

Why Do I Read *Quadrant*?

By Don Aitkin

Quadrant turned 50 last year, no small feat for a small journal. Of course *AQ* turned 75 in the same year, and *Australian Outlook* is almost as old; these two are the leaders of the pack, at least in terms of age. I started reading all three in 1959, when I was a young graduate student, and I still subscribe to both *AQ* and *Quadrant*; I have written for both, too.

Australia is lucky in its possession of small journals, with varying mixtures of the political, the economic, the literary, the historical and the cultural. We owe their number, most probably, to our tendency to live in urban clumps a long distance from one another. All our little journals have a geographic home that is pretty evident from their content and their authors.

Little Journals

And they all have a tendency, a predisposition, a bias. One, to repeat, will be geographic: good stuff in our town is being passed by elsewhere. Let's publish our own journal! Or, no one will publish our kind of poetry... Or, we need a medium to allow sustained discussion of ... Or, no one is telling the truth about... The literary world has seen greater numbers and greater variety in its journals than the political world, but there can be little doubt that the urge to communicate a point of view has been the main emotional driver in most of the decisions to publish. Every new journal involves the devotion of time, energy and money on the part of people for the most part ill-provided with these publishing necessities. In the early period a nationalist spirit provided some of the stimulus. *AQ* certainly possessed, not simply in its name, an interest in and coverage of what was important politically in the whole country. *Australian Outlook's* name emphasised a perspective different from that of the imperial motherland. *Quadrant* was from the beginning, and remains, internationalist as well as nationalist.

Money is always a problem, for all journals. Some financing can be applied for through the Australia Council, and pages can be sold for advertising. But advertisers like to see something for their money, and the print runs of little journals are small, measured in the small thousands, for the most part. Newsagency sales are hard to establish, if only because there are so many magazines available, and the main distributors have a good deal of power. So subscribers are treasured. When I came to retire I

thought that I would reduce my annual subscriptions, and wrote a nice letter to each of those journals that I was ‘letting go’ (as we say in the employment domain). I got some nice letters back, too, thanking me for my support over the years. But one journal, not to be named, pursued me for a few months, urging me to reconsider!

Most of the little journals I have read have been in spirit ‘towards the left’, which is to say that those who write for them have some kind of ‘progressive’ feeling about the human journey, and want to assist it in some way. That would apply to me, too. Most of what I have written in political science and history has running through it the implicit search for a better society than the one we have, better for more people more of the time. Like many others, I am to a degree a Rousseauian, believing in the natural worth and equality of human beings, and wanting to free them from constricted and unsatisfying lives. I am an optimist, not a pessimist. But in terms of outlook *Quadrant* is an exception, and that alone would make it interesting. It seems to me that most of those who write for *Quadrant* are rather pessimistic about the human species, Hobbesians rather than followers of J. -J. Rousseau. To read *Quadrant* at any time, if I remember correctly, has been to encounter people with rather different outlooks to my own. Many of them could write clearly and sensibly. Although I didn’t agree with them, they forced me to consider why I thought as I did, and that is always worthwhile.

What also make *Quadrant* interesting are its variety and its unpredictability. One great danger for small magazines is a tendency for sameness in perspective, writing and content. After all, the urge to publish usually comes, as I have argued, from the desire to communicate a point of view that seems hugely important to the editor or founder. But too much of it can be quickly boring, which tends to keep a readership small. Most of us who like to read are interested in more than one thing. A varied intellectual diet, as with food itself, is more nutritious as well as more enjoyable.

I recall talking with Ronald Henderson (he of the poverty line) in the 1970s after *Australian Society* had been founded. Would I be interested in writing for it? Ron asked. I then had a weekly column in the *National Times*. I said I would think about it, and looked at my issues of *Australian Society* to see what I could offer. I suggested to Ron that what the magazine needed was some humour, perhaps a satirical piece about life that would offset the high moral tone, the conviction of rectitude, that ran through each issue. Ron was a little piqued that I thought that there was anything wrong with the journal, and the notion of my contributing went

no further. *Australian Society* got off to a bright start but soon died, and much the same thing has happened to other journals that stayed monochrome. Those that have survived, it seems to me, have mixed their point of view with other fare: music, theatre, the visual arts, poetry, reviews, film, and so on. *Meanjin*, *Overland* and *Quadrant* have all done that; I feel sure that *Quadrant* could not have survived without its varied offering.

The World of Quadrant

It is probably true that intellectually I get more from the arts side of the magazine as I do from the political. In its pages I have found some of the poetry that I can understand and respond to, some excellent writing on music and art, thoughtful articles on topics I would not otherwise have sought out, and a sort of pungent combativeness that is its own.

But it is the politics that has engaged me. The underlying theme of *Quadrant* has always been anti-communism. Given my generally progressive attitude to life, I could never get worked up about the supposed internal communist threat to Australia. I felt that Australians were simply too sensible to follow that line. Nor could I see the external communist threat as something overpoweringly evil. To over-simplify it, I saw what occurred in the Soviet Union and China as excesses of the left just as I saw what happened in Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy as excesses of the right. You could not construct a political philosophy just from being against something, and I was building my own out of the possibilities for a good society in my own country. So the struggle was some way away from my own interests. But since I worked among academics a few of whom were squarely on the far left, and was occasionally put off by what I saw as their own monocular vision, *Quadrant* did give me a good sense of the opposite.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the right turn into market capitalism by Vietnam and China, *Quadrant's* tone has become stridently triumphalist. 'We told you so!' is the theme, and its pages now laud those who saw the light in 1956, or 1968, or later still, like Keith Windschuttle, a graduate student of mine in the 1970s. All that is understandable, but perhaps more puzzling is the view put forward in its pages that Australia contains a large cohort of disappointed leftists seething at the downfall of the Red world and doing bad things in the worlds of schooling, the universities, the arts, the media, the public service and so on. It may be that while not a communist myself I was and still am a 'communist dupe', and thus unable to recognise what those with clearer eyes than mine can

see. If it were so it would be nice to see some evidence, some data, some numbers (alas, I am still an empiricist, too). There never are any.

What *Quadrant* tells us about these people is that they are ‘elites’, and that they are powerful. They also constitute both a ‘commentariat’ and a ‘chattering class’, whose members seem to alternate between sipping chardonnay and sipping latte. Some of them weave baskets, either in Balmain or in Carlton, which is where they seem, perhaps alternately, to live. They find employment, when basket sales are low, in the ABC, the universities, the ‘Fairfax newspapers’ and in the public service. I was relieved to see that my preference for red wine, cappuccino, Canberra residence and feather-duster occupational status may have ruled me out of at least core membership of this group. The use of ‘elite’ continues to puzzle me. I have never thought of intellectuals, many of them academics, as constituting some kind of superior Australian class. They are not paid enough to live an ‘elite’ lifestyle, and their advice is not often sought. They do not belong to the social A-list, and they don’t appear in magazines that are about ‘celebrities’. It is hard to escape the view that the use of the term is intended to give readers the impression that the intellectuals in fact think of themselves that way, and are therefore pretentious. I would have to say that I know of few who behave in such a way. It also implies that those who write for *Quadrant* are somehow different. Though undoubtedly intellectuals, they are somehow neither of the elite nor fond of certain beverages and suburbs. Again, that does not seem obvious to me.

Where does this plot-centred view of Australian society come from? Some of it, I think, flows from the old sense of struggle against communism inside the nation and outside it. For it was not silly, during the Cold War period, to see the activities of communists in Australia as being directed in part by the USSR, which set ‘the line’. Yet long before the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union the small cohort of Australian communists had broken into three smaller warring groups, and had ceased to have any discernible influence in politics or the union movement. The victory of the West in the long Cold War has left *Quadrant* enthusiasts a little less than satisfied. Things have gone on in Australia much as they did before. There has been no great popular movement to the right, and though the Howard Government is still in power after ten years it is not a party supported in electoral terms by a majority of the citizens. And *Quadrant* is still a little magazine, rather on the fringe of things, even if the Prime Minister did attend, and address, its 50th anniversary dinner.

To a degree the *Quadrant* enthusiasts remind me of those fundamentalists excited by the imminent prospect of the second coming but always regretful that it didn't occur yesterday, as forecast. There must be a reason, they say, and the perceived reason in this case is that Australia is still run by those 'Left intellectuals [who] are if anything more remote from the mainstream of politics and in particular alienated from the society in which they live'. Such people are a scourge, and they have to be exposed and brought down.

If only it were so easy! Over the years I have known more than a few so-called Left intellectuals, but none of them seems to have or to have had particular power or influence, and none ever seemed notably alienated, from our society or anything else. If there is a familiar daemon in *Quadrant's* pages it is the commentator and broadcaster Phillip Adams. But Phillip Adams is a former advertising man, is thought to be rather well off, and has a regular column in *The Australian*, a newspaper that *Quadrant* seems to endorse. Try as I may, I cannot see Phillip Adams, who seems quite unalienated to me, as the leader of the 'Left intellectuals' who have an undue influence on Australian life. The only other names you will find are those connected with the history wars over the nature of the European occupation of lands in which there were already Aboriginal occupants. In this domain people are indeed named, and the familiar ones are Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan, Stuart McIntyre and Robert Manne. Again, with great respect to them all, the notion that any one of them, let alone the lot put together, represents some kind of plot to subvert true Australian values is simply risible.

The Role of the Editor

But conspiracies and plots are much scarier, and much more satisfying, than sober analysis. And they allow, almost ordain, the use of the broad brush. Some of the responsibility can be laid at the door of the current editor, Padraic P. McGuinness, another former Left intellectual who has come in from the cold. An economist and financial journalist for much of his life, McGuinness became *Quadrant's* editor in 1997. Editors have a great capacity to influence how their journal looks, what its tone is, and who writes for it. Those capacities in turn help to determine who reads it. McGuinness was appointed to replace Robert Manne, whose views on a range of subjects, especially the economic, increasingly differed from the general position of the board. That may account for the lack of apparent goodwill towards Manne, who has some claim to be regarded as Australia's most prominent 'public intellectual', though I myself would

not think of his being notably 'Left'. Indeed, it is decreasingly clear what the terms 'Left' and 'Right' now mean, even if *Quadrant* is pretty sure.

Peter Coleman, the journal's living national treasure, and always worth reading, has described McGuinness as 'irrepressible, a word rich with potential meanings. Whether or not he is irrepressible, he is a great hater. He is the one responsible for the quotation above about 'Left intellectuals, and his list of hates includes 'post-modernism', 'dumbing down', 'Dawkins universities', 'the chattering classes, 'political correctness', the ABC, 'militant Islam' and 'the boring old Left'. But he is always fun to read, because he accompanies excessive animosity with immoderate language, especially in his use of adjectives and adverbs. My first mentor and supervisor, Russel Ward, warned me to beware of these little words, on the ground that their use often betrayed a lack of thinking on the writer's part.

McGuinness is not of the Russel Ward camp. In his editorial for the October 2006 issue he could use 'dedicated', 'hard-working' and 'generous' (of supporters), as well as 'nominally', 'extraordinary', 'elaborate', 'objectionable' and 'progressivist' (not of supporters), along with phrases like 'political correctness', and 'orthodoxies now fashionable among the educated middle class', whose members are somehow able to practise 'a kind of neo-McCarthyism which encourages the pursuit and abuse, or ridicule, of anyone who questions the consensus'. This denunciation co-exists, without any sense of contradiction, with the editor's lauding of '*Quadrant's* commitment to liberal democracy and genuine tolerance of debate and dissent'. Given language like this, who needs names, numbers or evidence?

Well, I do, for one. I have come to take for granted that any proposition seriously advanced will offer some useful definitions, a reasoned argument, and some data or evidence. But much of what now appears in *Quadrant* on the generally 'political' side of the journal lacks such qualities. In consequence, the journal is much more open than it once was to the charge that it is a 'temple of complacent mediocrity' (Sir William Deane, in launching Barry Jones's autobiography in Canberra in November last year). Take the approach to universities, a frequent target in the journal's pages. It is not plain from Paddy's entry in *Who's Who* that he has spent much time in Australian universities since his student days, though he spent a year or two in academic life in London and Paris in the late 1960s. Nonetheless, he lays about himself with confidence, vigour and scorn, For my part I was employed by universities, and spent a few years in government dealing with them, from 1965 to 2002, and my

Australian experience included lengthy periods in a regional university, a new creation of the 1960s, a new creation of the 1990s and the ANU, with a three or so years spent in the UK and the USA (Oxford, London and Michigan), plus visits to scores of universities elsewhere in the world..

Quadrant on Education

I mention all this simply to make the point that I think higher education in Australia is much more complex a system that *Quadrant* writers can imagine. Editors attract writers, and Paddy McGuinness has attracted a few who seem to want to outdo him in scorn and vilification of the university system that employs them, or once employed them. Some known to me have spent virtually all their working life in the one university, or in a couple very similar. They seem characteristically dismissive of what they have not themselves experienced. A good history of higher education in Australia remains to be written but what is plain from the statistics is the astonishing growth in scale and scope of the activity (I find it hard to say ‘industry’, though technically higher education has become one) in the last fifty years. You would rarely discern this from *Quadrant*, in whose pages ‘the university’ has a Platonic essence apparently present in only a few of the institutions currently bearing the name. Coincidentally, such institutions appear to be the ones which the writers know because they work in them.

Since numbers can cause the eyes to glaze, try a visual experiment. Open out this issue of *AQ*, and mark off a square in the top left-hand corner with sides just a tad larger than 6 cm (you are aiming for 40 square centimetres). In it you can place, conceptually, anyway, the 30,000 or so university, teachers and agricultural college students of 1950. In the 56 years that have elapsed since then Australia’s population has increased two and a half times. Had university enrolments remained at their 1950 proportionate levels you could mark out a further such a square, and half of a third. In fact, university enrolments today are somewhat over 900,000, so you’ll require 30 such squares, which will fill the double page of *AQ*. Don’t worry if you haven’t quite marked out 30 squares, or they won’t fit. This is simply a way of making a point: when we compare what is going on in universities today with what happened at some time in the past, mine as well as Paddy McGuinness’s, we are comparing very different fruit — a lime with a rock-melon. The same is true of scope. Australia recognises something like 2,500 occupations today, according to the ABS, and the great majority of them require some form of post-secondary study; most of those forms were not available 56 years ago,

when we had a much smaller set of occupations. The choice facing 15-year-old school-leavers in 1950 was pretty simple. The choice facing 18 year olds today is not at all simple.

As with universities, so with the supposed dumbing-down of our society. Australia is a different place, and there are different things to learn. In my youth one could leave school at 15 and find work immediately, and that's what most people did. To go on matriculation was exceptional. Only 8 per cent of my 'academic' high school was in the final year, and only 2 per cent of that age-group went on to higher education (rather more in my high school, which had a university and a teachers college close by). The recent census is likely to show Australia as having 3,500,000 or so university graduates, maybe close to 4 million. How can we compare the quality of the 'best', even if we were able to agree on a definition, from two widely different eras? To say that today's students can't spell is to overlook the fact that no one needed to spell if they left school at 15; they would not be working in a job that required good spelling. To say that they don't know 'elementary' things that we knew is to overlook the fact that they know a much larger number of things that we didn't know and couldn't know, and probably aren't all that good at now, like computing. Someone in my final school year went on to be a teacher and then a headmaster. He snorts at the notion that today's students are inferior. 'Our Year 10s would knock over those exams we had for the Leaving — and they have all that other stuff to do as well.' My own judgment is that today's students (and I saw a lot of them in the 1990s) are better-rounded, more knowledgeable, more self-confident and more generally alert and interested than my own generation of the same age. But of course I can't prove it.

Doom and Decay

So why is there this sense of decay and doom in *Quadrant*? Ultimately, I think, it comes back to a deep-seated pessimism about and distrust of other people. Where I see excitement and reassurance in the present diversity of the Australian people, *Quadrant* sees the potential for divisiveness and collapse. Where I see an astonishing growth in our preparedness to learn and to pay for that learning, *Quadrant* sees a decline in standards. Where I see a growing tolerance among Australians for different points of view, different ways and different backgrounds, *Quadrant* sees a mushy, liberal consensus that strangles criticism and stops us seeing the threats within us. We may see the same reality, but derive different conclusions about what is happening and what could happen.

The Prime Minister, in his own address at the journal's 50th anniversary dinner, referred to 'the *Quadrant* tradition of fine scholarship with a sceptical, questioning eye for cant, hypocrisy and moral vanity'. I was instantly reminded, when I read this passage, of the old judgment about the thesis: 'This thesis has elements that are good and original. Unhappily, where the elements are good, they are not original, and where they are original they are not good'. The sceptical questioning eye that the Prime Minister mentioned is certainly there, but it only seems to work when it looks outside its pages. It could with advantage be directed within..

Peter Coleman, at the same dinner, spoke about *Quadrant's* 'Fifty Years in the Front Line' with authority, because he had been there throughout, and he provided this interesting summary judgment:

When *Quadrant* began in 1956, it was one of very few journals of opinion. Now there are dozens. Yet they all seem like different editions of the same journal — so great is the tentacular reach of political correctness in Australia. All except *Quadrant*.

I read this statement more than once and wondered what Peter Coleman had in mind. Set aside the rhetoric about tentacular political correctness. What ones would he include in the 'dozens' of similar journals? I can't get past ten or so. But then one shrugs: it all depends on your system of classification. A great deal of debate and opinion-offering goes on in contemporary Australia, in print and on line. But to me it is the sheer diversity of it all that is so impressive. There is the familiar party-political stuff, there is economic policy stuff, global-warming stuff, Christian stuff, ethnic stuff, media stuff, foreign affairs stuff, defence stuff, federalism stuff, feminist stuff... The list is almost endless, and there are considerable numbers of people involved in all of these debates. But only Procrustes himself could imagine this efflorescence could be contained within a single bed, let alone in the same journal, however many editions it had.

Memory takes me back once more, this time to a public meeting in the 1960s about the possible fluoridation of Canberra's water supply. A scientist friend and I turned up, and watched with incredulity as the meeting descended into an argumentative chaos. The disputants agreed only that fluoridation was a plot of some kind. One side was convinced that it was a capitalist plot, to get us hooked in some way so that we would demand more and more sodium fluoride, and thus line the capitalists' pockets. The other side were just as convinced that it was a

communist plot, seeking to sap our moral fibre through a chemical. If you are convinced that there is a conspiracy or plot you will easily find circumstantial evidence to support your view. To see all the variety in today's political discourse as coming from one of two camps, your own being the other, seems ludicrous to me.

The final puzzle in Peter Coleman's judgment was his pride in *Quadrant's* being bravely alone. In truth, that aloneness is not strictly true. There are think tanks aplenty in Australia, and several of them put out publications that share some of *Quadrant's* perspectives and preoccupations. Yet he is probably correct in asserting that there are many more that espouse a 'progressivist' (McGuinness) outlook on today and tomorrow. Most of those interested in debate seem to me to believe in a better Australia and believe also that it is possible to achieve this through argument, persuasion and democratic processes. They are not at all totalitarian, and they are not seeking to return to some imagined past.

And that gives me some confidence that they and I are on the right track. Imagine an Australia in which, for every *AQ* or *Monthly* there were half a dozen *Quadrant*-like journals — that is, the opposite of Peter Coleman's portrayal of the present. We would, I think, be in a very bad way, with all the indices of social unrest and discontent much higher than they presently are. So, with Peter Coleman, I am glad that *Quadrant* is an exception. And, therefore, I'll go on reading it.

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