

What do I dissent about?

by Don Aitkin

The 'Dissenters' in England were, in the beginning of the use of the term, those 16th and 17th century Christians who wished to dissociate themselves from the Church of England and from the notion of an established church, in which allegiance was owed to the monarch as head of that church. The more familiar name for their many descendants is 'Non-Conformists'.

A journal named *Dissent* carries for me something of that flavour. Its writers and readers do not agree with the Establishment on important matters of principle and practice. What matters might they be? What Establishment do they have in mind? As a word, 'dissent' seems always to have had special emotional flavours – those of independence, autonomy, courage, rightful opposition. 'Dissent' is good; 'assent' is altogether supine.

It is plain enough that *Dissent's* writers take exception to many of the policies and practices of the Howard Government, to globalisation, to the US President's decision to invade Iraq, to capitalism, to our society's lack of true democracy. In some respects so do I. But a working lifetime's study of history and political science, including twenty years in policymaking and running things, has made me wary of simple denunciation as an aid to progress. I can think of no good policy with which I had any connection that did not prove to have unforeseen and sometimes unfortunate outcomes of one kind or another, or to have costs that no one had estimated correctly. Yet they were good policies, and I would propose them again, even knowing what took place. And I can say why, rather more confidently than I could have done thirty years ago. Perhaps it is that as one gets older one re-examines more insistently one's reasons for holding certain views. That has happened to me, and it would be gratifying to recount that my views have become well integrated both intellectually and emotionally. I don't think that is the case: I am conscious that some of my attitudes have deep roots that I can't finally trace, while some of them will prove to be contradictory if pushed too far. What I feel more confident about is the presence now of a much greater number of 'establishments' than there seemed to be in the 1950s and 1960s. 'Left vs Right' is no longer the dominant divide, and I can detect separate intellectual power bases in government, the media, the universities, issue groups and even the churches. They all clamour for our support,

attention and agreement, and none rules over all. That seems to me a good thing. There are three million or so university graduates in Australia, and they have been educated to think and develop their own judgments. Diversity of perspective is a consequence.

A little autobiography may be in order. For about twenty years, from the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s, I wrote regularly for the press, and for much of that time I had a weekly column, first in *The Canberra Times* and then in the now sadly defunct *National Times*. In those days I knew what was happening across a wide range of social, economic and political issues. My world-view had been formed through school-teacher parents, a working-class heritage, a country town upbringing, and university experience in Australia, Britain and the USA. I was in favour of economic growth, redistribution, an end to censorship of all kinds and to the cultural cringe, education for everyone, a high level of public services. In the categories of those times I was a (non-Marxist) left liberal. Then for another twenty years I dived into the policy world of higher education and research, a world as real as any other, but one preoccupied with its own tensions and temptations. Over that time I lost some of my sense of what was happening with much of the rest of society, and in rediscovering all that now I am also discovering that my level of 'dissent' is a good deal higher than it once was.

In particular, I am impatient with, dissent from, the 'goodies vs baddies' view of the world that seems to me to characterise much of what I read in the press and in journals of opinion. I spent a few years of my life as a senior officer in two different local branches of my relevant trade union. Much of what we had to do was straightforward negotiation, but every now and then there came an individual case, and one of us on the executive had to take up the cudgels for that person. Most of the time there was justice on the side of the aggrieved, but not always; sometimes there was justice on both sides. When I became a chief executive officer I learned fast enough that three-quarters of our industrial problems had their origins in errors of management. But one quarter did not. I learned, even more quickly, that in disputes between members of staff, or between staff and students, or between students themselves, or between parents and university staff, one absolutely had to hear the other side before one did anything. There was nearly always another side, and you ignored that possibility at your peril.

Unfairness and Inequity

I no longer have the conviction, if I ever had it in a simple way, that our society is badly structured, and that if we could change the structure we could change the obvious inequities present. Our society seems to me now to be rather better than most, in structural terms. Moreover, all conceivable human societies will have structures and inequities. We can and should plan to reduce the inequities in our own society, but to imagine that we can get rid of them altogether is an idle dream. It is like thinking that we can end poverty, or injustice. Reduce, yes. End forever, no way. Poverty, injustice, inequity are not absolutes so much as areas of relative deprivation. It follows that a national government always has a job to do. Forty years ago the books called it 'nation-building', and I still like that term. It saddens me that our present Government seems not to see things this way, and appears indifferent also to the mounting list of infrastructure needs catalogued by Ian McAuley in a recent issue of *Dissent* – let alone to the need to think through and build a society that can serve as a good example for the rest of the world.

One outcome of any achievable human societal form is inevitably a more or (hopefully) less widespread sense of inequity, or unfairness, on the part of those without power or without what currently pass as the good things of life. Unfairness is a powerful political sentiment – perhaps the most powerful. Parents can perceive the force of a perceived unfairness in their children, and every one of us can remember from one's own youth how unjust, how unfair was some treatment by others. Unfairness burns the memory and I see it in operation in Northern Ireland, in the Islamic world, and of course in our own politics. Reducing perceived unfairness to a minimum, it seems to me, ought to be one of the central objectives of government in a civilised society. Doing so also tends to make for a relatively peaceful society, which is in everyone's interest. Since I dissent from the view that there is a magic wand or policy that will cure all inequities I am in favour of reducing the worst inequity that faces our own society, and then in turn reducing the less evil ones. Before too long there will be new inequities produced by our attempts to deal with past ones, but the general outcome is likely to be an improvement. It is a Benthamite perspective, I accept, but the story of the last few hundred years tells us that it seems to work.

This is probably the point at which I should declare my dissent from the view that Australia's becoming formally a 'republic' is a necessary step in this process. In my judgment, Australia has had the capacity to act independently since 1931, and indeed began so to act in decisive ways during the Second World War. It has gone on doing so ever since. I see no great and pressing virtue in our reshaping our Constitution to exclude the British monarch; equally I would have no great objection if that occurred. I simply do not see 'the republic' as an issue that is central. What I do see as central is the building and enhancing of 'social infrastructure' – the patterns of cultural and financial transfer that underpin a civilised society.

The experience of my own working life in higher education, and the discovery rather late in that life of the work of Howard Gardner at Harvard, have brought me to the view that all human beings are 'intelligent'. What affects their life chances is not native intelligence, which is common, but the mixture of encouragement, preparation and motivation that is given to them when they are young. A great deal of the power of that mixture is provided by parental love, nurture and consistency, plus social support in the first few years of life, a matter that is somewhat beyond the competence of governments. Many of the systematic inequities that infect our own society flow from incorrect assumptions about the nature of 'intelligence' and its distribution.

There is no easy solution here. People who occupy positions of power or privilege see every reason why this should be the natural order of things, and tend to wonder why others have not done so well: the fault must lie in them. I can recall an articulate Liberal MP telling me that anyone who really wanted to could get a job – indeed, the MP knew of almost nobody in the electorate who was out of work – indeed the MP's own daughter had found a job almost at once! The MP's division included some of the most salubrious suburbs of one of Australia's large cities. In similar fashion, academics who have done well are great believers in the old IQ notion, where only one or two per cent are 'geniuses' – themselves of course included.

As so often, the furthering of education and knowledge, especially about our capacities and ourselves, seems to be the principal step forward in understanding. The provision of as much education as possible to all members of a society ought to be another central objective of good government, for it seems to lead to the development of social and economic capacity, to a productive personal

life, to greater peace and harmony, and to the empowerment of human creativity. It is also cheaper in the long run, since it tends to reduce the scale and cost of crime, police and prisons. I dissent from the view that people should pay for that education on an individual basis: to follow that line is to shore up current inequities, rather than to help remove them. In short, we are born not simply equally deserving of respect but in broad terms equally gifted, yet only some of us get the opportunities to develop our potential. The unfairness that results is then often cemented into place because we prize our own children and family more than we do the children families of others. The outcome can be a class system, an aristocracy, castes, a *nomenklatura* – any system of systematic discrimination in favour of some and against others. For me a good society is one that understands this dynamic, and always works to produce more equitable outcomes.

It follows that I have had to unlearn some of my earlier learning. As an undergraduate studying history and economics I quickly came to the view, provided by some of my teachers, that economics lay underneath everything in human affairs. Two very similar yet contrasting accounts of this relationship involve something called one's 'relationship to the means of production, distribution and exchange' and something now called 'the market'. In retrospect they seem about equally right, which is about half right. Today I see power over others, and the desire for that power, as no less important. Men (in particular) like power, seek power, set up rules to govern its use, move quickly to occupy positions that grant the possessor power, defend its employment, and so on. From that perspective there are always 'classes', there are always rulers and there are always people chafing under their rule. Power-seeking is everywhere, in capitalist, communist, tribal and theocratic societies. Like Irving Kristol, I see and saw little virtue in 'really-existing socialism', but can offer capitalism only two cheers. I want to know who is to decide the rules of the market, and how and by whom its evils are to be remedied. We no longer sell humans or babies in our market, but our ancestors did. I strongly dissent from the view that the market rules, let alone that it ought to rule. The society precedes the market.

These predispositions do not, however, push me into advocating 'rights'. I have come to see the Golden Rule as the only simple guide to good behaviour in society, but it is a moral guide for individuals, not a body of law. I do see the need for governments to work always to equalise

life chances, for reasons already outlined, but I doubt that a Bill of Rights or its equivalent will help to advance that process. I always want to see the Bill of Responsibilities that should be accompanying it (social life is properly reciprocal, so that my rights are your responsibilities, and vice versa). For somewhat similar reasons I now dissent from the view that social location or past patterns of discrimination or disadvantage explain and therefore excuse violent or destructive behaviour on the part of an offender. My certainty in all this is not great, and in practice, when I have had to deal with anti-social behaviour on the part of others, I have in fact taken a great deal of notice of context and background.

More generally, I dissent from the currently widespread view that disagreeable outcomes must be the fault of someone who can be pursued through the courts. Because I am not, as already outlined, a great believer in 'rights' it follows at once that from my perspective we have no 'right' to a life perfectly happy or free of adverse incidents. Chance still plays an important part in our lives. All medical procedures under general anaesthesia, for example, carry with them a small but finite risk of death, even when there is no negligence on anyone's part. A commonsense prudence would enjoin that we wear seat-belts in cars, stop smoking, watch where we put our feet, not eat or drink to excess, and so on. But even then, though we reduce the likelihood of evil, it can occur. Some people who have never smoked get lung cancer; some highly experienced drivers and pilots crash; life is inherently risky. The 2003 Canberra bushfires produced wonderful stories of heroism and community compassion. They also produced contrasting examples of people who could take a deep breath and move on, as well as people who, months later, were still looking for someone to blame.

The vexed question of gender

As a student of foreign languages in high school, I was taught that 'gender' was a word applying to words, and that 'sex' was a word applying to human beings and animals. The trouble is that 'sex' carries such a huge and varied freight as a noun that I have come to accept that 'gender' will have to serve for the political issue of the differences in the treatment and status of men and women. It is an issue that has concerned me at least since I entered the workforce, for family and personal reasons as well as philosophical ones.

For some of the last forty years I assumed that men and women were essentially the same, and that culture, habit and 'patriarchy' combined to make men dominant. It followed that a truly civilised and democratic society would ensure that professions, occupations and positions of power were open to all, to women no less than to men. I am still onside with the moral thrust of that perception, and I still see women in an inequitable position in our society, but I now dissent from the initial assumption. It has become plain to me that men and women are different in crucial respects, and some important consequences flow from these differences. Indeed, I think we need to understand and celebrate the differences. These questions are so large that I cannot enter on the debate properly here. But for the present purpose there are two fundamental differences, as I read the literature and reflect on what I see. First, women see the world differently to men. Second, women have different (and in important ways superior) cognitive capacities. The second difference seems to flow from brain architecture, the first from a couple of million years of genetic inheritance. They are of course inter-connected.

Just as I grew to recognise that everyone is intelligent, so did I come to see, from reading, observation and experience, that these differences between men and women seem to exist, not just in our real world, but in others that I have visited or read about. I have had, for example, long periods in senior positions in three universities. In one of them men were about 97 per cent of the academic staff, in another around 50 per cent. In the first ego was king and competition ruled supreme. One outcome was that the university lacked cohesion and a good, shared sense of itself. The other university, where men and women were in approximately equal proportion, was a delightful place to work, for students as well as for staff. As I saw it, gender ratios were an important underlying factor in the enjoyable experience of working there. Women like situations to be harmonious if that is at all possible; men like to win. In the second university these goals balanced one another, and the outcome was a kind of harmonious productivity.

I have come to use a pair of metaphors to separate the sexes. For men the ruling metaphor is The Game. For women it is The Relationship. You can see this distinction in action everywhere. Our society, like all others known to me, is organised by and for men, and from the world-view of men. Women miss out in important respects, and what they do is given little value. One classic illustration is the

absence of women's unpaid household work from the economist's construction known as Gross Domestic Product. Another is the relatively poor reward available in professions dominated by women, most obviously teaching and nursing, in contrast to the now extraordinary, even piratical, rewards for those successful in managing Big Business, the archetypal male occupation. The paradox is that women are actually better able than men to 'manage', because their brains are constructed in a form that allows them to do several things at the same time. Men, in contrast, can only do the same set of things one after the other, and are generally less successful than women in multi-skilled tasks.

Why have men come to dominate? For three reasons: power is much more important to them than it is to women, they are bigger and stronger than women, and they are prepared to use violence to get their way whereas women usually are not. There are times when (imagining myself, in an Einsteinian thought-experiment, as ruler of the world) I want to restrict men solely to the domain of organised sport, and to pass the management of the world and its societies to women. But it is probably true that women do not want to run the world, though no one has ever asked them. I do want to see, quickly, an Australian Parliament in which women, and women's values and women's perspectives are equal in proportion to men and their values and perspectives. But making women more like men is not at all the way to go, or so it seems to me. What our society needs is more 'civilisation', meaning the self-conscious restraint of our immediate desires in pursuit of our longer-term interests. Women see that need much more clearly than do men, but education and understanding can and do assist men to see its virtue. Women's skills in management, in building harmony in organisations and in looking after one another, are greatly needed in today's world, and they are greatly undervalued, too.

I hope it will be understood that, as a man writing these contentious words, I have used the labels 'men' and 'women' in a very general sense. I do recognise that there are many similarities.

Aborigines, and the environment

My attitude to the 'problem' of the Aborigines also stems from my placing inequity as the baseline for a political perspective. In general those of us with immigrant backgrounds categorise Aboriginal people and treat them in an almost caste-like way as untouchables or,

more politely, as 'different'. In one important sense they are different: the Australian Aborigines are among the many losers in the wave of global colonisation that took place in the last three centuries. In fact, they are among the multitudinous losers in a much older and more continuous story: the migration of people from one place to another when food or land was exhausted in the place of origin. The Greek colonies in Italy, the waves of roving tribes from somewhere further east coming up against the Roman Empire in the first few centuries AD, the move of the Koreans into their peninsula and of the Chinese into Taiwan, the immigration of Europeans into the new worlds in the 18th and 19th century, the contemporary global flood of refugees – all are examples. Sooner or later the emigrants encounter people already settled. Usually there is conflict over resources. There seems to me nothing special about the encounter between the indigenous peoples of Australia and the European migrants, other than it is that we ourselves are affected by this encounter, and that the Aborigines had been in this continent so long without much contact with the rest of the world. Indeed, almost every Australian today must carry in his or her ancestry many stories of displacement from ancient lands, which ought to make the newer arrivals sympathetic to the situation of the Aboriginal peoples. On the whole it does not seem to have done so.

The present 'history wars' about the nature of the Australian encounter are important for the history profession, and to some degree for the rest of us. But they are also something of a distraction from the real nub of our problem, which is that I, and most of those reading this article, are among those who have benefited from the great loss the Aboriginal peoples experienced. I cannot do anything about the past encounter, but I can and should do something about the many inequities that have been its outcome. For me reparation involves the overcoming of those inequities, by doing what can be done to provide encouragement, preparation and motivation so that Aboriginal self-confidence, creativity and capacity can be greatly enhanced. It follows that I must be a sort of assimilationist in this domain, and I think that would be a correct assessment. Although 'statistics' here are very dubious, for obvious reasons, the census evidence is that Aboriginal people are marrying into the wider community in large numbers, just as they have adopted Christianity in large numbers. I think that convergence is occurring, and can see many Aboriginal elements in today's multi-cultural Australia that were not there half a century ago.

Aboriginal people are prominent in a number of domains in contemporary Australia, notably in art, sport, film and literature. 'Aboriginal' university students are often hard to distinguish from other students; in twenty years' time, if present trends continue, they will be even harder to recognise.

There is one nation in this land, and it allows, even celebrates, a great deal of diversity. Indigenous people, like everyone else in this ethnically diverse society, must be provided with the opportunity to create a meaningful life within it. That is the task that faces both our governments and ourselves, and it is that task, not lamenting the failure of the Prime Minister to accept that he might express regret for the past, which should be first on the agenda.

While my perspective helps to explain why I am a long-standing member of ACT Reconciliation, I dissent from what I see as a kind of Rousseau-like romanticism about the situation of the indigenous people and their descendants. It follows too, I think, that I dissent from the view that the indigenous people knew a great deal more about this land and its management than we later arrivals do. Or, indeed, that they possess a greater love for the environment than we do. Or that their spirituality is at a higher level than our own. It is plain that Aboriginal people seemed to see the land in a different way, but I cannot see in what sense it is or was a better way than our own, let alone that it allowed them to develop a more satisfactory or worthwhile culture. It seems to me that human beings in all environments develop a love, a special feeling, for their environment so that it becomes special for them and possesses a quasi-spiritual significance. They feel intimately at home in that environment, and in no other. Of course, those who live within a natural environment will experience it more directly than those who live in cities and only visit, but I am frankly sceptical of the view that the Aboriginal evaluation of the land was a thing apart from our own, and somehow incomprehensible to us. What is plainly true is that the Europeans saw the land primarily as a resource to be developed and utilised, and it is no less true that they overdid that development. We learn, however, and we will no doubt undo some of the damage. That development and utilisation have allowed millions more human beings to survive and prosper. Since I am one of them I am not going to agonise about the damage, but help to rectify it.

Nor do I have an especially romantic feeling for our natural environment. It is the result of millions of years

of impersonal geological and environmental change, most recently and importantly the drying up of the continent in the melting after the last Ice Age. We need to understand that process, and adapt to it. The eucalypt, for example, is a great survivor of the drying-up, and it has colonised much of Australia because of its useful relationship to dry conditions and fire. I dissent from the ecologically nationalist view that we should embrace the eucalypt and other indigenous species, and abjure deciduous trees and shrubs as 'un-Australian'. Indeed, knowing that established deciduous trees can protect suburbs and houses from fire, whereas eucalypts can cause great damage in these conditions, I would not myself plant eucalypts in streets or gardens. Human beings and their houses have no easy recovery from fire. Even more, given the intensity of sunlight in summer, and the need to get sun, light and heat into the house in the cool winters where I live, deciduous trees seem exactly right neighbours for our houses.

On America, and Australia in the world

I first went to the USA in the mid 1960s, and worked there for six months. I have gone back on average at least every other year, sometimes every year, and continue to find it a fascinating, muddled, inchoate, inspiring and perplexing country. Much as I admired aspects of American society, and admired even more some of the people who constituted it, I decided very early that I would not stay and that I would not then or later seek a job or career there. I did not want to belong and I did not want my children to belong. Why? The familiar set of answers included inequities of every kind, violence, overt racism, a kind of crass materialism unfamiliar to me, and perhaps most importantly, the lack of a sense of community that was wider than one's immediate neighbourhood or circle of friends. Another, much harder to articulate at the time, and a feeling shared by others of my age cohort who went overseas in their twenties, was the feeling that my own country needed to be shaped and that I wanted to play a part in that process. Australia had something special about it. Romaldo Giurgola, the Italian-American architect of our Parliament House, became an Australian citizen a few years ago. He explained that he had come to value greatly the fact that Australians had 'a life in common', whereas Europe and America seemed to him to have lost that quality. I have discovered that it is exactly that attribute of Australia that I greatly prize. Like him, I have not found it in the USA.

Above all, the simple truth is that the USA is an 'empire'. An American friend who lives in Australia was deeply offended when I made this observation some twenty years ago. It was not meant to offend, and is not intended in a derogatory fashion now. We know a good deal about empires. They are powerful, and have the capacity to project force more or less at will. They ensure that other nations are respectful, and that weaker ones pay tribute in some fashion. They are successful and often virtuous in their way, and their society exemplifies their success and virtue. Their heartland citizens are rather ignorant of and tend to look down on the rest of the world. They have an elevated view of the virtues of their own system and an 'empirocentric' view of the world. That being the case, they see no reason, on the whole, to leave their own borders. An Australian student at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government undertook some research on incoming members of Congress, and discovered to her astonishment that the great majority of them did not possess passports. Only about one in four Americans does.

Most Americans seem not to realise that theirs is only one form of 'representative democracy' and that whether it is better or worse than others depends on what outcomes you decide are important and wish to measure, and how you measure them. In my experience Americans are prickly if an 'alien' offers a comment on any aspect of American society and politics. It is as though the alien can have no *locus standi* from which to form an opinion. I ought to say that some Australians can be similarly prickly if foreigners make comments about our own system. Perhaps it is universal, though I am most conscious of it in the USA where, as a political scientist, I see much that interests me and is worthy of comment.

Empires don't have allies. Classically, those outside the empire are enemies, tributary states or barbarians. If America is an empire, then assuredly Australia is a tributary state, now promoted to 'sheriff' in our region. I wish it weren't so. In the late 1960s I argued for Australia's becoming an armed neutral in international affairs, rather on the then Swedish model. The arguments in favour of such a position are strong ones, and remain as valid today as they were then. But no one much agrees with me, and my friends in the armed forces were and are sceptical. We'd have lousy weapons and miss out on knowledge, they say. That doesn't seem to be crucial, because the intended outcome is to deter invaders, not to have the latest toys (and we don't even have those now). There is perhaps a more powerful objection. As Jay

Bulworth pointed out in a recent issue of *Dissent*, there is a mind state in Australia that sees the need for a Great Protector as essential. I think it's wrong and in a sense rather juvenile, but I agree that it's there, at least among those in charge at the moment, and perhaps in the wider society as well.

I am deeply dismayed at what has happened in the Middle East. I do not know what drove George Bush, and I do not find any of the explanations yet advanced especially persuasive. What happened during his father's presidency, the availability of Iraqi oil, the possibility of lunatic attacks on Israel, the desire of the US President for his country to be super-hegemonic – none of these explanations seems either necessary or sufficient, and all of them raise awkward questions about facts and evidence. Perhaps they should be rolled into one untidy ball. George Bush Senior showed, at least in his memoirs, a better strategic sense in the matter of invading Iraq than his son has shown in action. While I find eyebrow-raising the notion that the USA is, all things considered, a superior sort of moral entity to the United Nations, I saw little virtue in Saddam Hussein, and much to detest in his continued rule. What makes the mess so much worse is that the US found Hussein a useful antagonist to Iran and the Ayatollahs in the 1980s, and his continued rule owed a lot to American support in past years.

Above all, we and our Great Protector have invented some new rules to govern international behaviour that seem to me to have their basis in expediency not in law, and can be used against us in the future. The continuing failure to find weapons of mass destruction, and the growing implausibility of the claim that they will be found, make us look sharp practitioners indeed. I believe that the Howard Government will find itself eventually in the awkward and dismaying position that the Fraser Government found itself. The invasion of Iraq, like the contrived dismissal of the Whitlam government, will shame those who brought it about and bring them into a fundamental disrepute that they sense themselves even if they must deny it. But in the present case the evil consequences are global, not simply local. I hope that we will not have cause to rue them. The Bali explosions may have been only the beginning.

At least Two Cheers for Education

From my perspective, the most important change in Australia since the Second World War has been the great

expansion in the provision of education. When I was at school there was little incentive for parents to keep their children at school after the age of 15 and Australia was by present standards a poorly educated country. Because my parents were schoolteachers in the NSW service, and were themselves individual success stories for public education, I grew up with a strong belief in the virtues of public education, which I still possess. I can see, however, that when everyone is to be educated at all levels there will probably develop some variation within the education domain. I have seen a good deal of schools in the past ten years, and it is plain that they serve many other purposes for both society and parents (let alone for pupils) than simply education. The Catholic school system, for example, was once the bulwark of Australia's Catholic community and the core of its continuing separateness. Now it attracts children whose parents want more attention to tradition, discipline and the old core subjects than they seem to see in the public system. Very many of these families are not Catholic at all, while the regular attendance of Catholics at Mass has fallen from about two in three in the 1960s to one in seven today. The old Protestant-Catholic divide has gone, and the context in which education is provided has changed very greatly. I find that my attitudes, nonetheless, are grounded in experience long ago. I still hold to my earlier views, but doubt that they are as relevant as they once were.

It may simply be that I have lived in rapidly moving times, but I have stopped thinking that victories are permanent. I once argued, as chair of a committee reporting to Government, that Australia should set itself the target of 65 per cent of all children completing secondary school. We passed that target only a few years later, but not all the good things that my committee saw as outcomes have actually arrived. We keep worrying about standards and curricula and moral values and access and equity. We probably always will. Universities, to give another familiar example, are not set up once and for all. They have continually to reinvent themselves, and to renegotiate their relationships with the society that supports them. The notion that there is a single model of what a university is or ought to be seems quite fatuous to me.

Yet some things don't change. I have in the course of my working life run university departments, a Commonwealth authority, a middle-sized university and a small company. In all of those entities a manager is constantly struggling with the tendency of the urgent to overwhelm the important,

of the short term to defeat the long term. One's best resources are a sense of history and a sense of purpose. A capacity to see oneself in someone else's shoes is also a great asset. Ultimately one needs to develop a dynamic sense of the common good and how it is best enhanced.

Finally, I have come to see that good ideas are the ultimately important item, even if they are not adopted at once. In the time I was involved in policymaking I had to learn patience. I could see how to deal effectively with a need or a problem. But tackling any need or problem of consequence involved more people, entities and organisations than just me or mine. At the government level, any major policy initiative would require an inter-departmental committee, and probably the approval of Cabinet. No matter how obviously right my proposal was, there would always be a number of doubting, sceptical or preoccupied people to persuade, and these were people who were more important, in the scheme of things, than I was myself. From time to time I would wonder whether or not it was all worth the effort, and why anything got done. But when I look back I can see that many things I thought should be done have finally been done, if not at the time I thought was important, or in the context I thought was appropriate, or by the party or people I would have nominated. The outcomes have been good, but not as good as I would have hoped, because they have not been accompanied by other initiatives I thought were connected. Perhaps that is the cost awaiting all policymakers. But the ideas themselves – they are the essential ingredient of change. So being clear about them, and being prepared to refine and reform them, is hugely important.

One outcome of that process is an essay like this. It represents work in progress, not work completed. I look forward to the emergence of an Australian leader who can articulate a vision of the kind of Australia that he or she and I want to hand on to our children and grandchildren. It is a long time since we had such a leader, but unless we citizens of the world can get our countries right there is not much prospect of our getting the world right. As has been true from the beginning of human social existence, the need is for ideas that work for the great majority, the spread of those ideas, and altruistic leadership. Policies come next, not first. That is a position our current Prime Minister seems not to accept. I hope that Mark Latham is more receptive to it.

Endnote

A serious scholarly article on the subjects discussed above ought to come with a multitude of footnotes. I think it might be more useful to point first to two books that have had a major impact on me: Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983) and Allan and Barbara Pease's *Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps* (2000). Both are well written and well researched. I have written about my own discovery of the universal possession of 'intelligence' in the *Australian Quarterly*, August 1999. Those interested in following up ideas about how we bond to our environments could usefully start with Eric Rolls (*A Million Wild Acres*) and George Seddon (*Landprints*).

[Don Aitkin, historian and political scientist, was the Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Canberra from 1991 to 2002 and before that the first Chairman of the Australian Research Council.]