

PM glosses over double standard

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IN THE same week that the federal Attorney-General ordered books removed from a university library and the Defence Minister hand-annotated an official letter to a vice-chancellor suggesting a change to a history curriculum, the Prime Minister told us we had embarked on "a generational struggle for ideals of democratic freedom and liberty under the law".

In what his supporters are touting as a landmark speech celebrating 50 years of *Quadrant* magazine, Howard thanked the publication for "its contribution to the universal values of liberal democracy". It was an enthusiastic endorsement. Not only was *Quadrant* praised as "a great literary journal" but it was also hailed as helping "many of us navigate the battle of ideas" that Howard elsewhere described as "stultifying orthodoxies and dangerous utopias". (He was referring mostly to the 1960s). In other words, the country's top political leader put on record his own intellectual debt to a once marginal conservative magazine whose influence today is such that it could this week attract a chief justice and a cardinal, a High Court judge and an archbishop, as well as business people, commentators and assorted intellectuals to its anniversary dinner in a posh Sydney hotel.

It was a time and a place to "recognise the debt that intellectual life in Australia owes to *Quadrant*, and to the people importantly who have sustained *Quadrant's* free spirit," the Prime Minister said. He singled out a number of individuals from the magazine's history whom he praised for "taking on the communist left and their fellow-travellers". These were mostly cold warriors such as Bob Santamaria, Richard Krygier, Peter Coleman, James McAuley, Heinz Arndt and Frank Knopfelmacher. But he also identified two of today's cultural warriors - Geoffrey Blainey and Keith Windschuttle - who, he said, the magazine had been willing to defend against "the posse of political correctness".

"Of the causes that *Quadrant* has taken up that are close to my heart, none is more important than the role it has played as counterforce to the black armband view of Australian history," the Prime Minister said.

What a strange and sad statement. No issue is closer to the heart of our Prime Minister? We could have hoped that perhaps when it comes to indigenous Australia he might judge chronic illness, low life expectancy, drug and alcohol problems and, above all, violence against women and kids in outback communities as more important than rants about a so-called black armband approach to our history. Others might yearn for a Prime Minister who had "close to his heart" critical national problems such as poverty, unemployment, declining education levels, global warming, the increasing Australian diaspora, the water crisis or even, given the theme of the speech, protection of democratic liberties in an age of terror.

But this speech had no such ambitions. Its focus was narrow, its spirit was mean. It boasted about the virtually complete vanquishing of the left here and abroad but it showed no interest in setting out a new agenda or in helping us think through the big challenges that confront us today.

In many ways, the speech could be seen as the "Mission Accomplished" of the Culture Wars. I wasn't there but while press photos show that John Howard was wearing civvies, not a flying suit, his words suggest he was nevertheless in combat mode as he proclaimed victory on the battlefield of ideas in recent Australian history.

As he surveyed the room he no doubt felt a degree of satisfaction at the size of his ideological army.

These days the cultural gatekeepers, the people who occupy or even dominate the Government's key cultural bodies and the media, are Howard-approvers and a remarkable number of them are *Quadrant* writers or former board members. You can find them on the board of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

(Janet Albrechtsen, Ron Brunton and Keith Windschuttle), at the Australia Council's Literature Board (the current chairman, Imre Salusinszky, and the former chairman Peter Goldsworthy), as Fairfax columnists (Miranda Devine, Michael Duffy), as News Ltd columnists or journalists (Frank Devine, Christopher Pearson, Salusinszky), and at crikey.com.au (Christian Kerr). Then there are the politicians, Barry O'Farrell in the NSW Parliament and Tony Abbott, Peter Costello and Howard in Canberra.

No wonder Howard was so full of praise of the little magazine that, for a mere \$30,000-a-year funding from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, has been able to radiate such influence.

What was perhaps most surprising about the speech was that Howard fumbled the focus and failed to engage his audience on what must be two of its major preoccupations. These were not the Howard battlers, they did not need platitudes and heroics. This was Howard's intellectual heartland. He needed to tap into them and he should have used the opportunity to explain his thinking and even seek their views. He did not.

There were two glaring omissions on the night.

Although Howard made a passing reference to Owen Harries, the well-respected foreign policy guru, and his articulation of the position of "people who legitimately opposed the original action to oust Saddam Hussein", he did not address the current situation of the war in Iraq.

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This in a room full of neo-cons whose American kindred spirits have abandoned the war and renounced their initial rationalisation of it. The same arguments are happening here - but you would not know if from the Prime Minister's speech.

Instead he chose to focus on the threat to "free and open societies" posed by "a new tyranny, the tyranny of Islamist terrorism" which the Prime Minister described as having "at least a family resemblance to the great struggles against forces of totalitarianism in the past". I don't know who put that line in the speech but it is utter nonsense. One of many things that distinguishes al-Qaeda from, say, Nazism and communism is that it is a globally networked body that appears to operate with a high degree of local autonomy. This makes it far more difficult to contend with. Islamic terrorism is not part of a highly disciplined uniform and monolithic force; it does not have a command and control structure. This enemy cannot be vanquished by military might as Nazism was. Nor does it seem vulnerable to internal collapse in the way communism in Russia and eastern Europe disintegrated before the startled and unprepared gaze of the West.

Howard conceded that today's struggle is not against Islam itself, but against "a perverted interpretation of Islam" whose "terrorists and suicide bombers ... eagerly set out to spread terror and kill innocent Muslim citizens". Well, yes, I think we all know that.

It would have been more germane for Howard to address the newer and far more anarchic issue of home-grown terrorism. How do we account for the London bombers, all but one British-born and seemingly integrated into local communities? Or what about Omar Sheikh, the middle-class, British-born son of wealthy Pakistani parents who loved cricket and chess and was educated at the London School of Economics? What made him decamp from the bourgeois comforts of Britain to become the person who supervised the kidnapping and execution of *The Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl?

It was Bosnia that reportedly turned Sheikh into a jihadist. How many middle-class Islamic boys and girls around the world are being similarly radicalised by the Iraq war today?

Does the Prime Minister have a view? Is he worried about a similar phenomenon here? He did not say. Instead he made a bad joke about it being "an inconvenient truth" (not to mention a contentious proposition) that withdrawal from Iraq "would be an enormous victory for the forces of terror and extremism around the world".

But, in my view, the single biggest flaw in this landmark speech was its failure to delineate the "ideals of democratic freedom and liberty" that are under threat and that we are being urged to fight so hard to preserve.

It will be a "long, twilight struggle", said Howard "for the very ideals that some people wistfully dreamed were unchallengeable after the Cold War". He did not elaborate, but we are entitled to ask how banning books increases freedom of speech and how censoring curricula to suit current political appetites protects diversity of opinion.

Recently I was in Washington DC, the first time since September 11, 2001, and was startled to see that Pennsylvania Avenue has been blocked so that traffic no longer passes the White House. Lafayette Park, long the place where the vagabonds of democracy exercised their rights with all types of crazy creativity, is now dotted with police cars and free of protesters.

It smelt like surrender. Of course we need to protect ourselves, but we should be flexing and strengthening our democratic rights and ideals and there is only one way to do that. Use them or lose them.

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