car is stolen, I do not need the thief to be confined for years in a cement room, raped and given AIDS. I simply want my car back or another one of the same quality in the same condition. This is known as restitutive justice and is being pioneered in New Zealand. Perhaps 140 years after the secret ballot was made law in Victoria, it is time we got back into some real political innovations.

I say all of this, of course, in the certain knowledge that not even an Australian republic will be able to repeal Murphy's Law. Perhaps changes gently undertaken with humour and humility rather than hectoring assertiveness, might kick back at us only manageably hard when they do inevitably recoil on us, and only let us down in ways that are incrementally repairable—or, as we would say in the bush, repairable.

What the vernacular republic might think of the prospective political one can perhaps be deduced from most of the poems and spirit of this lecture—at least before we went all mushy and hopeful just now. It might just sympathise with my long held wish to see the use of fashion against people classed as a form of assault. The tradition of government wanting to be a lion and many of the voters wanting it to be a bounteous cow will not soon change. Some might remark that anyone who actually pays taxes is not smart enough to invent new systems of government anyway.

I have only one other pipedream, and it belongs more to society and culture than directly to politics. I would like us to move on from a philosophical moment in which we delegate all of splendour to nature and seem almost to consider building a form of pollution—as I asked elsewhere recently—Would we, and our pressure groups, now permit the Sydney Opera House to be commenced?—to a readiness to essay human-made splendour in our cities and landscapes; really glorious buildings, surprising but unquestionably superb arrangements of landscape, wonderful monuments. This would take a tremendous step up in self-confidence from believing that splendour is at best only attainable by individuals, who then hide it away decently in galleries or poetry books and a self-deprecating demeanour. That, probably, is the very best thing I would hope from a republic—a republic which, of course, I may not live to see, and perhaps rightly. Like the composition of a poem, it should not be rushed or the ending forced just to be available for the Olympics of 2000 or the centenary of Federation in 2001.

I will end with a poem by a colleague of mine, Bruce Dawe, who is a better poet of the vernacular republic than I am. The poem is titled *The Flag of the Future*, and it reads:

*The Flag of the Future*

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is already flapping in the minds of the people  
it will cover 3,000,000 square miles  
and be as small as a postage-stamp  
it will be as vast as a West Australian sunset  
and invade the psyche  
it will hang outside every CES  
like the long-term unemployed  
and be run up the mast at Mojo seeking a salute

it will draw to itself like a magnet  
the iron filings of monomania  
the rusty needles of opportunism

like all flags it will oversee an unimaginable journey  
at times blood will fuse its folds together like an adhesion  
at other times it just won't be able to help being beautiful  
it will be betrayed by its own idealism  
and its heroes will be forgotten like earlier heroes  
shining in their shrouds  
only to rise again from new-ploughed furrows  
like dragon's teeth

because it is in the world and of it  
it will suffer all the indignities of creatures  
it will be burned and adored  
and many of its truest followers  
will not be found in the halls of parliaments  
and government annexes  
but in out-of-the-way places  
and failing country towns  
where they're not always sure what its colours are  
even though they know it's the only one for them

Thank you. I was told there would be a question time now, so please feel free to ask questions.

**Questioner**—You said that republics, like poems, should not be forced. Yet, occasions like this produce such a fine performance, it seems to me that it would be a pity not to push the idea of a republic.

**Les Murray**—I suppose I am both pushing and warning. I am just making a few statements, none of which are binding on anybody. I am just stating how I have handled the idea of the republic and matured it in my mind as I have gone along. Everybody else who has thought about it has a similar story to tell, I am sure.

If it is time for the republic, I think it should come. If it is too early, you will botch it. There will be a moment for it, perhaps. I doubt that it will correspond exactly with the Olympics or



2001; that is my opinion, standing here with those four or five years away, but other people might disagree.

I think that, like a work of art, it has to be unquestionable—not divisive. An essential of any republic I'd want is that it would never relegate anyone. I thought that, when Gough Whitlam said that to bring it on now would be to offend a great many people who were not yet convinced of it, was one of the times he was statesmanlike. It is a thing I want, but that does not mean that it should necessarily come while I am around to enjoy it.

**Questioner**—It is just that I guess we could have said the same about the formation of Federation.

**Les Murray**—We probably could have said the same thing about the invention of fire. I might be being too cautious altogether; I do not know. There seems to have been a ground swell which carried Federation, and there does not seem to have been much opposition to it—or not much opposition we now remember. I am not a big enough expert on history to know the voices that were raised against it. Everybody seemed to settle into it pretty quickly when it came.

Mind you, Federation did come fairly gently. People did not notice for a while that there was a Federation. It was 1913 before the Commonwealth issued a stamp. They were not obtrusive, for a start. The only thing that happened, I suppose, that was really big news was the Sunshine Harvester case. Before about 1910, nobody else thought much about the Commonwealth. It was there, but it had not bitten in yet. If our republic came gently like that, it might not be a bad thing—it might not be a bad model to remember. I would not like to see tremendous fanfare, the forcing of opinion and the silencing of dissent. That is presidential monarchy.

**Questioner**—In true bushie fashion, if it can't be fixed by No. 8 fencing wire, don't worry about it. If it ain't broke, why fix it?

**Les Murray**—It is broke. I think the present arrangement is still subtly bad for self-esteem. The thing I should have put in this essay was probably the smartest thing that I have ever said about the republic—that is, the best reason to have a republic is so that we could forget about it, and stop aching, picking at ourselves and worrying about our national identity. We do too much of that. Perhaps when the republic comes, it will be a way of forgetting about it and getting on with just being natural about it. Because when we do pick at it, we cause infective sores which give pain to a lot of the population. That seems to be open-ended. You can do more and more of it. As a mantra against doing that sort of thing, the republic is useful.

The republic will not now go away. It has to be treated. Probably, if we had wanted it enough, we could have had it almost any time since the 1950s. Perhaps there was also a moment in the late 19th century when we could have had it. That is why I identified this other thing, of how we like to play with it, toy with it, make projects out of it and conjure rosy potentials so that we will never have to see the ordinary political compromises that will happen when it comes. But I think it is broke. It needs the fencing wire. There is something to be fixed.

**Questioner**—It is unlikely that multiculturalism will go away. Do you think it will die down quietly?

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**Les Murray**—It is only a policy; it may not represent a fact at all. Most migrants I talk to have no liking for it; they think it is a racket used to cause employment, and I think myself it tells a lot of lies about a lot of people. In particular, it ascribes all the guilt to my kind of Australians. It is likely to be divisive, and I think it is intended to be divisive. It is a thoroughly pernicious thing and I would stamp it out and take back the \$2 billion it costs per year and put it in the consolidated revenue or, indeed, return it to the taxpayer. I have no sympathy for it at all. I think it is a foul thing, grown out of cringe, fed on cringe to breed more cringe.

**Questioner**—What are your views on the longevity of the female monarch and the subsequent soap operas of the minor royals, which then leads to the question of whether Australia should wait around for a republic, considering that William recently said, ‘I don’t want to be king’?

**Les Murray**—I don’t blame him. I don’t think it matters much; it is fairly irrelevant. It is irrelevant in the minds of most people, isn’t it? Most of the day you don’t think much about the Queen between breakfast and bedtime. She is a decent lady and I would say long live she as the head of state of a rather more friendly foreign power now than it used to be. I find Britain a friendlier place now than I used to find it. I have not thought of her position vis-a-vis Australia as being real for so many years that I am out of the habit.

As for that bad crowd with which the poor woman is unfortunately saddled, we don’t want them, really, do we? Mind you, we are only reading about them in the papers. We have not heard their say much. I wouldn’t absolutely trust the soap opera that has been describing them to me. I really don’t know them. I have not met them socially; whether I would want to is another matter.

**Questioner**—What happens to the writer inside a writer when he becomes involved in politics or political issues?

**Les Murray**—He worries! This one worries and thinks he shouldn’t do much of it. I was at one time greatly exercised by our cringe and by our lack of self-esteem and the way we hobble ourselves. That became less real to me as time went on but at one time it was important, and I think it is important to a lot of writers.

You sup with the devil of politics with a long spoon. You use poetry to check the truth of what you are saying. If it’ll stand up in a poem, it’s probably got some truth in it. If the poem tells you that it’s nonsense, it probably is. So I use the poetry to check the truth of everything. Occasionally, republican notions were one part of my work, but never the whole of my work. A lot of my work has to do with creatures who’ll never notice whether they are in a republic or an empire. The eagle has never heard of America. The kangaroo has no idea of the Commonwealth of Australia—none!

**Questioner**—The lines which define our present states were mostly ruled by imperial mapping pens in London. Do you see in the future republic perhaps a more regional approach? Do you feel that the six states, as they are, adequately allow people to feel connected to a bit of ‘country’?

**Les Murray**—I like the idea of country; I always did. I think of my country as that lying between Walcha, the Myall Lakes and about John’s River. But, no, because the states won’t

go away. It will be awfully hard to move them. I can't see us moving away from that system by which you have to have a referendum on changes to the constitution. You won't get the people to give up states. You won't get states to give up states either. I can see no big change for a long time in that one. It would have to be a cataclysm, and the last thing you wish a country is a cataclysm. So I reckon that states, for better or worse, will stay there. They tell me that in local government in the states there is a movement towards more regionalism, but it is still only arbitrary marks on a map. One of the things that tells you that their marks are wrong is often that they draw the lines along water courses instead of along watersheds—as I suppose I just did now. But, no, I can't see any shift in that; I wish I could.

**Questioner**—Les, do you think artists, poets, should go into politics? Should we have a poet in the Senate?

**Les Murray**—It has been known to happen. Yeats was in the Irish Senate. He was on the committee that devised the Irish coinage, which is not bad coinage; it is not quite as good as ours, but I think we have the best designs of coinage on earth. He also is one of the cases where you can say that a poet was almost an acknowledged legislator, too. There was one poem of Yeats'—we were talking about it on the way in—which was tremendously influential in his country. The poem was *Easter, 1916*, which has the line, 'A terrible beauty is born'. Yeats worried deeply about that later on because it became the absolute mantra of the Irish nationalist movement. Many fertiliser bombs and other things have been exploded with that echoing in the background.

It has been a politically effective work of art. Politically effective works of art are probably nearly always dangerous, I suspect. But what is more dangerous of course is the unformed poem—a poem that is not made by a poet but made by a sensibility or by somebody like Marx, or Jesus, or Mohammed, someone like that. A poem which is looking for embodiment, a powerful idea which lacks an adequate embodiment, is tremendously dangerous. A work of art at least has closure. It has been given a body by someone, therefore it does not come looking for your body to flesh it out.

Putting poets in Parliament is probably no more dangerous than drawing parliamentarians from any other trade and probably not much more effective. I am certainly not volunteering for the job.

**Questioner**—What are your views on how best to decide the process of going towards a republic, if that is a process Australia wants?

**Les Murray**—I think it is going that way, slowly, but tiptoeing and holding back for the pleasures of contemplation—the pre-orgasmic part, the endless foreplay of the republic—which will probably mean that I will never see the thing before it arrives. I am not sure how. I do not understand enough about government. I used to live in Canberra and be in the know, but I do not anymore.