

UN. But acting on this obligation required cooperation amongst the permanent five. The semblance of any such unity, as Schlesinger lucidly tells us, began to fray even in the early months of 1945. It disappeared altogether during the Cold War as the United States and U.S.S.R. vetoed one another's resolutions. In this respect, the UN was stillborn. It never truly had the chance to exercise the powers it was delegated.

The second message highlights the achievements possible when American diplomacy is clear-eyed, accommodating of the legitimate interests of others, and patient. These were the characteristics of the diplomacy of the Truman era—a time when the United States was, relatively, at its most powerful but also, perhaps, still hesitant about its mantle as global leader. Nonetheless, it led the world in establishing the alliance against communism, the UN, the Marshall Plan, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and NATO, as well as supporting the European Coal and Steel Community (the harbinger to the European Union). This architecture which, arguably, has so positively dominated international politics since then, took time and energy to create. Moreover, as the political horse-trading, scheming and backroom deals described by Schlesinger make clear, none of it was easy and it certainly did not all go America's way. But despite such difficulties, this approach legitimised American objectives. It made other states a part of, and therefore more willing to accept and actively work toward, the policies determined and outcomes desired. It is difficult to imagine the United States similarly persevering today, particularly in the post-September 11 world.

Finally, the regenerative qualities of the human spirit are evident in Schlesinger's account.

To be so vividly reminded of the determination applied by the statesmen of San Francisco to insure against a repeat of the most devastating war in history, even as the Asian sphere of that war still raged, is to appreciate our ability to learn from and correct for past mistakes. But history also reminds us of our ability to eventually forget these lessons. With many now questioning the very *raison d'être* of the UN, Schlesinger's book is a timely reminder of the reason it was founded. It was not formed to eradicate poverty, cure disease, improve human rights or advance the human race. These are laudable goals, but the UN was formed to prevent major wars. This was its primary purpose in 1945 and should be its primary purpose now.

The UN, of course, is not without its flaws. But like democracy and capitalism, neither of which is perfect, it is the best system of international collaboration we have for the moment. Nonetheless, reform is desperately required. The Security Council is a relic of the geopolitics of 1945. To be legitimate today it must reflect contemporary realities. It needs to accommodate today's powers currently excluded—Japan and Germany—and contemplate the accommodation of tomorrow's big states—India and Brazil. It must also address the extraordinary powers inherent in the veto, for legitimacy is not to be found in this uneven distribution of such clout. However, as the many failed attempts at reform instruct us, positive change is not easy. And whilst Schlesinger's book does not attempt to answer these questions, he certainly shows us where they might be found. Perhaps it is time for the United States to again lead the world in another act of creation.

**Reviewed by Scott Featherston**

*Orwell's Australia: From Cold War to Culture War*

by Dennis Glover

Melbourne: Carlton North, Scribe Publications, 2003, 138pp, \$19.95, ISBN 0908 011 563

George Orwell continues to be one of the most talked about and debated political commentators of the last century. Once claimed by the right as a champion of the anti-communist cause in books such as *Animal Farm* and *1984*, in recent years Orwell has been the subject of intense interest and reassessment from the left.

In his recent book, *Orwell's Australia: From Cold War to Culture War*, Dennis Glover, speech writer to former Labor leader Simon Crean and a prominent Labor intellectual, claims Orwell as the inspiration for his own brand of social democratic politics. Glover's book also looks at Orwell's influence

on Australian intellectuals, and the diverging interpretations of Orwell's politics across the political spectrum.

As a discussion of Orwell's leftist political views, and his influence on Australian intellectuals, Glover's book raises many important issues of continuing relevance to Australian democracy. The place of 'truth' in political discourse; the egalitarian spirit in Australia political culture and society; the future of the democratic left and the Australian Labor Party; and the importance of civility and rationality in political life are discussed through the prism of Orwell's political writings.

It is a pity that discussion of these issues quickly becomes bogged down in a polemic against the Coalition government, and against



so-called neoconservative writers and commentators. Cheap point scoring for the ALP replaces investigating political debate in this country, and the way that those debates have increasingly polarised opinion.

In his role as ALP mythologiser, Glover paints a dark vision of contemporary Australia. The Howard government is obsessed with staying in power at any price. It is prepared to lie to the Australian people. Cynical and alienated voters realise they are being lied to, but according to Glover do not seem to care. Innocent refugees are used as scapegoats by an increasingly authoritarian government. Glover even claims that the government will stoop to political murder. All this is argued with a straight face.

Contemporary Australia is then compared to the glories of the recent Australian past. According to Glover it is the Australian commitment to social democracy that has made our country great:

The true 'Australian genius' lies in the creation of a social democracy without ideology—it's the genius that gave us eight-hour day, mass home ownership, non-denominational public education, nation-building investment, a welfare state, free public health care, and affordable higher education for everyone with talent. (p.3)

By comparison, Australia's conservatives 'would have us believe that what made [Australia] great was rugged individualism, British institutions, and a willingness to charge machine-gun posts with nothing more than an unloaded rifle and a bayonet' (p.2). Of course Glover nowhere mentions which conservatives argue the above.

Glover claims writers and commentators he labels as 'neoconservatives' are poisoning our political culture with their ultra-right wing and anti-egalitarian

ideas. Who are these nefarious characters? Glover names a grab-bag of political commentators—Paddy McGuinness, Andrew Bolt, Piers Ackerman, Gerard Henderson, and Janet Albrechtsen. It is hard to tell what binds these writers together apart from their general criticism of the left. One wonders whether the neoconservative designation is merely a convenient label for the partisan political task of denigrating the right generally.

Glover's main complaint about contemporary political life in Australia is that the Howard Government has destroyed, or is destroying, the great Aussie spirit of egalitarianism. Glover acknowledges the growing economic and social cleavages in our society, and the fact that Labor is less and less the party of the working class and the disadvantaged, and more and more the party of the urban left-wing elite:

Australia is seeing the emergence of two societies increasingly cut off from each other. One, based in wealthy, inner-city suburbs, with rising income and wealth—the sort of places where not only the educated left tend to live, but the millionaire commentators too—dominates entry to our elite universities and occupations, and is characterised by affluence and access to opportunities that the poor can barely comprehend. And the other trapped in declining suburbs and towns with houses they often can't afford to sell, has fewer opportunities for education and fewer chances of entry to well-paid professions. The former are having a smaller proportion of our children. The latter are having a larger proportion—often without the ability to provide for them adequately within the nest of a trusting and

lasting family relationship.

As a result, at least one in six of our children are being brought up in poverty. (p.89)

Glover makes a strong argument for the ALP to return to its working class origins, to take seriously the values and desires of the vast majority of working Australians, whose main preoccupation is providing a better life for their families and communities.

Glover blames the Howard government for dismantling large chunks of the welfare state and for downgrading egalitarianism in the name of efficiency. This is a curious claim from a member of the ALP, the party which in the 1980s and 1990s deregulated the economy. If Australia is a more unequal and unfair society, as Glover claims, it is not due to the Howard government and a few right-wing political commentators in the media—it is due to the Hawke-Keating economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s.

No Australian government, neither Labor nor Liberal, could have resisted the economic revolution sweeping the world in the 1980s and 1990s. It occurred in response to demands from ordinary people for a higher standard of living. While it increased the distance between rich and poor, it also benefited many ordinary working class people, who realised that they had little to gain under socialism. Glover nowhere acknowledges this political and economic reality.

Overall Glover's book is a disappointment, due largely to his inability to discuss issues without resorting to his ALP-approved phrase book. Be that as it may, Glover advances some powerful arguments on issues such as the decline of civility in political debate, and the way that social and educational cleavages fuel alienation and cultural division between inner urban and suburban or regional Australia.

Orwell remains a troubling and disconcerting figure, partly because he was himself a deeply contradictory figure. A man born into a relatively affluent, middle class family, radicalised by his experiences in colonial Burma and his time among the downtrodden in Paris and London, who fought for the Trotskyite left during the Spanish Civil War but who denounced communism as the greatest threat to civilised man. In the 1930s Orwell identified with the radical left and pacifism (despite fighting in Spain), yet in the late 1930s referred to himself as a 'Tory anarchist'. Can such a person teach us anything about what it means to be political in our contemporary society?

For all his faults and contradictions Orwell remains a compelling figure for his commitment to truthfulness and decency in public life, and for his firm belief that there are some things that should remain beyond the political realm (Orwell would have hated the 1960s slogan, 'the personal is the political'). Contrary to those who argue that with the collapse of totalitarianism Orwell has had his day—Glover is right when he says that people who have only read *Animal Farm* and *1984* could make such a claim—Orwell remains the secular patron saint of people who value free speech, decency, civility and our liberal democratic system of government, whether they be on the right or the left. What is needed now is a book that deciphers what Orwell means to us today, without claiming him for the partisans of any faction.

**Reviewed by Martin Sheehan**

*Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*  
by Don Watson  
Random House Australia  
2003, 198pp, \$29.95,  
ISBN 1 74051 206 5

In *Politics and the English Language* George Orwell described the derelict condition of contemporary English. Born on 25 June 1903, the centenary of Orwell's birth last year and the prominence of his essay—since its publication in 1946 it has become one of the most frequently cited in the English language—provide good reasons to revisit this problem, its cause and prognosis.

Alas, Don Watson's disappointing book gives us many contemporary Australian examples but none of the insights and analysis of Orwell's seminal essay. Watson hints but does not explicitly show why 'public language' pervades big organisations; he notes that public language is the language of the walking dead and of authoritarian cant, but does not outline its pernicious consequences like Orwell did; and Watson omits the critical point that public language is the language of 'educated fools'.

According to Orwell, 'modern English prose . . . consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house'. He denounced stale and pretentious images, imprecise meanings and meaningless words, dead metaphors, flabbiness and abstraction. Burdened with these loads, 'the writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose.'

Watson shows that this characteristic of modern English prose, which he calls 'public language', has become even more pronounced since Orwell's death in 1950. Why? Watson offers no explicit diagnosis. But it is telling that neither Orwell nor Watson criticise the language of the farmer or grazier, skilled tradesman or small business owner. The subsidiaries of Berkshire Hathaway Inc., one of America's largest conglomerates, employ more than 120,000 people and generate billions of profit. Warren Buffett, one of the world's richest men, is its Chairman and owns a plurality of its shares; but its headquarters, with fewer than 20 staff, more closely resembles a small business than a behemoth. Buffett is renowned for his clear and incisive language: so much so that the US Securities and Exchange Commission asked him to write a preface to its *A Plain English Handbook: How to Create Clear SEC Disclosure Documents*.

Perhaps the dreary prose that Orwell and Watson criticise lacks life because its authors (usually academics, public or private sector bureaucrats, management consultants and politicians) are themselves lifeless. Unlike the owners of small businesses, users of public language are irresponsible in the sense that their employment and remuneration are seldom tied to the achievement of predetermined results. In these organisations, the boss shoots the arrow of managerial performance and then hastily paints the bull's eye around the spot where it lands. Despite their incessant chatter about 'outcomes', bureaucrats are promoted on the basis of conformity and credentials rather than results.

Watson's book falls far short of Orwell's essay in a second respect. Orwell not only described but also analysed the use of language as an