

## A Plea For Smarter Debate In 2013

17 December 2012

Since Tony Abbott and his cronies took the Opposition frontbenches, there's been a marked decrease in the standard of public discourse. Ian McAuley's Christmas wish is for more facts and less hyperbole.

John Howard once said we need a "right wing Phillip Adams".

That is someone, who, like Adams, does not devalue public discourse, who can talk about economic issues with more rigour than is conveyed in a string of three letter words, who can argue from the basis of facts, who does not patronise us with illogical arguments or blatantly mis-used statistics, who understands the difference between criticism and spite, and who knows that most public ideas are based on underlying assumptions.

If you are out there please come forward and resurrect the policy debate. We have an election in the coming year.

If you want to criticise the government do so; it's the essence of democracy. But explain why. Don't just say "Labor is incompetent," or "we need to get rid of this rotten government". There are plenty of blogs that make such banal assertions.

If you have reasons, support them with logic or facts. Before you say interest rates were lower under the Coalition government check the Reserve Bank website. Simply saying over and over again that Australians' cost of living is rising faster than their income does not make the statement true. (Or perhaps you have evidence that the Australian Bureau of Statistics is engaged in a conspiracy of official deception?)

If you are using official statistics, don't patronise us by neglecting the normal qualifications a first year economics student would make. Don't compare a 1992 financial figure with a 2012 figure without bringing it to constant prices. Remember that even six-year-olds negotiating for pocket money can see through that argument. They know that ten bob a week was a pretty good allowance in 1960.

If you think the Gillard Government has mishandled the economy, explain what it should have done better. If, like Christopher Pyne, you think it should have run a surplus budget in the wake of the 2008 crisis, explain why you think 10 or 12 percent unemployment would have been a good outcome. (Perhaps it would have made it easier to hire a servant.)

If you want to tell us that a politician has diverted a cut of all AWU membership dues into his or her personal account, provide credible evidence, and not just a cutting penned by a Murdoch journalist — you might notice that those on the "left" don't quote from the Pyongyang Times.

If you want to pass judgement on a member of parliament based on allegation, explain why you believe the legal assumption of innocence is unreasonable. You may have some new legal insight to share with us.

If you know about a flow of people entering the country and evading immigration checks, once you have notified authorities, you can write about our borders being out of control. Otherwise hold your peace.

If you can meet these tests, which, until not many years ago, were the standards for acceptable public discourse, please make your voice heard.

It won't be easy though. The Liberal Party, with reinforcement from the Murdoch press and radio shock jocks, has occupied the space normally taken up by political critics.

They have read the nihilistic spirit of the times — that there is no reality, just opinions, and that all opinions have equal validity. Tim Flannery has an opinion on climate change and so does Lord Monckton. Both are worthy of airing, because, you know, every coin has two sides. Australia has very low taxes, but that's only one opinion put forward by statisticians at the OECD, whoever they are. There are hundreds of bloggers and callers to talkback radio who know our taxes are among the highest in the world. You can't go against the weight of numbers.

Even the ABC, with its policy of giving air to "principal relevant perspectives" has signed on to this process. It's easier to do pieces on the politics or "atmospherics" rather than the policies of issues. Policy journalism requires research, and, if policy issues are pursued with the present opposition frontbenchers their weaknesses will be revealed. It wouldn't look good for the ABC to show up the weakness of one side without "balance".

Liberal Party strategists, like propagandists in the old Soviet Union, know how impressions are shaped — what psychologists call the "availability" bias. We see boatloads of refugees on TV screens (usually the same footage), but we don't see the overstayers coming through our airports and melting into the community. We learn about the fires and deaths during the government insulation program, but the media doesn't tell us about the higher rate of fires and deaths before the program was in place. To expose that would require a little research. It's much cheaper to send a roving mike out to the street to get an "ain't it awful" comment.

Some opinions are so widely held that they're uncontested. Only a crank would challenge the idea that governments are intrinsically incompetent. Of course the private sector always does a better job. We all know that crime rates are rising, that life on welfare allowance is easy, that there's plenty of work for all who really go looking for it. And of course, we all know that Coalition governments are much more competent than Labor governments. Public opinion confirms it.

Policy debate has been lost in this postmodernist mire. But perhaps it could be resurrected by a right wing Phillip Adams. Then we may have a contest of ideas, rather than the asymmetric warfare of reason and logic confronting vitriol and unsubstantiated opinion.

Otherwise if Labor is re-elected next year it will have escaped serious scrutiny, for the Liberal front bench — Abbott, Pyne and Bishop — have done all they can to avoid policy debate. Over the last two years there have been important policy issues on the table, but parliamentary time has been dominated by a savage and unrelenting attack on the Prime Minister, the Speaker and others, devoid of policy relevance. If Julia Gillard wins the election, it will be due in large part to her Thatcherish "iron lady" image, rather than any consideration of Labor's policies or principles.

Similarly, if the Coalition wins, they will have escaped scrutiny, and have a blank policy cheque. Abbott has made so many contradictory and superficial policy statements that he would have to ditch most of them once in office. He would have almost absolute discretion over what's in and what's out. His connived distractions and idiotic speeches have been a clever way of giving himself policy latitude. His political strategy is almost a copy of that used by Egypt's President Morsi — create chaos, foster division, and develop your agenda while everyone's distracted by the real or supposed faults of the outgoing regime.

Unless an Abbott government were able to rig the electoral system (Bronwyn Bishop has already foreshadowed an intention to do so), it would probably be a very short-lived one before an early election or a party coup removes him from office.

Abbott is only the immediate manifestation of the problem, however. The danger lies in a permanently trivialised policy debate, in which evidence and logic don't get a look in, where the vacuous movement of postmodernism has devalued rational argument. Into the space so vacated there is no end of wacky, dangerous and destructive ideas which can gain traction.

It may be very clever for the "right" to refuse to engage in serious policy debate — the strategy may get them into office in the coming year — but they run the risk of killing any serious consideration of public policy and subjecting our country to extremist political movements.

Will the articulate right please stand up for public ideas?