

A RAPID LEAKING OF RESOLVE AND THE TYRANNY OF OUR TIMES

As the late cartoonist Bill Leak got better and better at his work, the cultural climate continued its long slide downhill, writes **Giles Auty**

In company with most other prominent Australian newspapers and magazines, *The Weekend Australian* of 18-19 March was full to bursting with entirely deserved tributes to the recently deceased Bill Leak, who was not just an outstanding cartoonist even by the best international standards but also a man of admirable kindness and integrity.

However, while editor-at-large Paul Kelly, who first employed Leak at *The Australian*, made the following appropriate comment on page 17 of that issue—‘Bill Leak stood for enduring values against the tyranny of our times’—by contrast an unconnected article on page 9 recounted a tale of abject governmental surrender to just such tyranny.

Did anyone else note the irony of that particular juxtaposition? I will return to that contentious subject a little later.

In the meantime, I would like it to be known that Bill, along with the late Frank Devine and the painters John Olsen and Tim Storrier, was one of a very small band of people who actively welcomed me to these shores when I first came here to work, basically as an art critic, in 1995. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the Fairfax Press and the ABC shared rather a different agenda. In fact, my feet had barely touched the tarmac before the former launched a full-scale assault on my professional reputation in a half-page feature in *The Age*. Not long afterwards, the ABC followed up with a concocted 45-minute TV program of similarly unbalanced hostility. Even more amazingly to me, when an English friend proposed my name to a well-known ABC figure as a suitable subject for interview her terse reply was:

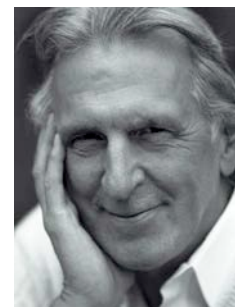
‘I can’t possibly have people *like that* on my show.’

A fine welcome to Australia.

The main purpose of the foregoing is to reflect on the nature of the cultural climate in Australia even 20 or so years ago when Bill himself was still at the outset of his professional career. He was neither as accurate in his choice of targets then nor nearly as sharp in his instinctive insights nor in his brilliant rendering of these in pictorial form. However, as Bill continued to grow better and better at his work the cultural climate of this country continued, no less inexorably, its long slide downhill.

Titian, as most would probably agree, had already established his place in the hierarchy of great European painters when, at the end of his remarkable life, he embarked on *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1570-76), which broke entirely new pictorial as well as psychological grounds. Towards the end of his life I believe Bill’s cartoons took him similarly to a new place.

Yet ironically at precisely the time when Bill produced his unforgettable series of cartoons attacking the questionable antics of Human Rights Commissioner Gillian Triggs and of Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane the former



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was invited by the Blue Mountains City Council to address them as their highly honoured guest. In short, to an even greater extent than when I first came here, Australia remains a bitterly divided country.

Indeed, here one may wish to contrast the thoughtful genius of Leak with the kind of dumb fanaticism which one may encounter almost anywhere today in this country.

What the latter represents is a seemingly incurable disease which has slowly transformed Australia during my own years of residence here. Bill's insights and drawings became more and more telling, in fact, as the country he cared deeply about began discovering new depths.

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If you do not yet possess a copy of Bill's book of cartoons *Trigger Warning* (Wilkinson Publishing Pty Ltd), launched less than 36 hours before he died, correct such an oversight as soon as you can. For example, it is very hard to go past his cartoon of 20 October 2016 which features Soutphommasane as a rather convincing new leader for North Korea.

What the latter demonstrates is that the cartoonist's art is a brilliantly effective one which lacks any direct equivalent in words. For however accurately I describe that particular cartoon, I cannot even begin to recreate the force of its visual impact.

At the time of Bill's death, it was proposed that a radical revision or abandonment of section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act* would make an appropriate memorial to his passing.

Predictably, however, this has not occurred largely because of the grip exerted today by political correctness and other articles of postmodernist faith that have become firmly entrenched in a country which has—principally via our highly politicised education system at all levels—by now become effectively brainwashed.

The latter would have come as no surprise at all to Bill, who grasped most of the major predicaments of our age very clearly. Indeed, as he explained pointedly at the launch of his book *Trigger Warning*:

Ever since conceptual art supplanted transcendent art, all art has been reduced to the level of graffiti. And to people reared on postmodernism and cultural relativism who can't tell the difference between Banksy and Picasso, I'm not a cartoonist drawing cartoons for a newspaper; I'm an artist exhibiting his work in a gallery that gets hundreds of thousands of visitors through the doors every day. And the work of a man like that has to be taken *very* seriously indeed. It has to be *analysed*. It has to be *deconstructed*. It has to be *decoded* by these people in a search for hidden meanings. And because art, like political activism, is a form of therapy, it's supposed to reinforce and confirm their prejudices, not challenge them.

Well, bugger that.¹

In Bill's lifetime and mine, the culture of almost all Western countries has been transformed in a manner which contains rather more than a whiff of the totalitarian precepts of so-called neo-Marxism. However, very few of the latter have even the slightest connection to the established thinking of Marx. Safe schools program? Gender fluidity? Marx himself was vehemently heterosexual and fathered his last, unacknowledged child—Freddy, who died in January 1929—via an unpaid family servant.

If indeed the present Western world is as hopelessly lost as I—and the late Bill Leak—suggest, what best explains and characterises our troubles?

In the April edition of *Quadrant* magazine, British journalist Bruce Anderson sums up the whole matter with admirable brevity and clarity:

Antonio Gramsci was the most formidable Marxist after the founding father. He realised the proletarian revolution was not enough and that there were other ways forward. He advocated a long march

through the institutions: educational, cultural, journalistic, bureaucratic, ecclesiastical. This has been alarmingly successful, thanks in part to widespread naivety among conservatives, who thought they were being hard-headed when they reasoned: ‘Leave culture to the leftists. What harm can they do?’. *This is dangerous nonsense* [my italics]. Everyone understands the importance of soft power in international affairs. That is equally true in domestic matters.²

The foregoing is a subject on which I have written extensively myself, especially in my recent book *Culture at Crisis Point*.

Which brings me back to the matter I referred to in the second paragraph of this article. On page 9 of *The Weekend Australian* of 18-19 March quite a long article appeared under the heading ‘Catalyst fund killed by Coalition’. It recounted the surrender of funds totalling about \$100 million which had been set aside from Australia Council funds largely to combat the heavily politicised nature of the latter body in the distribution of arts funding. My understanding is that Tony Abbott and George Brandis sparked the original, highly overdue action of setting aside those funds.

For the first time in history, a centre-right government had been wise and bold enough to at least try to seize a poisonous nettle which has had a vast influence in warping the quality and direction of culture both in Australia and Britain. Long before setting foot in Australia, in fact, I had attempted to curb the baleful political and cultural influence of the Arts Council of Great Britain by working on a number of conservative advisory bodies for the arts.

This would not have gone unnoticed by left-wing bodies in Australia, for example the Fairfax Press and ABC, and accounts entirely (at last) for the extreme hostility of the reception I received from both bodies on my arrival here. A less determined journalist would very sensibly have returned home.

The problems Bill faced so bravely in his latter years reflect very badly indeed on a country which is lurching increasingly towards a variety of forms of totalitarian thinking.

Bill Leak believed passionately, as I do, in the value of free speech which, in turn, underwrites effective democracy. The problems Bill faced so bravely in his latter years reflect very badly indeed on a country which is lurching increasingly towards a variety of forms of totalitarian thinking—two of which almost certainly hastened Bill’s death.

Please God we can do better than that.

For years now decent people in Australia have peered over the edge and have not liked what they saw. The finest memorial we could make to Bill would be to start recovering the traditional good sense of the country he loved.

Endnotes

- 1 For a full transcript of the speech, see <https://www.cis.org.au/commentary/articles/bill-leak-speech-from-trigger-warning-book-launch/>
- 2 Bruce Anderson, ‘How Donald Trump Can Save the West from Itself’, *Quadrant* (April 2017).